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## **Digital Embodiment in Contemporary Abstract Painting**

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## Thesis Abstract

This thesis re-investigates Clement Greenberg's discredited abstract expressionist claim that painting should seek its own purity through the acknowledgment of its material. I argue that Greenberg's physical, bodily determination of painting (but not its purity) is re-located as a criticality in contemporary practice because of the changes brought about by the simulacrum and the digital. By utilizing the particularities of 'painterly' issues such as materiality, depth and opticality into the virtual, this claim responds to Arthur C. Danto's 'end of history' theories where he argues that artists are no longer bound to the dictates of grand master narratives of art. For Danto, contemporary art has irrevocably deviated from the narrative discourses which define it such as Greenberg's.

Not satisfied with either postmodern strategies of parody in painting that claim a linear end to the modernist canon, or with recent claims that contemporary painting is beyond postmodernism, I convert Greenberg's physical determinism using Andrew Benjamin's notion that contemporary abstract painters, through making, accept and transform the historical/modernist premise of the yet-to-be-resolved object/painting by staging a repetition of abstraction as an event of becoming.

This 're-styling' of abstract painting is then examined as an ontological conjoining of Greenberg with Merleau-Ponty's claim that the painter transforms the relationship between the body and a painting by overlapping the interior sense of self with the world of external objects. I argue that contemporary painting can offer a philosophical dialogue between the painter's subjectivity as a mirroring of the painter's personal style through objective ornamental materiality. This dialogue is developed through Stephen Perrella's *Hypersurface* theory which proposes a non-subjective, deterritorialised, architectural parallel of the digital as a transparent, fluid system of multi-dimensional signs in which the contemporary subject traverses. Consequently, I suggest, the symbolic virtual changes the body's sensuous relation to time and space and is central to contemporary painting's criticality.

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## Foreword The 'End' of Irony

This thesis was born out of a need to demonstrate what I saw as the circular limits of rhetorical ironic contemporary art practice which was predominant in the 1980's and early to mid 1990's. I reasoned that irony, especially in painting, was dependent upon dominant, linear, art historical readings that presumed that painting was dead. Often this had to be demonstrated as a mockery of Greenbergian, modernist avant-garde and utopian ideals. I arrived at the present text with the experience (in the early 1990's) of making ironic painting/objects that resembled *real* 'cakes' in both appearance and scale. Oil paint was applied to small canvases by the use of cake decorating equipment and then stacked one upon the other to critique the division between painting and sculpture which supposedly challenged the hegemony of both painterly expression and modernist seriality (illustration 9). However, after a while these strategies of irony seemed to limit my practice to being endlessly caught up within a (so-called) *dead-end* experience. I was therefore driven to thinking and writing about the positive possibilities for contemporary painting (as I saw it in 1999). Without the experience of the strategies of irony I would not have been able to formulate a renewed sense of potential for painting that, in the later Chapters of this thesis, becomes a philosophical exploration of the act of painting in the contemporary through ontology, digital embodiment, and ornamental materiality as re-configured through Clement Greenberg. In order to demonstrate the early part of this journey more clearly I will argue in the Introduction and throughout Chapter One that irony is neither a dystopian emancipation from modernism, as imagined by artists like David Salle or Komar and Melamid in the 1980s, or, as David Pagel claims in the 1990s/00s in *Abstract Painting... Once Removed*, a position from which the future of painting has to remove itself in order that it is distinguished historically from the 1980s.

Not sure how I could argue for a renewal of painting yet dissatisfied with current texts that *claimed* to question rhetorical irony which was often called postmodernism, I set out to prove the inherent classicism of those texts. My aim was to find a way of constructing a transformed criticality about painting that was relational and not exclusive to firstly, dominant binary models such as Hal Foster's version of antagonistic postmodernism against modernism, and secondly, David Pagel's attempts a decade and a half later to overcome the *short-comings* of modernism (such as Clement Greenberg's) by claiming a position of anti-historicism. This desire for a new sense of criticality was born out of Arthur C. Danto's claim in *After the End of Art* that artists are no longer bound to the dictates of grand master narratives of art, and that contemporary art has irrevocably deviated from the narrative discourses which define it. "Contemporary art, has no brief against the art of the past, no sense that the past is something from which liberation must be won, no sense even that it is different as art from modern art generally" (1997,p.5). Danto asks how to identify what critical principles there can be when no narratives are seemingly available, where 'everything goes' and painting is just one of a number of artistic activities from which to choose. "It is part of what defines contemporary art that the art of the past is available

for such use as artists care to give it. What is not available to them is the spirit in which the art was made”(1997,p.5).

I began to notice that *critical* attempts had been made in the early 1990's and onwards to go *beyond ironic* limitations in painting which became predominant through a number of museum exhibitions, and, that in order to escape historicist irony, the key to understanding a shift in both the practice and contextualisation of contemporary painting was through some kind of relation to the simulacral. At that time I understood the simulacrum only through Jean Baudrillard's fatalist strategies but thought that there may be some way of re-configuring his fatalism through the newer technologies of the digital or virtual. As the thesis progressed my initial concerns became more complex, moving between a seemingly antiquated reliance on painting's materiality and its representation in the electronic. As a result, I discovered that I could begin some kind of critical re-configuration of painting as a crossing-over or overlapping of authors and texts which didn't conform to the rule of *contemporary* pluralistic postmodernism versus *traditional* progressive modernism, and that it was paintings philosophical understanding of itself as an embodied activity which was at stake. The only way for me to comprehend embodiment in painting was, and still is, through painting's perverse, physical insistence in the face of transitory, multi-representational imagery in the digital non-corporeal world of the sign. It is this discovery as a parallel relational activity to the simulacral that has led to the subsequent thesis.

Key in my discoveries were Merleau-Ponty's *Eye and Mind* (1960), and Stephen Perrella's 'Hypersurface Theory: Architecture><Culture' (1998). These texts made me realize that painting was not beholden to art's own sense of history, but rather to the conditions of the culture around it. Merleau-Ponty explores the phenomenology of the act of painting as the *imaginary texture of the real*, and Perrella, the ornamental architectural sign which I transcribe later as effecting painting. Andrew Benjamin also offered a re-configuration of abstract painting by re-introducing both the act or craft of making and its historical (Greenbergian) contextualisation as a *staged becoming* of modernism's *original* impulses.

So, the outline of my thesis goes something like this; the Introduction and Chapter 1 begins by mapping my dissatisfaction with current uncritical painting trends in the art world, the art market and academia by examining the representation and motivations of the recent proliferation of exhibition catalogues, art magazines and the popular press. I ask how to challenge the binary model of art history that these magazines often unwittingly present and which some postmodern theories often favour. I do this by examining Rosalind Krauss' and Yves-Alain Bois re-configuration of overlooked modernist artists in their book *Formless*. *Formless* works against the division between form and content which they claim is prevalent in much twentieth century philosophy and binary in its thinking (which is itself formal), by re-constituting the term Formless as a third term which stands outside its opposition.

Studying Bois and Krauss' *Formless* offers a re-appraisal of modernism in the contemporary, and in order that I gain an overview of what modernism presents historically, in Chapter 2 I re-investigate Clement Greenberg's discredited abstract expressionist claim that painting should seek its own *purity* through the acknowledgment of its material fact. I re-examine Greenberg in order to argue that *criticality* in contemporary painting utilizes the *formless* as a non-binary, third term by making apparent the physical, bodily relation of painting to the changes brought about by the simulacrum and the digital. By relocating the particularities of 'painterly' issues such as materiality, depth and opticality into the virtual, this claim for painting is in response to a number of 'end of history' theories such as Arthur C. Danto's, *After the End of Art*. Danto argues that artists are no longer bound to the dictates of grand master narratives of art, and that contemporary art has irrevocably deviated from the narrative discourses which define it. He then asks how to identify what critical principles there can be when no narratives are seemingly available, where *everything goes* and painting is just one of a number of artistic activities from which to choose. To flesh out Danto's thesis I examine Hal Foster's postmodern strategies of parody in painting that claims a linear end to the modernist canon, and then David Pagel's claim that contemporary painting combines the conflicting models of modernist abstract expressionism with the strategies of Pop Art as a *re-styling*.

In Chapter 3 I try to re-think the (historical) activity of abstract painting in the contemporary as an ontological exercise. By arguing along with Danto that although artists are no longer bound to the dictates of grand master narratives of art, but fascinated by the potential of Greenberg's legacy as a re-contextualisation for contemporary painters, I attempt to join Greenberg to Merleau-Ponty's ontological claim that the painter transforms the relationship between the body and a painting by *overlapping* the interior sense of self with the world of external objects as an *imaginary texture of the real*. The notion of embodied *overlapping* is further examined through writers who extend Merleau-Ponty's theories, allowing me to propose *overlapping* as a critique of Jean Baudrillard's disembodied, simulacral argument, in that the latter fails to distinguish between the self and the mechanically reproducible copy of the object.

From this overlapping of disparate contexts, Chapter 4 addresses the ontological in relation to the digital by suggesting that contemporary painting's criticality is central to its narrative. By converting Greenberg's physical determinism into a paradox that includes Lyotard's notion that the body is not an island of self-determination but a conduit through which information passes, I attempt to re-invigorate Greenbergian materiality through Andrew Benjamin's notion that contemporary abstract painters accept *and* transform the historical/modernist premise of the *yet-to-be-resolved* object/painting through a repetition of abstraction but as a *staged* event of *becoming*. Merleau-Ponty's *overlapping* is then re-converted as a *yet-to-be-resolved becoming* for the act of re-staged painting through Ian Burkitt's claim, that although the symbolic virtual

changes the body's sensuous relation to time and space, the symbolic virtual is at the core of the body's relations and activities of making (and makings representations).

My Conclusion argues that critical painting offers a philosophical dialogue between Merleau-Ponty's ontological mirroring of the painter's subjective motivation, with objective ornamental materiality as a stylistic strategy. This is combined through Stephen Perrella's Hypersurface theory which proposes a non-subjective, deterritorialised, architectural parallel of the digital as a transparent, fluid system of multi-dimensional signs, which paradoxically infuses with paintings material construction and reception in the contemporary as *pleasure*.

## Introduction 'Uncritical' Strategies in Painting

In the mid 1990s the combination of anecdote, exhibition catalogues and art magazines had shaped my understanding of supposedly *key* issues in painting. My initial aim was to reclaim a sense of reconstructive *critical* thought which to me seemed to be lacking in the exhibitions surrounding *new* anti-postmodernist issues in painting. Along with some early reading of postmodern philosophers such as Lyotard, Baudrillard, Derrida etc., my research then suggested that mainly art magazine and exhibition catalogues were/are available for up-to-the-minute analysis, but these often came with particular biased philosophical, political, historical and financial agendas. In particular, I wanted to criticize art museum exhibition catalogues because they made essentialist claims for painting in the contemporary as historically *distinct* from both modernism and the postmodern strategies of the 1980s, and not as I will argue later in the thesis, as an amalgam.

So, I will begin to argue through my initial concerns that the contemporary condition of art practice as 'post-historic', and more specifically 'post-ironic', is a mythology dependent on a linear understanding of paintings *history(s)*. Therefore, if we are to re-configure notions such as post history what are the values we could attach to contemporary painting when avant-gardism, according to Arthur C. Danto, or David Pagel's understanding of irony become redundant strategies? The value of the condition of *post value* will then be interrogated as a prognosis for art practice and not as a diagnostic condition that pre-supposes a hegemonic authority in art.

In order that we break down the genealogy of these hegemonies, I will explore ways of grafting conflicting ideologies such as Jean Baudrillard's notion of the simulacrum with Yves-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss's *Informe* theories to test whether there is some form of overlapping that can offer painting a positive confusion of contexts that counters historical essentialism. My aim is to understand painting as an *impurity* of historical categorization and re-configure it as *positively decorative*, or rather, as a phantasm of appearance *only*. Carmine Lannaccone argues that this condition is prevalent in contemporary painting because of "an inescapable standard set by the omnipresent media, each form of which competes for time and attention... If this is so, this means that painting must accommodate itself to a new way of being seen" (1999,p.88). For Lannaccone, contemporary painting demonstrates no sympathy with either avant-garde notions of the subversive, nor classical and Platonic ideals of inherent truth. Through Lannaccone, this Introduction will lead onto asking whether Greenbergian materialist modernism could be re-thought in terms of *sliding across* the surface of contemporary simulation to re-deal its aesthetic constituents via David Pagel's claim, that contemporary painting combines the conflicting models of modernist abstract expressionism with the strategies of Pop Art as a *re-styling*.



## Media Representations of Painting

To demonstrate the evidence at hand (some of which is anecdotal) I will turn to the local, namely, to painting in London and then the rest of Europe and America - to what I perceive as uncritical positions within contemporary art practice in general and painting in particular, for example, the notional reworking - or, to put it cynically, the return to naive and faux naive figuration - of Elizabeth Peyton (illustration 10) Dexter Dalwood (illustration 11), Martin Maloney etc. For me, the devices of these *figurative* artists are barely distinguishable from the strategies of early 1980s neo-expressionism whose philosophy appeared to suggest a rejection of 60s pop, minimalism, systems art, feminist art and process art, along with process arts' 70s *knock-ons*, by making claims of a return to a *painterly freedom of expression* and a populist approach against *theory*. Obviously Peyton, Dalwood and Maloney etc., wouldn't always claim the same, but the appearance of gaucheness which is sometimes overtly ironic and at other times unknowingly childlike for me throws up negative, circular modes of *end game* critiques. By this I mean that these artists pastiches of expression, which paradoxically, and rather confusingly, stand-in for *real* expression as the last word in postmodernism's fight with modernism, rely too heavily on a preconceived idea of what is historically relevant - namely that *moving on* from ironic painting of the 1980s as a return to *painterly freedom of expression*, via American and European post-war modernism, is the *correct position* for a contemporary painter. JJ Charlesworth in 'Not Neo but New' puts it like this,

the Saatchi Gallery's 'New Neurotic Realism'... (whose artists) use of informal materials and amateur techniques could simultaneously signify an allegiance to popular culture, a resistance to the professional conventions of institutionalized art, a critique of the process of aesthetic judgement and evaluation, or even a desire to make artwork more authentic and resistant to a depersonalized and media-saturated culture (2002,p.10).

Similarly, process and abstract painting have made a return that often appropriates, as decorative irony, the language of late 60s/early 70s artists such as the Paris based Support/Surface group. Contemporary artists such as Jason Martin (illustration 12) or Zebedee Jones etc., borrow from process, and in a formally and metaphorically more ambitious way, LA artists Laura Owens, Ingrid Calame (illustration 13), and Monique Prieto (illustration 14) borrow from, and flatten the American tradition of abstract expressionism. Both groups of examples attempt to straddle an ironic and/or emotive uses of process and techniques. These conditions, I would argue, are inter-linked directly with market suitability and aimed at audiences demanding the *style* of the authority of *Modern Art*, meaning that contemporary art can only be validated if it looks like, or is set-up against that which is already known as *Art* to a contemporary audience.

If we look at the model of the contemporary market and its influence for a moment, unregulated patterns of practice influence and encourage artists, galleries, critics, museums and academies

into panic responses toward creating a notion of *Art* or *High Culture*. Oliver Bennett, in his *Evening Standard* magazine article 'Exhibitionists', which charts the *rise* of Goldsmiths College Fine Art students in the art market, describes the knock-on effect of these panic responses;

'There were suddenly more dealers, and Goldsmiths' students - who are very worldly - saw how the international set-up operated', says (dealer Karsten) Schubert. Their work soared in price: (Damien) Hirst's cryptic installations in particular. 'It caught fire more quickly than the artists could have imagined and is still continuing', says (dealer Maureen) Paley (1993,p.71).

In turn, this media exposure panders to the glamourization of art to media support and consumption and Bennett adds that "Barbara Gladstone, who has a gallery in New York, recently put on a show of young British artists including Goldsmiths graduates. 'They've created international publicity for themselves in a very sophisticated way', she says. 'They've made the world aware of themselves' "(1993,p.71).

Whereas I recognize the inevitable - and to a greater degree the necessary and positive aspects of market forces, especially in relation to object based work, my aim will be to establish where and what the critical means now in relation to representation and the production and consumption of art and artists. However, what I don't want to explore is an ethnographic relation to the phenomenon of the market upon contemporary art production because this would lead to a methodology and investigation of the role of capital in the reception/understanding of art that is far too big a subject for this thesis. I would however, like to briefly demonstrate the conditions under which artists can be expected to be encompassed in order to describe the often one-sided argument on which art now is measured. Although this is obviously not always the case, the media especially can take on the role of judge and jury toward *new* developments in art. Consequently my focus toward this condition has come about because of a dissatisfaction with not only the market, but also with what has become known through the art press, and then the wider media, as the *YBA phenomenon*. I would like to make clear that my judgment here is not based on a fear of change prevalent in the conservative press, or contrarily, the *YBA phenomenon* as representing a breakthrough (or cutting edge) of contemporary art as in the more liberal broad-sheets. Instead, I would argue, that the artists who are somewhat lumpenly represented in this fashion, have desired to create works or strategies that differ to how they are perceived.

The media in recent years has acknowledged a need in 'modern-art starved Britain' (where even modernism has very rarely been acknowledged) to 'discover raw-talent' in order to declare its own *radical* credentials. And although this is often perpetuated and encouraged by the commercial galleries and collector's associated desires (sometimes misinterpreted as philanthropy), media interest has by default or unconsciously fuelled a reading of art culture (especially in this country) as *subversive, cool, or chic* - all three of these terms being expected

to add up to the same thing! In the European/American phase of modernism this might have been exploited as a new or unusual focal point (think of Jackson Pollock's Life article in the 1950's declaring that he was probably the greatest living artist in America) but in the 90's/00s the context has changed. The problem with trying to suggest for instance, that Gary Hume's solo show at the Whitechapel Gallery is *the* voice of British painting in the 1990's, as the Observer newspaper claims, clearly mimics modes of journalism as authoritative claims of reportage based on the iconic status of the 50's (Pollock) counterpart.

This curious demonstration of historical amnesia ignores the context of the original *intended* meanings within the historical and cultural conditions of 1950s American art. Rather than acknowledge this amnesia *as a representation*, a construction of myth, those meanings are plucked from their original contexts and are commandeered to suit the bias of broadsheets (such as the Observer), often resulting in a naive understanding of the conditions of contemporary art and culture. For me, the (British) media assumes contemporary arts *newness* without ever recognizing the redundancy of its appropriation of the problematics of modernist terminology and ideology. It is redeployed uncritically to describe art now as Andrew Graham-Dixon demonstrates in his article for the *Independent* called 'The Midas Touch?', when he attempts to outline the impact of Goldsmiths graduates on the contemporary British art scene which he views as a revision of modernist intentions; "the old notion of the avant-garde - the idea of art as, essentially, a radical activity - has been thoroughly discredited"(1990,p.13).

If (or when) a broadsheet does acknowledge the *re-use* of modernist terminology it is often as a parodic cynicism, a circular argument that is entrenched in its own sanctimonious position and this is where Graham Dixon's enthusiasm for young Goldsmiths art becomes undone;

New movements, the most cynical proponents argue, are no longer driven by creative dictates but by the market and its desire for a procession of new and saleable commodities. But it is equally possible to argue that once young artists cease to believe in the radical potential of what they are doing then art will truly have died"(1990,p.13).

Or, as William Feaver more damningly demonstrates in the *Sunday Observer* review section, when describing my painting in the 1998 'Whitechapel Open';

Michael Stubbs' 'Paranoid', a heavily-pointed crazy-paving image, is symptomatic of the fear that pervades the Whitechapel Open. This is the art equivalent of the late-Eighties debate, or 'debate', rather, about the End of History having come about. Freaked by the gibe that the End of Painting is nigh painters resort to laying down immaculate surface finishes, indicating that, true, they have nothing left to do. Or else they revert to old styles, salted with irony (1998,p.6).

However, one positive aspect is that contemporary art now has a platform to exist publicly in this country (something that I wouldn't have said ten to twelve years ago). The problem though is that contemporary art is presented through a revisionist modernism. This modernist tendency is something which is only now beginning to emerge, and as a consequence, an orthodoxy of historical modernism as conservatism is (often unconsciously) enforced and maintained. Equally, this modernist stance is polemicised in the media against *traditional* classical values of art - or old versus new - the old representing a timelessness and therefore hegemonic authority that the *faddish* modern cannot emulate as William Feaver once again demonstrates with a Sunday Observer review of a previous 'Whitechapel Open' show;

Mutant furniture and fittings... have been around for some time and Hilary Wilson's are hardly major contributions to the sculptural 'debate' involved, but they do give pause. So do the dozen hammers armed with thorns by Jordan Baseman (not unlike Man-Ray's tin-tacked flatiron) and Michael Stubbs's five layer, caky canvases squashed together with pink and green paint oozing like icing... This is what surrealism has come to; advertising concepts with nothing to sell but themselves (1990,p.8).

For me, to take sides between the *fashionable new* and the *debased old* is not to think through the complacent redundancy of this argument because, I will demonstrate, this argument often overlooks modernism as having never existed or misinterprets postmodernism and deconstruction.

### Contemporary Painting as 'Entertainment'

The agendas of art magazines also operate within the climate of historical misrepresentation but try to offer an alternative. They promote art as an (unwittingly) modernist pursuit with which readers ought to be associated (a pursuit which is commercially led!), they are industry based, often promoting art agendas which reflect the magazine's image or picking up on current art world trends. Their views are from *inside* the industry (and sometimes funded directly by institutions, galleries, collectors, or through advertising etc.), acting rather like trade magazines promoting insider favourites. Both the media and art magazines tend in general to pay lip service to the *official* history of advanced western modernism in the twentieth century that has been written on the basis of revolution in art. So called movements of art represent breaks from other movements of art in order to construct a historical narrative of rupture, as is demonstrated in 'Modern Art' survey books such as Norbert Lynton's, *The Story of Modern Art*, or Robert Hughes', *The Shock of the New*. Recent contemporary art trends copy Lynton's and Hughes' historicism and use their surveys as indicators of value by comparison. This *value by comparison* can often determine both the artist's mode of approach in the production of their work and where it will end up - works are aimed at those who will be the eventual purchasers. This means that artists are more frequently recognizing their role in anticipation of what has almost become a form of corporate patronage, for example Charles Saatchi. The question

becomes in this instance one of how to negotiate the complexity of the condition of media/patronage not by critiquing the media as an enemy of *true* art (which is in itself an easy modernist strategy), but by asking how modes and methods of contemporary representation offer an opportunity to re-configure art's production in the contemporary.

As a counter to this narrative historicism, Jochen Schulte-Sasse's introduction to Peter Burger's, *Theory of the Avant*, argues that art is an institution unto itself,

the social history of literature and art cannot be explained by making simple, direct links between the contents of individual works and social history. Rather, (Burger) holds, it is the social *status* of art, its function and prestige in society that provides the connection between the individual art work and history. Burger's concept of the institution of art establishes a framework within which a work of art is both produced and received (1984,p.xl-xlvii).

However, Schulte-Sasse's foreword ends by asking for a self-reflexive approach that is "a critique of Burger's own sociopolitical presuppositions and the limitations they place on the potential of post Avant-Garde art"(1984,p.xl-xlvii). Schulte-Sasse's warning seems not to have been heeded, as oddly, in the 90s/00s, the myth of rupture is still played out by the media, the commercial gallery sector, the museums, and artists in a circular game of mutual recognition. In Britain for instance, the BANK art group promote their shows with deliberately *shocking* titles such as 'Fuck Off,' or 'Cocaine Orgasm', in order to court negative publicity which in turn stimulates interest from the art establishment (illustration 15). This seeming contradiction is not as paradoxical as it appears because what is played out by BANK is a modernist form of avant-garde sentimentalism, a simulated avant-gardism. Whereas BANK's provocations insist on a sophisticated double-take that is potentially interesting as a joke, it falls short of its intentions by proclaiming a disregard for, or being *outside* of the commercial interests of the art world. Consequently the humour of this parody confuses itself by its linear belief in avant-garde art. BANK live out the sign of revolution and to me they are not aware of their position as a sign circulating within other signs in the *artworld* which says it's cool to be *avant-garde*; in effect they misunderstand the context of their own joke. I will argue therefore, that context within the sign means that we can re-think criticality within the commercial.

For me, a seeming contradiction occurs with a re-configuration of criticality within the commercial, or rather, of *context within the sign* in that art can be perceived firstly, as empty of criticality as in the dual argument of art being without social and revolutionary intent; art being purely commercial. Or secondly, art can be full of criticality, suggesting that art criticizes from the position of progressive re-evaluation. A one sided argument does not take into account the complexities of the condition of how we give value to art as *post value*, or rather, how art re-evaluates its position after the certainties of modernism and postmodernism that Arthur C. Danto discusses in *After the End of Art*. In short, the current art system still loves the modernist

tradition of revolution in art. In fact it often overlooks its dual role, via the media, as a provider of luxury commodities, and it is this contradictory modernist ideal of desiring the market but at the same time hating it that leads me to the relationship between the media, the commercial, and how artists could critically re-interpret, or rather, re-integrate the role of the commercial and the media into their work as *entertainment*.

In Carmine Iannaccone's *Frieze* article, 'Entertainment Complex', he asks the reader to question the status of avant-gardism through the avant-garde's primary source of painting. Iannaccone talks specifically about the contemporary painter Laura Owens (illustration 16) who invites the media and the artist to collude in a beneficially mutual relationship.

The difference between high and low culture is irrelevant for many younger artists because all art forms must now answer to a new and common point of reference: entertainment. One attitude suggests that the fine arts should take themselves more seriously as a form of entertainment, and likewise that entertainment be taken more seriously as of value in the fine arts. Perhaps this is a characteristic of our age - an inescapable standard set by the omnipresent media, each form of which competes for time and attention... If this is so, this means that painting must accommodate itself to a new way of being seen. As entertainment, a painting cannot assume the automatic privilege of intense scrutiny, but must work when in the periphery of a viewer's consciousness. In fact, it may need to work best in that capacity. What is lost in dramatic focus is gained in a far more general sense of presence; in the same way films make themselves far more present through their extraneous manifestations - billboards, adverts, previews, reviews - than during the 90 minutes in which the movie gets (supposedly) your full attention (1999,p.88).

For Iannaccone, the art work as a *revolutionary tool* in the fight between high and low culture (in its social as well as artistic sense) is a model that cannot be vindicated, as works of art and artists do not stand outside the systems of production in which they participate. Entertainment, via its relation to the moving image, pre-dominates art's reception and Iannaccone argues that painting in particular has arrived at a point where it must acknowledge its participation as part of the entertainment industry, or rather, that *art as high culture* is entertainment. Similarly, I will argue, contemporary criticality occurs through a knowing participation in these events not as cynical market manipulation, but by recognizing that art can only now have value (and by value I mean status critically and commercially) when it is solely art; that when it is both produced and represented and therefore named as art it explicitly sells and advertises nothing but itself within the system of art production. Like Adorno's claim that the "truth content of artworks, which is indeed their social truth, is predicated on their fetish character"(1997,p.227), this contemporary *value* that I am talking about which *sells and advertises nothing but itself*, has arisen as a historical shift which allows art to *operate* within its own designated system, and not as a traditional avant-garde or outsider practice that idealizes an autonomy from society and the

forces of capital and production. Adorno suggests that art is subject to an external law which differs in its manner of growth from socially useful objects of production - "the heteronomy, which reception theory's normative interpretation of phenomena foists upon art, is an ideological fetter that exceeds everything ideological that may be inherent in art's fetishization. Art and society converge in the artwork's content (*Gehalt*), not in anything external to it"(1997,p.228).

## New Formalism

But enough of my unqualified anecdotes on the artworld; JJ Charlesworth in his recent *Art Monthly* article 'Not Neo but New' argues for entertainment as pleasure, or rather, a relationship between dissociated pleasure in new formal abstraction and its mode of presentation in the gallery system. In particular, Charlesworth examines the Whitechapel Galleries exhibition 'Early One Morning' that shows a young generation of formalist abstract sculptors.

'Early One Morning' is compared to a concurrent Tate Gallery show that exhibits the 1960's generation of sculptors with overlapping aesthetic concerns. Charlesworth says that the "comparison with the swansong of Anglo-American formalism is interesting, but not because younger artists have made a coherent rediscovery of the interrupted trajectory of late Modernism that the (1960s) sculptors came to symbolize"(2002,p.8). This return of formalism he says, which although might be comforting to conservative critics looking for a sense of re-established tradition and continuity, instead "showcased a very contemporary problem afflicting the status of gallery aesthetics and its relation to the wider culture"(2002,p.8). Charlesworth privileges abstract formal and material considerations that celebrate the dissociated pleasure of material form which "might seem at best perverse, at worst reactionary - indeed a throwback to the bankrupt ideals of late modernism"(2002,p.8). But, he is quick to add, "this re-emergence of formal attention, evacuated of critical complexity or agenda, is nevertheless rooted in the same very contemporary pressures that bear on both the critical and institutional circumstances of art presentation in general"(2002,p.8). According to Charlesworth, these *contemporary pressures* are reflected as a contradiction between "the expansion of critical discourse that seeks to assimilate art to broader concerns, against the dogged persistence of art's institutionalized forms and limits"(2002,p.8). For him, the formal issues in the contemporary and formal issues in historic modernism causes a mismatch or confusion of ideologies between "critical concerns that supercede the tradition of gallery-based art and the market's ongoing appetite for work that conforms to that context"(2002,p.8),(Gary Webb, illustration 17). For Charlesworth, unlike other contemporary work that pays attention to the representation of institutional, cultural, social and political issues, the formalism of 'Early One Morning' has to be understood in terms of the overall scene of gallery art by those critical discourses that previously inhabited it.

If the shifts in contemporary art since minimalism can be seen as a step-by-step working through of the contextual contingencies that formalism had previously

repressed - questions of political engagement, cultural division and subjective identity - those developments were nevertheless articulated in relationship to the residual context of art's presentation, and inflected the persistence of its traditional forms (2002,p.8).

So for Charlesworth, the unresolved tension inherent in post-minimalist work of the 1970s and 80s, at least with regard to formal questions and the art gallery context, turns on "how to address critical demands antithetical to formalist orthodoxy, while maintaining an uneasy stand-off with the material and institutional conditions that produced formalism in the first place"(2002,p.9). Charlesworth then says that the compromise between the abundance of critical perspectives and their "assimilation into persistently conservative gallery modes of presentation underpins the impasse that critical practice had reached by the end of the 80s regarding the material, commodity of object art"(2002,p.9).

Although we could accuse Charlesworth of the oversimplification of historical linearity, or rather, that linearity is something to be wary of as a form of institutional/commercial patronage and power, Charlesworth makes a change in that he offers a context of presentation to the abstraction that is now being shown - he is saying that it is solely tied in with how the artworld perceives its role. For Charlesworth, this contemporary context of gallery based art dominating the discourse of what was institutionally perceived as *criticality* happened because (in Britain anyway), the

evacuation of critical discourse was most immediately apparent in the explosion of 'young British art', which, in its formal conservatism and indulgence in everything anti-critical and populist, did most to retrieve a viable, marketable model for gallery art, a turn which was richly rewarded by the rapid growth both of the commercial market and the public status of art in the 90s (2002,p.9).

From this perspective, and like me, Charlesworth recognizes the rapid expansion in public reception to contemporary art - even art that was seen as occupying marginal critical perspectives now seems to be represented in the once inhospitable institutions. Therefore, Charlesworth argues, the relationship between critical discourse and the institutional forms through which "they are articulated is now quite different to what it would have been two or three decades ago"(2002,p.10). If Charlesworth is right, and I suspect that he has a strong case, then the "hegemony of formal aesthetics and its implicitly hierarchical cultural divisions, now finds itself able to achieve an undreamt-of level of cultural prominence, in part due to the final collapse of conservative aesthetic discourse as a significant cultural force"(2002,p.10). But is there a contradiction between cultural prominence and its *collapse* with regard to formal aesthetics? Charlesworth says that the

demise of traditional aesthetic criteria and the limitation of critical discourse through its compromises with traditional formal categories, underwrites what yBa so conclusively demonstrated through its commercial success, and what the new formations of critical



practice can now exploit via the new opportunities for dissemination that result from art's broadened public status (2002,p.10).

But Charlesworth also recognizes the dangers of the re-formulation of aesthetic formalism in the hands of an "old fogey critic (such as) Richard Dorment"(2002,p.10), who, reviewing 'Early One Morning', declares with "breathless excitement that the exhibition 'is all the more remarkable... because it features abstract art at a time when abstraction is out of favour with young artists' "(2002,p.10). But abstraction has been around for some time, or rather the understanding of it as a re-configuration, and Charlesworth goes onto criticize Dorment as misrecognizing the context and intellectual play that the artists in 'Early One Morning' portray;

old school conservatives such as Dorment will no doubt have a warm regard for Early One Morning, as it offers them the nostalgic misrecognition of modernist certainty in an epoch of postmodern heterogeneity; hilariously, he insists on comparing Shahin Afrassiabi's (illustration 17) intelligent arrangement of DIY goods to the underlying logic of Cezanne's essential forms (2002,p.10).

Instead, Charlesworth argues, what the "new formalism discovers is not the ideal of the autonomous object of formalism, but the conditional persistence of the terms of aesthetic experience, as it might be encountered within the secure conditions of the art gallery"(2002,p.10). This not the same as say Greenberg's essentialized account of material form, but rather the recognition of an

ambiguity towards reference and representation, the hallucinatory excess of material form, and the syntax that develops between elements once they are placed in relation to one another - all echo the past but are discovered (anew) because these aspects are default values, so to speak, the pragmatic reality of what was once mistaken for an essential (2002,p.11).

Or rather, that Greenberg's *essential* of art practice was without *galleryfication*. But, I would ask, is this also a re-configuration of the critical, or is it really a cover up or frock coat for formal or market conservatism? Charlesworth says that for younger artists seeking to find "viable terms for a material practice after the epoch of postmodern critique, and reconciled to the exigencies of the market, the reinvention of non-figurative form allows for an art that is idiosyncratic and resistant to assimilation into other forms of visual culture"(2002,p.11). Charlesworth argues that this *resistance* might be seen as an assertion of cultural separation or independence of the artist away from the wider *popular* culture. For me, Charlesworth may well have had in mind Clement Greenberg's 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch' in which "kitsch is destined for those who (are) insensible to the values of genuine culture"(1939,p.12) in the gallery, because, as Charlesworth says, *resistance* away from the wider *popular* culture could provoke the "criticism that such a resistance might also be conducive to the market's desire for objects that do not too much involve themselves in the world outside, but instead focus on the luxury and

excess of the aesthetic moment within the confines of the gallery”(2002,p.12). For Charlesworth, this criticism fails on all accounts because this suggests that the rationalised terms of formalism were only ever an effect of these conditions,

conditions that appear to reassert themselves now that the critical impulses in art practice have relocated elsewhere. But the terms of formalism were anyway always contradictory; prone to the rarifying and sequestering impulse of elite taste, formalism nevertheless attempted to attest to a common affective potential of aesthetic experience (2002,p.12).

The work in ‘Early One Morning’, Charlesworth adds, although “reconciled to the commercial locus of the unique object, the work that ‘Early One Morning’ heralds is nevertheless involved in discovering the potential that might be articulated within the terms of that context” (2002,p.12). This is not a return to modernist (conservative) certainties he says, but rather, a contemporary reconciling with the plurality of practices in which “questions of form, experience and context may once more be negotiated. This is not a ‘return’ of history, but the reinvestment of certain conditions that persist in art practice today, conditions that result from the critical and institutional dead-end of the previous decade”(2002,p.12).

So it seems that Charlesworth is offering a re-configuration of abstract formalism that somehow circumnavigates the traditional argument between avant-gardism and/or traditionalism, and Charlesworth’s article is important to this thesis because not only does it overlap with my interests in re-configured material abstraction, but it gives a context for it to exist as *art* and not as art as *avant-garde revolution*.

## Post History?

This re-evaluation of the *value* of art is also reflected by Arthur C. Danto in *After the End of Art*, except that instead of arguing for contemporary art as either entertainment (Iannaccone), or presentation (Charlesworth), Danto examines the much wider historical implications for contemporary art by insisting that for contemporary artists there is no continued sense of a liberation to be won from the master narratives of previous art. Contemporary art he says, does not recognize the prescribed value of modernist critics (such as Clement Greenberg), that “the great master narratives which first defined traditional art, and then modernist art, have not only come to an end, but that contemporary art no longer allows itself to be represented by master narratives at all”(1997,p.xiii). The ensuing fragmentation of master narratives allows contemporary artists unprescribed *freedom*. Danto adds that it “is part of what defines contemporary art that the art of the past is available for such use as artists care to give it”(1997,p.xiii). In fact, Danto basically appears to argue for artists as able to do anything with the past, such as the 1980s German painter Marcus Lupertz who re-painted images of Nazism in an effort to reconcile his generations feeling of guilt with the past, or the British romantic

painters Stephen Campbell or Stephen Conroy who pastiched classicism so as to resuscitate the values of a *lost* mythical past. These artists I would argue, in contrast, would make no sense in Danto's argument, because by reviving classical styles of painting as a counter to 1970s *dry* conceptualism they appear not to be asking questions of the linearity which the inheritance of their (counter) practice depended. I don't think Danto would be supportive either (nor Charlesworth) but his *anything goes* theory doesn't preclude them. It would appear though that Danto is offering a diagnosis of the problem that *anything goes* he seems to ask us to consider the questions; where is art going, what value can we give it, where is arts authority and what theories shall we follow? These problems are raised not only by Danto but also by a number of critics, social commentators, academics and journalists etc., as is evidenced in the growing interest of the popular press and recent exhibition catalogues, especially around issues of painting and which I will examine more closely in Chapter One.

Danto and Charlesworth are therefore, important for me because they set up the issue of giving a value to contemporary art *beyond* the constraints of classical, modernist and postmodernist narratives. In fact, I would argue, they give an outline or blueprint to work out from by acknowledging the limits of historicist readings of contemporary art. For Charlesworth, context and experience in art arise out of the dead-end of institutional/critical languages and are re-configured in or by the market, with artists producing a formalism in which "the plurality of practices (mean that) questions of form, experience and context may once more be renegotiated"(2002,p.12). But Charlesworth's notion that new formalism can only be possible because it is "reconciled to the commercial locus of the unique object"(2002,p.12) does not allow us to discover the full philosophical implications of the *making* or qualitative value between works of formalist art in the contemporary. Charlesworth only sets up the commercial/market *idea* that a new generation of artists are exploring the "cultural limits and potentials of the experience of form (which) are being invented on today's terms"(2002,p.12) - he doesn't yet commit to the experience of what this *new formalism* might "express, and to what ends"(2002,p.12) - he says that it remains to be seen.

Equally, Danto, whose book appears as a timely resume to much recent postmodern and post-structuralist thought, also doesn't appear to forecast predictions for modes of practice that the condition of *post-history* creates (he could legitimately claim this is not his job or priority). He does however offer the so called humour of Russian artists Komar and Melamid as examples of good practice in relation to his projected thesis. But for me, and unlike Charlesworth's argument, these artists are very heavily locked into a 1980's style ironic art that is a direct parody of both western modernist art and modern official Soviet realism. It's as if we are asked to stop reading the works as *paintings* (or within the languages of Greenbergian painterly materiality and style) once the narrative rhetoric of the message of rupture has been identified. We could of course argue that one or the other art form was dominant during certain parts of the twentieth century - a reliance it would seem that invite Komar & Melamid's liberal,

interventionist reclaiming of *Modern Art* for the people through the series, 'The Most Wanted Paintings'. This project involved members of the public from various countries and cultures, being asked to select by poll both their favourite colour for abstract paintings, and their favourite generic figurative paintings. The results of the poll showed that in the USA blue was the favourite colour for abstract paintings in the upper income bracket, and black for lower incomes. But the results of the far more popular figurative survey, which was international, showed that the most wanted painting was a version of a nineteenth century landscape which for Danto ironically proved that the "44 percent blue landscape with water and trees must be the a priori aesthetic universal, what everyone who thinks of art first thinks of, as if modernism had never happened"(1997,p.213).

But for me, Komar and Melamid present a humour which assumes its own *endness*, a humour which gives preference to a particular linear narrative of art (western modernism), which by the logic of its own ancestry, seeks its own closure toward future art production as a *dead-end* strategy. This fixed view of culture as moving along dominant trajectories excludes culture's troublesome habit of shifting dialogues between variable audiences and perpetuates the populist idea of contributing further to the continuing development of contemporary art dialogue (in a historically logical or linear sense), namely, that art or more specifically painting is now dead, a popular claim of the 1980s.

I will argue in Chapter One that it would be unproductive to describe these parodic or ironic modes as challenging the presumptions of modernism since the model of negation employed here simply confirms the recognition of a dominant or linear validity despite its denial. Work that conforms to this parodic circularity closes down the experimental and exploratory space that multiple narratives could occupy and with which self-reflexive artists could make challenging work. Or, as Yve-Alain Bois says, that a *strategic* approach, or positive game of making painting in the context of the conditions in which it finds itself is different to a

theoretical machine encouraging indifference, since on the contrary one has to take a side, the strategic approach has the advantage of deciphering the pictorial field as an antagonistic field where nothing is ever terminated, decided once and for all, and of leading the analysis back to a type of historicity that it had neglected, that of long duration"(1990,p.256)

Therefore, instead of isolated moments that need to be negated Bois' *long duration* could be applied to Charlesworth's interest in new formalism as "the plurality of practices in which questions of form, experience and context may once more be renegotiated"(2002,p.12). This would provide a model to explore both the reaction against the historicism of the ironic, and also to explore Charlesworth's assertion that this "is not a 'return' of history, but the reinvestment of certain conditions that persist in art practice today, conditions that result from the critical and institutional dead-end of the previous decade"(2002,p.12). This work he argues, revels in the

context of its own presentation in the commercial galleries. Along with Charlesworth, I will also argue that there is on the one hand, a confusion or misrecognition in the re-contextualization of new abstraction which results in a safe linearity of historical events in relation to paintings past, and on the other, that abstraction's relation to simulacral and media representation facilitates the mechanisms that change our interpretation of abstract painting in the contemporary.

## Chapter 1 Painting after Parody: What does it mean to Paint Today?

Like the Introduction, this Chapter is very much a prologue to the rest of the thesis and contains some generalized arguments that came to my attention around painting and its relation to the market that bugged me at the beginning of my studies; it also contains many questions. This Chapter deliberately dashes across, as an introduction, many of the issues that re-appear in Chapters Two, Three and Four. Chapter One is intended to set the scene for more in-depth examinations of writers such as Clement Greenberg, Merleau-Ponty, Andrew Benjamin and Stephen Perrella, who I will argue, although seemingly unrelated, when brought together offer a philosophical re-configuration of the way we understand contemporary painting in relation to embodiment and the digital. Most of the sources in this Chapter either make use of, or are trying to carve extensions out of, a critical language born of postmodern theory from writers such as, Hal Foster, Jurgen Habermas and Jean-Francois Lyotard who attempt to give value to painting after modernism. But rather than understand painting as or through a modernist historical genre that needs *deconstructing*, I would like to frame painting as an ongoing contemporary activity that challenges distinctive definitions of the modern and the postmodern. I'm excited by a resurgence in the critical interest in painting and also by following the fragmentation of difference and individual voices within this emerging genre, especially painting that appears as derisively *decorative* and not as angst-ridden expressionism. There are painters working in cities like London and Los Angeles where one would not have historically have imagined these issues to be fore-fronted, given that since the 1940s cities like New York have hegemonically dominated the *problematics* of advanced abstract painting.

My primary interest for the resurgence of interest in painting *and* the simulacral character of contemporary technology, *via* Walter Benjamin, or later Baudrillard's recognition of the cultural changes brought about by technology, as filmic or photographic in the first instance, and later as computer cyberspace, has profoundly altered the way in which we pass on and relieve information, shifting our sense of visual space and manual process. This could be demonstrated for example in recent (ironic and post ironic) process painting, where layering presented as physical fact could be *imagined* as mimicking the 0-1 command of the computer. It is the digital, I believe, which offers a philosophical reading of contemporary painting that works away from, or rather in parallel too, the activities of new abstraction in the market place.

An example of this is demonstrated in *Colour Me Blind*, an exhibition catalogue which argues a relation to postmodernism's predisposition toward painting after modernism through *re-presentation*. And similarly, Lane Relyea's *Artforum* article 'Virtually Formal', 1998, that offers examples of painting created through a 'cyberspace', citing the works of Ingrid Calame (illustration 13), Monique Prieto (illustration 14), Laura Owens (illustration 15) and Kevin Appel

(illustration 18). Some of these artists use computers as a tool in their work, whilst others are influenced by its representational space. Relyea says that “what matters most is how developing technologies jolt and loosen painterly attitudes toward colour and form, as well as the very space of painting itself - the space it physically shares with its viewer as well as the space it pictures, the space of both body and message”(1998,p.133). Relyea adds that although paintings are made on durable substances (canvas or board etc.),

The space of the monitor is neither physical nor illusionistic, neither like a body nor an envelope; it's instead an interstitial space, always between, relaying input and feedback, command and performance, facilitating the call and response of communication. This kind of space has come to dominate experience. But given the relative physicality of picturing in wet pigment, rather than pixels, that experience is made less ideational and more bodily when reconvened within the conventions of painting (1998,p.133).

Indeed could we re-define painting as sliding across and through the interstitial space of computer representation? Is there a relationship between this *interstitial space* and the fleshiness of the body and painting's materiality? Can we re-frame both bodily and painterly materiality through simulation? And how could we demonstrate painting's relevance alongside installation, video, or photographic art, in spite of painting *appearing* to be *critically* outdated?

In order to begin to answer these questions we need to find out how painting views itself in the contemporary. Therefore, the rest of this Chapter will examine the catalogue texts for *Colour Me Blind*, (which included Takahashi Murakami) (illustration 19), *Abstract Painting... Once Removed*, and other recent painting shows such as *New Abstract Painting* (Fiona Rae, illustration 20) that attempt to diagnose the condition of recent painting. It would be fruitful to tease out where and how *they* perceive painting to be placed and to cross reference these texts to determine their similarities and differences. I will argue that these particular catalogue texts are attempting to demonstrate a different description of history other than that of a linear trajectory, but that they fail in not questioning the very precedents to which they seemingly oppose.

By contrast, the kind of historical method that I am hoping to create is a trans-positional one. I will ask how to cross-reference painting through its hegemonic histories whilst also arguing that it is painting's relation to interstitial cyberspace that transforms its hegemonic meaning in the contemporary. Equally, my position, although seen through the inevitability of postmodernism, doesn't mean that I am uncritical of the so-called liberation of trans-historicism that is exemplified by the Tate Modern's policy of mixing genres of artists and art movements in a single room so as to offer *non-conventional* historical lineages. Postmodernism in fact could be re-organized to open up unrecognized or unconventional combinations of fissures and gaps in the genealogy of (classical) historic understanding that, like any notion that becomes part of conventional wisdom can be viewed in at least two and sometimes more ways.

It is also necessary to examine the now standard movement of art objects in the market in relation to both contemporary art practice and its reception, or more specifically, how these conditions maintain the balance of power and mechanics of desire which drive it. Part of this examination would need to include how the market creates a notional *critical* interest, or more interestingly, formulates judgments of artists' work that are conditional on accepting the rules of the game of contemporary art, and in particular painting.

### Painting Beyond Postmodernism? 'Abstract Painting, Once Removed'

The exhibition catalogues that I have just mentioned generally suggest that a narrative is in place historically which says that ironic 1980s painting, and irony's strategic problems, are different to the problems of the 1990s. Claims are made for the recent trend in painting that are historically distinct from both modernism and postmodernist (ironic) strategies. David Pagel, writing in *Abstract Painting, Once Removed*, exemplifies this differentiation when he describes the ironic strategies of painters from the 1980s:

It's important to distinguish what's going on in abstract painting today from the once prevalent postmodern notion of art-in-quotation-marks. The primary purpose of the latter's predominantly abstract works was to make grand (tongue in cheek) propositions, and then by means of a sly wink, knowing nudge, or ironic twist, let insiders know that such goals were ridiculously overblown, even dangerously authoritarian. This insistence on making a mockery of modernism, first by turning American abstraction into a simplistic cliché, and then by attacking this straw target, goes hand-in-hand with the idea that form and content are separable and that artists' intentions are easily translated to objects. It cynically treats the contemporary world as an incidental footnote to a vaunted history from which artists and viewers have become irredeemably alienated. This passive-aggressive approach to art making often prevails where a surfeit of historical precedents is available, but current works have no vital connection or living relation to precedents - and have a hard time coming to terms with the fact (1998,p.24).

By setting up a polemic between the ironic and the expressive that presupposes an *end game* of ideology(s) - a kind of *death* of modernist art practice, Pagel places himself in postmodernism.

Abstract painting, Once removed (from self-expression) situates the works in this exhibition far from the old-fashioned yet still prevalent idea that abstract painting is the perfect vehicle by which 'creative' individuals spill their guts and tell their personal, angst laden stories, whose unique pains and torments could not be conveyed by any other means (1998,p.25).



Dana Friis-Hansen, also writing in *Abstract Painting, Once Removed*, describes in more detail exactly what type of painters and their paintings Pagel describes as *removed* from *angst-expression*. Friis-Hansen claims that by isolating the “elements of the language of painting - the drip and the stroke, canvas, palette, stretcher, etc. - for examination, celebration, or deconstruction”(1998,p.19), these artists alter the way in which we read physical painting. The physical becomes paramount as opposed to the solely “retinal, spiritual, or conceptual aspects of painting and its tools”(1998,p.19). For Friis-Hansen,

The Expressionist drip and brushstroke are key icons for Ingrid Calame, Sally Elesby, Fabian Marcaccio, Takahashi Murakami, Aaron Parazette, and Richard Patterson, who address paint’s primary syntactical form in diverse ways. Instead of brushes, Tad Griffin makes customized squeegees to pull paint across a surface (1998,p.19).

Friis-Hansen adds that technology has played an increasing role in contemporary painting. He says that “Kevin Appel, Jeff Elrod, Aaron Parazette, and Monique Prieto use the computer as a limitless sketchpad with an array of electronic tricks to generate or manipulate images, which they then render by hand in paint on canvas”(1998,p.19-20). Equally for Friis-Hansen, some of the artists in the show use the camera as a tool to address issues of abstraction in painting. For example, Kevin Appel, Glenn Brown, Aaron Parazette, and Takahashi Murakami (illustration 18) “mix representational painting with issues of abstraction. Photography is part of the production, or even the final product”(1998,p.20).

The removal of expression in painting by applying paint with either a technical gesture that is distant from touch, or a deliberate, self-conscious application of the brush either as a demonstration of the means of application or re-presented through the intervention of another medium are at issue in the contemporary narratives that are presented throughout this Chapter. But these narratives, which are supposedly at odds with the *limited* binaries of the modern or the postmodern, need to be re-examined through painting itself and I will suggest over the course of this thesis that we need to discover what individual painters are doing, and how their paintings don’t necessarily fit the narratives that writers like Pagel and Friis-Hansen are proposing. As a consequence, in Chapters Three, Four, and the Conclusion, I intend to look at paintings themselves as opposed to the limited (ironic or non-ironic) historicist contextualisations that are prevalent in contemporary descriptions of painting.

Anyway, back to my critique of David Pagel’s *attempts* to demonstrate contemporary paintings difference from postmodernism. Pagel endeavours to argue through the cul-de-sacs that he sees as inherent in postmodern painting, because he says that the re-use of the physical languages of painting often result in a self-conscious ironic introspection. Pagel argues against the ironic to make a claim for a *new* practice that is beyond these constraints; it is the viewers he says, who change the way the works are read because they are

invited to consider all of these works *in Abstract Painting, Once Removed* on equal footing with one another - at one remove, as it were, from the tendency of critics and curators to treat art forms from other places as signs of their environments, rather than as multilayered objects that shape their surroundings as much as they're shaped by them (1998,p.23).

For Pagel, although 1980's postmodern painting, which is based on an *ironic twist* towards modernist art history appear at *one remove*,

it would be a mistake to think that they share much with the works in this exhibition. Too eager to close the gap between the past and the present by claiming a position of centrality for themselves, their willingness to be once removed is an empty pretence based less on maturity and willful humility than on juvenile self aggrandizement. These defensive painterly surrogates merely act as if all of history were a sham in order to be seen themselves, as 'historically' important (1998,p.24-25).

On the one hand Pagel is interesting in that he seems to be exploring *ways out* of what seems a postmodern impasse (although he never states what these exits are), and on the other, he also asks that 1990s painting needs to finally ask

the question 'once removed from what?' (which) must be answered in terms of expressive intentions. With these (new) works, speculation about particular gestures, flecks, and smears of paint never leads back to a *modernist notion* of originating consciousness. Instead the activity of paying close attention to the peculiarities of each piece leads viewers beyond the shroud of privacy and into the world of shared social space, where arguments can be made openly and aggressively without compromises being made for personal feelings (1998,p.25).

However, I'm concerned with Pagel's insistence on an essentialist critique of 1980's irony in order to divorce himself of both postmodern strategies and the framing of modernism, so that he can justify the differences with 1990's painting. In particular, Pagel intends to defeat irony in the same manner as irony attempts to defeat heroic abstraction. Whereas, he asserts, that "painting today *conjoins and* is indebted to Pop Art's exploitation of mechanical reproduction and High Modernism's focus on the 'embodied effects of aesthetics' "(1998,p.27), he could also be describing a "Neo-Geo" group show from the 1980s which could include the likes of Peter Halley or the appropriationist Sherrie Levine - so where is the difference for the 90s artists he is promoting?

For me, Pagel's insistence on going beyond postmodernism (and modernism) seems both linear and general, relying as it does on the historical presumption that modernism, as a totality of philosophies, precedes Pagel's own reading of postmodernism as a form of inclusiveness. I would argue that although Pagel appears to be diametrically opposed to modernism he is in fact

unwittingly continuing the classical thinking he is trying to attack. However, if we re-consider Pagel's desire to *go beyond* postmodernism as interrelated, and try to re-work Jean Baudrillard's simulacral theories into re-thinking painting *as a form of entertainment*, maybe then we could consider Pagel's claim that painting today conjoins and is indebted to *Pop Art's exploitation of mechanical reproduction off High Modernism's focus on the embodied effects of aesthetics* as both a stylistic appropriation, *and* as an ironic parody that aims to create multiple dialogues.

As a counter to Pagel, Jean Francois Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition* criticizes the demand that art be contained within framing discourses of inclusiveness, an inclusiveness such as Jurgen Habermas's.

What Habermas requires from the arts and the experiences they provide is, in short, to bridge the gap between cognitive, ethical, and political discourses, thus opening the way to a unity of experience. My question is to determine what sort of unity Habermas has in mind. Is the aim of the project of modernity the constitution of sociocultural unity within which all the elements of daily life and of thought would take their places as in an organic whole? Or does the passage that has to be charted between heterogeneous language games - those of cognition, of ethics, of politics - belong to a different order from that? And if so, would it be capable of effecting a real synthesis between them? The first hypothesis, of a Hegelian inspiration, does not challenge the notion of a dialectically totalizing *experience*; the second is closer to the spirit of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*; but must be submitted, like the *Critique*, to that severe reexamination which post-modernity imposes on the thought of the Enlightenment, on the idea of a unitary end of history and of a subject (1979,p.72-73).

Pagel also attempts a critique of a *sociocultural unity as an organic end of history*. Pagel says that since the artists in *Abstract Painting...Once Removed* challenge history, that they *challenge the notion of a dialectically totalizing experience* because of the externalized effects of the simulacral, they

prefer to pay more attention to the social spaces paintings actually occupy than to the psychological depths many viewers presume to read into their surfaces, *and that* they favour insistent superficiality, cool detachment, intellectual rigour, and material veracity that take precedence over urgent expressivity and inward-turning emotionalism (1998,p.25).

Pagel's division between surface and depth, or rather, detachment and expressivity (as a form of critique?) occurs he says, because of the effects of mechanical reproduction. But I would argue, is Pagel not simply affirming the Hegelian premise of the totalizing experience that Lyotard challenges - the stabilizing of the referent for the purposes of a 'correct' academic argument which demands that the postmodern overturn the modern. Instead, could we re-think

Pagel's split through Lyotard's claim that postmodernism "is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant" (1979, p. 79). For Pagel, painting, or infer or hyper-real painting, although acknowledging the surface *skin* as *decoration* as a shift from the reliance upon the hand-crafted, establishes a split between the enlightenment genealogy of depth/surface. For me, Pagel relies on a guiding set of preceding arguments that support the classical equation of surface=superficial in opposition to depth=real; that the object lacks an original source which is akin to Baudrillard's *seduction* of the surface where the "aesthetic form (of)... the work as such disappears in the inevitable destiny of Mechanical reproduction... which has become entirely the multiplication of objects without an original" (1979, p. 164).

What I do not want to advocate is a Pagel/Baudrillard hyper-real simulation of detached signifiers from the *original* which sustains the surface=superficial model, rather, I want to adopt hyper-real simulation as a strategy that circumnavigates the need for a binary opposition; that *surface as skin* be understood as the *primary* condition of painting in the simulacral. Therefore, I will propose that for hyper-real *surface* to be understood as a critical tool, this *surface* must emphasize the exaggeration of painting's ability to be read as *pure* material seduction. Arguing alongside Greenberg's insistence of the truth to materials (but not his essentialist theories of purity), my *surface* argument will aim to expand upon Greenberg's limited readings to include a re-reading of material fact within the terms of the simulacral. In particular, I want to re-stage Pagel's conjoining of High abstraction and Pop Art in the contemporary in more detail in Chapter Two.

## Colour Me Blind

In the meantime, as further evidence of the proliferation of interest in contemporary painting (and the simulacral/digital), I will now examine Ralf Christophori's text from *Colour Me Blind* because he introduces a rhetoric of painting in relation to the computer image which will become increasingly influential for this thesis.

The *Colour Me Blind* catalogue, in which Christophori contributes, is important for me because it appears as a seminal publication on contemporary painting as is evidenced in the number of academic and museum bookshops that stock it in quantity like the Tate Modern. *Colour Me Blind* is also significant because it demonstrates and contextualizes the limitations of the current painting debate which asks to be (historicized) *beyond* the postmodern. At this stage of the thesis I will be examining both the conceptualization and historicisation of this and other catalogues as an account or narrative of painting in the contemporary. This is done so that I may better understand how painting is being talked about intellectually, academically, commercially and in the museum sector, and, as I said earlier, leaving the actual discussion of painting and its making until Chapters Three, Four, and the Conclusion. However, on occasion I will have inevitable recourse to current debates through actual works.

In *Colour Me Blind*, Ralf Christofori recommends a cross-cultural overlapping of tropes but as a relation between the immediacy of the imagery of comics and computer games. The artists in *Colour Me Blind* he says transpose this immediacy “onto the canon of a fundamentally abstract tradition of painting. They also do the same in reverse”(1999,p.27). Although 1960's pop art borrowed imagery from comics (computers were not then available), Christofori claims that “it is possible that we are dealing here with a ‘new form of abstraction’ ”(1999,p.27). For Christofori, quoting Jens Peter Koever, painting has evolved in a

significant parallel to the multiplication and acceleration of image production and distribution, to the increasing impregnation of most areas of life with the visual in all its forms. The multiplicity of languages inherent in the (works in this show) is due to a deliberate dual coding, through the transformation or integration of everyday popular and non-artistic optical products such as logos, films, and consumer interfaces, along with a simultaneous reference to the grand repertoire of abstract painting (1999,p.27).

But, Christofori says, Koever's argument for a dual coding presumes a well established (historical) binary system, because

If we assume that ‘optical products’ as a whole are available to us as a cultural code, there cannot really be any dual coding. Such an argument would amount to a revival of the ‘High and Low’ debate, which has been around several times already. The whole point of the increased accessibility of cultural images is that it sidelines this very distinction: as a distinction, it seems already to be beside the point. The artists discussed here are looking for structures beyond this still-hierarchical interpretation (1999,p.27).

Can these structures *beyond hierachical interpretation* then be understood as trans-historical? Indeed, could we begin to argue for, or invent a third term rather than a *one on one* term to describe this non-binary position? Is it then possible, firstly, to discover whether there are possibilities for trans-migrational relations between art movements and histories that initially appear as different and unconnected? And to discover secondly, whether these *relations* can be collaged together to create hybrid and infinitely extendible, inter-changeable repertoires of possibility for painting that are not reliant on modernist or postmodernist master narratives, but include rather than differentiate other cultural visual languages not ordinarily associated with *high art*.

For Christofori, it is the collating of historical abstraction *with* the craft of painting that offers a programme with which to understand again the contemporary pictorial grammar of say comics, computer games, and painting together.

Abstraction makes its appearance as a strategy that operates both in comics and computer games. In both, abstraction serves the process of reduction to essentials, the

gain being both in an economy of pictorial means and in the instant recognizability of scenes and characters. Conversely, painting uses the same pictorial grammar to evolve narrative qualities out of abstraction - just as in the reading of comics and computer games (1999,p.28).

Christofori adds that it is the abbreviated pictorial language of abstraction *and* computers and comics that transforms the viewer's ability to form a narrative context of the form of abstract painting from its traditional understanding.

During the 1950s and 1960s, abstraction displaced its expressive qualities onto a primarily 'wordless level', in subsequent painting, by contrast, it seems to have (re)developed a narrative rhetoric. The codes that have emerged here are different from those in the early forms of the picture story, but like them they function within a framework of narrated action. As pictorial and also cultural vocabulary, they are handed over to the viewers, who construct picture stories of their own, each according to his or her experiential horizon (1999,p.28).

The viewers' involvement as active participants in the readings and meanings of contemporary paintings is contrary to Clement Greenberg's desire to stamp the exclusivity of *high arts*' authority (which privileges painting as an individualised mannerism) as having no relation to popular reproduced imagery. But Christofori's text is relevant for me not only because of its reliance (or publicity hook) on comparing the visual grammar of abstraction with comics, but also because it begins to ask how Greenberg's material function of painting which says "that the unique and proper area of competence of each art coincided with all that was unique in the nature of its medium"(1960,p.86), can be re-read as a rhetorical narrative. Coming Chapters will re-consider further Greenberg as a presentation of rhetorical narrative.

As a contrast to Christophori's interest in the computers and cartoons Lane Relyea, in another essay from *Colour Me Blind*, deals with the aesthetics of contemporary abstraction. Initially, Relyea appears to offer a rethinking of classical aesthetics in relation to contemporary abstraction not only through contemporary abstractions relation to mechanical reproduction, but also as a series of four master tropes; metaphor, synecdoche, metonymy, and irony. Relyea proposes, at least in theory, a re-configured *surface* argument.

Relyea somewhat unusually opens by appealing for *beauty* to be analyzed not in its traditional aesthetic terms but as a continuation of what both Jackson Pollock (illustration 21) achieved in the 1940s and 50s and also the colour field painters of the 1960s. Relyea discusses the reading of painting as a series of painting's own tropes.

More serious - and more confusing - is the association made between painting and the current aesthetics revival. Part of the confusion is due to the way beauty is often defined. One of its most popular advocates, Dave Hickey, characterizes beauty in

relation less to 18th century aesthetics than to the classical tradition of rhetoric out of which aesthetic discourse grew. For Hickey, beauty is not about evoking the Ideal through pictorial unity so much as it involves using 'tropes and figures for the purposes of persuasion' (1999,p.14).

By emphasizing this as different from modernism Relyea adds that the lesson

Pollock's work seemed to offer was how to strike a direct and unmistakable stance by speeding up the works address, by getting rid of all the lengthy transactions of reading and interpreting, all the conventions and symbols used by viewers to get what supposedly lies behind a work, so that emphasis could shift to the work itself and what lies in front of it, namely the viewer (1999,p.14).

But to emphasize the shift to the work itself, Relyea argues, required a drastic rhetorical manoeuvre; it required a loss of art's metaphoric dimension.

As TJ Clark summarizes Pollock; 'His painting is a work *against* metaphor'... Just how much of a risk this really was quickly became evident. As early as 1952 Harold Rosenberg responded to Pollock's attack on pictorial convention as if it left almost nothing to look at. Here the lesson gleaned was that 'what was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event. The big moment came when it was decided to paint ... just to paint (1999,p.15).

But for Rosenberg, a problem occurred when the actual moment or *event* in painting came to be mechanically reproduced in catalogues and press reviews because reproduction would *spoil* the 'authenticity' of Pollock's action painting. Relyea describes how Pollock's work *against metaphor*, or rather, the *event* of the action of the painting, led Rosenberg to believe that mechanical reproduction somehow defeated the authority and authenticity of Pollock's breakthrough; that the media had trivialized the heroic monumentalism of modernism's advance or attack. Relyea says that Rosenberg condemned what he called a new 'taste bureaucracy' in which the production of modern masterpieces had now been all too clearly rationalized with 'vanguard painting' being *used* in its totality as material for 'educational and profit-making enterprises, colour reproductions, design adaptations, human-interest stories'. Relyea adds that because of mechanical reproduction, Rosenberg complained that

in the growing postwar culture industry the likelihood of art being misappropriated, misread, travestied and trivialised was far too great. Despite the fact that more people see and hear about works of art than ever before, Rosenberg sighed, 'the vanguard artist has an audience of nobody' (1999,p.15-16).

According to Relyea, Rosenberg ignored the benefits of mass reproduction that today we see as a means of distinguishing the difference between the actual painting and its representation in both contemporary and historical art. Photo-mechanical transfer plays a major part in the

practice of some artists such as Glenn Brown (illustration 22) who renders impasto paintings (most notably Frank Aurbach), as flat painted mimics which he copies only from photographs. Relyea suggests that Rosenberg's outrage at mechanical reproductions of Pollock's paintings was shared by the next generation of American artists because

artworks that wagered everything on how they appeared to the viewer would flourish by the beginning of the 60's - not only colour-field painting but certain minimalist sculpture and pop art as well by the end of the decade, with the rise of process and conceptual art, another wave of iconoclasm, not unlike the kind outlined by Rosenberg, would demote imagery once again (1999,p.16).

But, Relyea argues, a contradiction occurred in the 1960s between the way works *looked* and the way mechanical reproduction competed with art's *look* and "yet it's this in-between period, during the reign of artwork that emphasized looking despite the sense of crises embroiling it, that many of today's artists - certainly the artists in *Colour Me Blind* - are returning to"(1999,p.16). Relyea says that this return to the *look* amounts to a re-mining and re-appraisal of abstract expressionism and then colour-field painting, they are overlooked art movements that are now being re-thought by a contemporary generation.

However, I would argue that Relyea argues this contradiction of *looking* as a truism. He appears to offer a dominant trajectory of *art history* (colour-field follows directly on from abstract expressionism), in order to present not only a very different group of (contemporary) artists in terms of their subject matter (through their relation to the digital), but also a need to squeeze them into an art historical reading - a desire for an authority by which to compare. Although Relyea attempts to give an acceptable distance of time (and criticality) for contemporary painting that is not simply read as an historical repetition, he falters in his reliance on that history.

To illustrate this desire for reliance/difference from history, Relyea later re-introduces metaphor as one of four master tropes to make sense of visual art since the 60's. He says that there "exist four main modes of address, or what are called 'master tropes'; beside metaphor, there are synecdoche, metonymy, and irony... Its possible to see much of the visual art made in the wake of Pollock's attack on metaphor - as adopting the last three of these 'master tropes' "(1999,p.16). For me, Relyea's underlying desire for a rhetorical historical unity sets the stage for his *master trope* theory in order to gain credence for the *historical* relevance of the artists in *Colour Me Blind*. But, Relyea adds, that "what I've just described could be taken as the passage from modernism to post modernism (or, to use Krauss's terms, from colour field to expanded field). But if modernism and its beliefs no longer seem available to us, the same does not hold true for the rhetorical strategies it employed" (1999,p.17-18).



Relyea then changes course, offering a more fluid model of interpretation for contemporary painting:

Unlike such rigid dualisms as modernism versus post modernism, the four master tropes represent more fluid modalities: They're always available, and are in fact hard to keep separate from one another. Indeed, despite the prevalence of a more or less ironic mode (or at least the prevalence of artworks that seem rhetorically divided against themselves), it's impossible to completely repress the simultaneous use of the other three modes. The present show is a case in point. Nearly all of the artists gathered in this exhibition can be said to mix metaphor, synecdoche, metonymy and irony, but to very different ends (1999,p.17-18).

For me, Relyea's historical preamble somewhat undoes an interesting discovery between the individual distinctions of the master trope theory; distinctions that offer the potential for a fluidity of movement between them as a counter to ironic iconoclasm. But if we were to adopt Relyea's model of the cross referentiality of the four master tropes without the necessity to ground his model in history, it may be possible to combine this as a freeing-up of meaning in painting.

## New Abstract Painting

Enrique Juncosa's text in the exhibition catalogue for *New Abstract Painting* at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, and the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, says that

The new abstract painters use the styles of modern art as a means and not as an end, forgetting normativism and prejudices, to relate forms and theories which, in the recent past, have been opposed. In doing so, they attack our submission to the apparent logic of our systems of perception and try to recover from the traumatic decline in idealism in art after the 60s (and to do so without having to resort only to irony) (1996,p.15).

Juncosa argues that in spite of the significant differences between the artists in *New Abstract Painting*, "abstraction is able to mean something more than the elegiac accumulation of worn-out gestures"(1996,p.15). Although they take motifs from Abstract Expressionism they do not address the spontaneity of automatic painting nor of its function as the representation of the unconscious, and "just as they evade transcendentalism, their formalism is apparent and not conventional, being based on reorganization and linguistic games" (1996,p.15).

For Juncosa, "nobody now talks of the ideal of essentializing purity or of progress in one direction but rather of notions of infinity, chaos, pluralism and complexity" (1996,p.11). However, much in the same way as Pagel and Relyea, Juncosa also relies on an historical precedent by claiming that just as the Post-Minimalists and Neo Expressionists questioned form in their chosen mediums, the "new abstract painters question formal dogmatism and unequivocal

visions of things" (1996,p.11). In describing the Post Minimalists and Neo Expressionists as questioning formal dogmatism, I would argue that Juncosa is setting up a deliberate formal polemic in order to gain credence for *new abstraction*. The Neo Expressionist movement in particular, which Juncosa mentions, appeared to me in the 1980s as an art market led phenomenon whose platform of *freedom* to paint like *wild animals* was justified as a reaction to what was perceived as over intellectualism in conceptual art of the 1960s and 70s. Neo-Expressionism claimed that most conceptual art in the late 70's was eventually perceived as unduly dogmatic, preferring the linguistic over the visual, or a separation of the two faculties. Juncosa in this sense is simply conforming to the linear pattern of reactive (reactionary) patterns.

But Juncosa then contradicts, or rather throws open his argument, by replacing historical formalism with a material approach to painting which allows for form to re-configure itself. Not one of the painters in *New Abstract Painting* he says,

in all likelihood, conceives his art in a militant way, neither does he or she believe in the possibility of creating a pictorial paradigm that is totalizing, replaceable and equivalent of natural order. Abstraction today is nothing more than a material - or set of forms - which may be freely used without any need to refer to a particular ethic (1996,p.11).

Arthur C. Danto by comparison, argues for *impurity* in painting as a deliberate strategy of re-configuration of form, not as random liberalism, but more specifically as against Greenbergian *purity* in his essay for *New Abstract Painting*; 'The Pure, the Impure, and the Non-Pure: Painting after Modernism'. Philip Guston, Danto says, turned from making *beautiful* abstractions to harsh cartoon-like painting's that offended, and made *impure*, painting's historical project because it "is the adjustment of impurities which forces paintings continuities"(1996,p.23). Danto argues that painting's contemporary understanding of its identity happens through its relation to Greenberg's material notion of purity in art (or painting), which, Greenberg says,

was unique in the nature of its medium. The task of self-criticism became to eliminate from the specific effects of each art any and every effect that might conceivably be borrowed from or by the medium of any other art. Thus would each art be rendered 'pure', and in its 'purity' find the guarantee of its standards of quality as well as its independence (1960,p.86).

Danto says that if painting recognizes itself as painting then it produces the stage upon which painting as painting becomes *impure*, "which in no way then especially justifies the quality of explicit impurity we find in Guston's late work"(1996,p.23). The value, or quality of impurity that Danto asks us to consider in Guston, is comparable he says to Carroll Dunham's recent paintings (illustration 23) by arguing that painting as painting can become more than an argument with its formal self.

Dunham exemplifies impurity in the sense in which it internalizes what was once an external division between Abstract and Figurative art, which Guston energized. There is, no doubt, an exploitation of what, in the language of the docent, would be designated *biomorphic* or even *zoomorphic shapes* in Dunham's painting, but they are made vivid and real by the cartoonists strategies of representing meat - juicy, raw, bulbous, sticky, *visceral* - and they are more than organic: they are sexual in a way which expresses how sexual encounter feels more than the way it looks (1996,p.23).

Danto's interest in Dunham is the taboo of 'feeling' (Dan Cameron's term) which Danto sees as extramural but also inherent to the execution of Dunham's work. He documents this in more detail in his book *Art after the End of Art*, when talking about Sean Scully's paintings as emotional indicators rather than postmodern abstractions, who provides, like Dunham, a self reflexive relation outside his paintings. Danto argues that Dunham "establishes the identity of the erotic and the comical, so that they are impure not merely in an aesthetic sense, but in the sense in which certain thoughts are stigmatised as *impure*". But, I would ask, how exactly could we re-configure painting that is more than *form* in the context of experience? What would this context comprise of?

My overview of all of these recent catalogue texts have been arranged to provide a diagnoses in order to ask questions of postmodernism's own sense of knowing, and where, or how, or more importantly why, each of the writers perceive a divorce or *beyondness* from postmodern strategy? Could a prognosis be offered as a re-contextualizing of history which is non-binary in its definition and wider as a context? Judging by the number of exhibition catalogues available around issues of painting and its relation to modernism/postmodernism, it would appear that a *post-historical* positioning is upon us, which is infinitely extended and extendible. Could it be the case therefore, that individual positions for artists in relation to one another once again take on a symbolic importance - not as a product of historical polemicism, such as a revival of the values of the historical avant-gardist, but as a *hyper simulation* of what is expected of Modern Art? Could this *hyper position* be understood not as something that replaces something else, but as an interwoven and multi-faceted culture of separate identities belonging loosely to a world we call art?

This is the main thrust for the rest of the Chapter; figuring out a position which could be termed as re-interpreting the value of *post value*, or rather, that the term *post* need not apply. Instead we need to ask how value is given or transferred to artworks in the wake of deconstructive and post-structural theories which supposedly argue for the end of art.

## Re-Writing History

To begin, I will return to the paintings of Carroll Dunham who was included in *New Abstract Painting*, a show which argued a separation from the pre-dominance of 1980s/90s Neo-Abstraction (Dunham's work in the show could indeed have been described at that time as abstract in the conventional terms). However, and in tune with Danto's argument for *impurity* in Dunham's paintings, what confuses the binary separation of *new* abstraction from neo-abstraction is Danto's insistence that the paintings "are made vivid and real by the cartoonists strategies of representing meat - juicy, raw, bulbous, sticky, *viscera*"(1996,p.23). This is how Dan Cameron's *Artforum* review describes Dunham's newer works at Metro Pictures, New York; the "greatest shock of Dunham's new work is the extent to which his figurative inclinations have burst from their fetters"(1998,p.95). Cameron argues that by demonstrating that the apparent divide between abstraction and figuration are two sides of the same coin and that the divide itself should not be a problem, Dunham's position as an artist complicates the set up of the market and history. Cameron claims that Dunham's work requires a long-term commitment from the viewer because since Dunham began to appear in group shows twenty years ago his singular use of process in the deployment of colour and drawing has made him the odd man out in discussions of recent American painting.

Too analytical, introspective, even principled to be lumped in with any school, he is nevertheless claimed by a range of artists who see him as a rare standard-bearer in a morass of contemporary styles that seem increasingly defined by the subordination of artistic invention to the latest wrinkle in critical mores (1998,p.95).

Cameron appears not to claim a spurious avant-gardist *radicality*, or bad boy image as a knowing pastiche which has become familiar with the YBA phenomenon, but rather describes how Dunham's painting's function as themselves within the painterly terms that Dunham sets up and deploys. Cameron argues for an art that doesn't simply play up to the '*latest wrinkle in critical mores*'; but asks that Dunham's paintings be accepted (almost independent of their current historical standing), as both challenging and satisfyingly formal/painterly paintings that represent through their viscosity actual lived experience.

But could we take Cameron's claim that Dunham complicates the divisions between painting genres in relation to the market a step further, and then account for painting (in the contemporary) as a kind of to-ing and fro-ing between styles, histories and forms that hitherto have been understood as separate? If so, painting activity as an overlapping of contexts could be rewritten as a non-linear understanding that sees the present time not as one art fashion, (often based in the market on rather tenuous modernist, aesthetic relations) replacing another (albeit with ever increasing speed), but as a series of inter-communicable relations with individual and personal histories? How could this be argued if, and to re-quote David Pagel from *Colour Me Blind*, "artists *now* favour insistent superficiality, cool detachment, intellectual

rigour, and material veracity that take precedence over urgent expressivity and inward-turning emotionalism”(1999,p.25)?

Could we begin to re-think Pagel's notion of the *embodied effects of aesthetics* as re-dealing classical and/or modernism's formal agendas as a *critical, decorative*, aesthetic that doesn't purport to any underlying message or *truth*? Is there a way we can think of the decorative as *pure/impure* ornament, although the pre-condition would be an acknowledgement of the classical? Francesco Pellizzi, in 'Fragment on Ornament' seems to think so when he says that

ornament dazzles, distracts the eye from what it conceals, but also draws it in: one's gaze wavers between substance and appearance, shifting between the impersonal aspect of the image (that which cloaks the images 'self') and its persistent expressiveness. Through the radically external, the rigorously 'superficial', we see vertiginous things, things that make our head spin, and our gaze cannot become fixed. Dangerously seizing 'what lies beneath' through a kind of visual phantasmagoria, that power-of-sight that used to be called 'envy' (from *invidia*, which derives from *in-video*) is neutralised. 'True' ornament can in itself negate the very primacy of form: a screen of added appearance in some way disguises all direct relation to that substance around which our classical idea of form has revolved (1990,p.98).

Pellizzi's description of ornament as screen bears an interesting relation to Baudrillard's simulacrum theory in which *representation* clothes classical form; "Appearances, which are not at all frivolous, are the site of play and chance taking the site of a passion for diversion - to seduce signs is here far more important than the emergence of any truth"(1979,p.149). Baudrillard likens the appearance of signs to the *trompe-l'oeil* which "does not attempt to confuse itself with the real. Fully aware of play and artifice, it produces a simulacrum by mimicking the third dimension, questioning the reality of the third dimension, and by mimicking and surpassing the effect of the real, radically questioning the principle of reality" (1979,p.156).

But I will argue, Pellizzi's statement, although careful to prefix terms such as 'true' or 'what lies beneath' with ironic speech marks as if to demonstrate these terms as a pastiche, like Baudrillard, overlooks and denies any questioning of classical formalism; he simply takes it as a given. It's as if classicism is a necessary crutch on which to lean, a classicism that historically evolves into modernism and is then used to justify a postmodernist position as a *split* from modernism much in the same way that David Pagel in *Abstract Painting, Once Removed* argues for painting as beyond the postmodern. And it is this reliance on the classical and then the modern (sometimes unconsciously), as a pre-given requisite of contemporary art that I am challenging throughout this Chapter.

However, Pellizzi does begin to shift his argument away from classical binaries by stating that;

There is a 'necessity' in ornament that stems directly from its total arbitrariness: it is an *ad hoc, post factum* phenomenon, so to speak, in which form is added as the shadow, or echo of function. But it is precisely in the doubleness that form retains an irreducibly independent quality: ornament is an instrument which will always to some extent remain an end in itself (1990,p.100).

But Pellizzi's ornamental arbitrariness of signification which determines form as its shadow still requires a certain faith in classical ideology in order to absolve its role of being *free* of classicism. So what role, and how can that role be said to be self-reflexive of the conditions to which it supposedly attempts to find a difference? For me, the use of ironic speech marks maintains the 'truism' that ornament as surface is opposed, or separate to underlying form - that it is different. Pellizzi further demonstrates this as an acquittal of modernist ideology stating that modernism seemed to posit itself from the very start as the enemy of ornament: the modern 'unveiled', secularised structure, stripped of decoration, despite the fact that some of the very roots of modernism lie in the dizzying spirals of *nouveaux* and revivalist styles of freestanding adornment. 'Postmodernism', in the common perception, supposedly rediscovers the value of ornament, which in fact becomes its emblem. In postmodernism there is apparently a new attempt to make ornament, 'the thing in itself', as a kind of return to certain aspects of the late Gothic, the Baroque and other such 'styles' - that is, to apply to the 'superficiality' of ornament the 'substantiality' of structure, thus inverting, though certainly not negating, the modernist approach (1990,p.100).

Although Pellizzi comes up with an interesting conjunction between the postmodern appropriation of historic ornamental signs as a substitute for modernism's detached signifier (or *thing in itself*), his equation of '*superficial ornament as substantial structure*', or rather, that the "postmodern thus appears to be bent on finding an ornamentation that is perfectly 'transparent' and rigorously anti-Platonic" (1990,p.101), allows us to see how exhibitions like *Abstract Painting, Once Removed*, and *Colour Me Blind* acquire the *necessary* academic, classical baggage to validate their *newness* and legitimate a difference. These shows, which *officiate* a lineage for the showing of contemporary paintings as *newness*, follows Pellizzi's claim of an ornamentation that is severed from underlying form that is equally lineage. Similarly, for David Pagel and Lane Relyea, the difference of discriminatory terminology between the aesthetics of cartoon and computer games (*Colour Me Blind*), and neo-abstract painting (*Abstract Painting, Once Removed*), act as a distinction to justify the market and an institutional *neo avant-garde*.

However, Pellizzi says that decorative "ornament whose form instead of distracting from form and hiding it, actually seeks to merge with it and in so doing, to dissolve it" (1990,p.101), means that we still have a relational argument (as opposed to a binary argument) with Baudrillard's

notion of the trompe l'oeil as "mimicking the third dimension, questioning the reality of the third dimension"(1979,p.156). Yet the decorative paintings of Philip Taaffe (illustration 24), Pellizzi argues, where there is such a rejection of form that the very forms of ornament do not seek refuge in some substance of their own but hover like "pure 'evanescences', presences in dissolution, translucent super structures built on nothingness, architectures of air and colour spread out in subtle flatness, one-dimensionable even as they give the appearance of a play of perspectives"(1999,p.101); also reflects Baudrillard's description of the *appearance* of mechanical reproduction as the "aleatory, meaningless, or ritualistic and meticulous, circulation of signs on the surface; its inflections, and its nuances. All of this effaces the content value of meaning, and this is seductive (1979,p.149-150).

But can we think of Taaffe's work in this context as recontextualizing form, not as a separation from form that is simply in danger of becoming a *victim* of simulation, but as an active formal and intellectual play on the condition of painting today? Pellizzi says that "ornament, by subsuming and negating the wall that is supposed to sustain and justify it, ends up also nullifying itself as such and becomes 'residue', an inherently layered image"(1990,p.101), an unformed, or formless form which exists as a set or system of signs.

In Chapter Four I will discuss at greater length the relations between 'form and the formless' by examining painting through Stephen Perrella's Hypersurface theories which, like Pellizzi's 'formless ornamentation', also collapses architectural distinctions between structure and ornament but without the need for binary or pre-supposed distinctions.

## The Informe

In the previous section I asked the question; what is the value of post-value? The problematics of this question play a significant role in this Chapter given that David Pagel, Ralf Christofori and Lane Relyea etc., have asked how to go *beyond* post modernism by (unwittingly) setting-up and eradicating value which to my mind describes a sort of nihilism. This nihilism is described by Jean-Francois Lyotard as a need to legitimate value in order to eradicate it as a totality of consensus through what Habermas calls '*Diskurs*', or rather, a dialogue of argument. As I understand it, Lyotard reasons that argumentation is required to justify the criteria of (arbitrary) performance (within any given system) as a *task* with a *legitimate* end. Lyotard criticizes Habermas's orientation toward legitimation in the direction of a search for universal consensus because of two assumptions:

The first is that it is possible for all speakers to come to agreement on which rules or metaprescriptions are universally valid for language games, when it is clear that language games are heteromorphous, subject to heterogeneous sets of pragmatic rules. The second assumption is that the goal of dialogue is consensus... consensus is only a particular state of discussion, not its end (1979,p.65).

For Lyotard, “this double observation (the heterogeneity of the rules and the search for dissent)”(1979,p.66), destroys a (humanist) belief that Habermas holds dear, namely, “that humanity as a collective (universal) subject seeks its common emancipation through the regularization of the ‘moves’ permitted in all language games and that the legitimacy of any statement resides in its contributing to that emancipation”(1979,p.66) and that this is a form of outmoded self-prophetic consensus.

But I am drifting slightly into Lyotard’s beef with the legitimacy of (humanist) knowledge systems. However, through Lyotard’s critique of *the heterogeneity of the rules and the search for dissent*, and given the initial nature of my question (what is the value of post-value?) which has been asked in relation to contemporary painting by Pagel, Christofori, and Relyea etc., we can now re-formulate that a pre-supposition is at work here. I would argue that in order for something to have a *post-value* a value must be created that precedes *the* after or post-value. When this precedence is applied to the above exhibition texts it becomes obvious that a value system is being instigated in order that it can either be devalued or revalued as a circular lineage, much in the same way as art history is written. Therefore, it seems that the question of *post-value* needs reappraisal. Ornament for example, could be re-comprehended as circumnavigating a form/content binary in order to continue to ask how we can re-think painting as unformed, or as (Pellizzi’s) formless form as ornamental signs. Is it possible that we could re-translate Pellizzi’s *formless form* as a movement of terms in flux, as an ‘operation’, a shifting between form, content, structure and surface?

In order to re-think (un)form, this section will initially explore Georges Bataille’s formless theories by way of Yves-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss who argue for a critique of the classical/modernist model of binary opposition in the introductory notes to Bois and Krauss’s *Formless*, which they claim, acts as a *third way* sidestepping dual or binary opposition:

Although it was over sixty years ago that Georges Bataille undertook his philosophical development of the term *informe*, only in recent years has the idea of the ‘formless’ been deployed in the theorizing and reconfiguring of the very field of twentieth century art. This is partly because that field has most often been crudely set up as a battle between form and content; whereas ‘formless’ constitutes a third term which stands outside that opposition of form and content, outside the binary thinking which is itself formal (1997,cover notes).

Bois and Krauss’s *Formless* critiques the division between form and content and offers a re-reading of the kind I’m interested in, especially when compared with Pagel, Relyea, Christofori and Pellizzi;

Our project is to redeal modernism’s cards - not to bury it and conduct the manic mourning to which a certain type of ‘postmodernism’ has devoted itself for many years



now, but to see to it that the unity of modernism, as constituted through the opposition of formalism and iconology, will be fissured from within and that certain works will no longer be read as before (1997,p.21).

Bois and Krauss revisit modernism as a clear take on postmodernism's positive values and not in its perfunctory role; "with regard to the *informe*, it is a matter instead of locating certain operations that brush modernism against the grain, and of doing so without countering modernism's formal certainties by means of the more reassuring and naive certainties of meaning"(1997,p.16).

For me, although Bois and Krauss's apply the model of the *Informe* or *Formless* as a re-dealing of modernism's cards by re-examining artists often overlooked as too complicated within the official *history(s)* of modernism, their model can potentially be applied to re-examine broader, less polemic contexts in relation to painting. By replacing binary division with the mode of operation which constitutes its re-presentation, Bois and Krauss argue that it "is neither the 'form' or the 'content'...but the operation that displaces both of these terms...Because it is an *operation* (it is neither a theme, nor a substance, nor a concept)"(1997,p.15). This *re-dealing* as an *operation* also challenges the very meaning of the binary term *critical* with its reliance upon making negative judgments. The challenge still though, is to figure out how to frame and give qualitative value to works of art and artists in conjunction with the trans-historical relationship with previous art, and in particular, the kind of abstract painting that Pagel, Relyea, Christofori and Pellizzi have categorized as against ironic postmodernism?

Without wishing to fall into Jean Baudrillard's classicist understanding of *pure* simulation as artifice (which presupposes an original *real*, and which I will critique in Chapter Three), I would argue that the term *critical* can be replaced, or rather transposed, by Bois and Krauss's term the *operation*. The *operation* allows art a flexible, fluid and ambivalent model that re-interprets meaning by advocating two or more simultaneous readings. By supporting the transference act of *operation* in this instance, I mean it as an ongoing analytical evaluation with numerous possibilities for cross referencing painters and painters work - we could reason that the *operation* as *critique* overcomes simulation's classicist inheritance of the ideals of *deep structure*, to rethink simulation in a positive way. That is, simulation could be re-thought as a continual skating across deep structures surface which is accessed as form even when revisiting history; this *surface* being the means of both form *and* structure itself that *is* its layered content. Surface as both form *and* structure could begin to give us the tools to re-translate Clement Greenberg's assumptions on painting, that the "unique and proper area of competence of each art coincided with all that was unique in the nature of its medium. The task of self-criticism became to eliminate from the specific effects of each art any and every effect that might conceivably be borrowed from or by the medium of any other art"(1960,p.86).

Rather than adopt Greenberg's methods of a discipline to *criticize the discipline itself* which resulted in painting dealing *only* with its material constituents to produce optical effects, we could think of the material and optical constituents of painting as rhetorical narratives of form, as an *operation* of materiality and opticality that is only made possible by the *effect* of the simulacral condition of photo-mechanical transfer - and in the late twentieth and early twenty first century, digital technology. This re-configuration could also be extended to re-appraise contemporary painting at the service of embodied, subjective/objective relations, allowing us to ask again how artists seek an identity through their work (in relation to other works) given that Arthur C. Danto says that contemporary art has irrevocably deviated from the narrative discourses which define it; "Contemporary art, has no brief against the art of the past, no sense that the past is something from which liberation must be won, no sense even that it is different as art from modern art generally" (1997,p.5).

So how can we establish a critique of the enlightenment split between a deep/surface genealogy, or rather, as painting as skin or decoration opposing underlying form in order to discover a *different* surface? Rather than advocating simulation as a binary against classicism, can simulation re-appropriate the classical or modernist modes of expression as a hyper model? Can we integrate Jean Baudrillard's text 'On Seduction' (from which I have previously quoted) with the *Informe's* argument against form as content with, or in favour of, seductive appearances? And finally, and probably a later question; what role does cyberspace and the digital play in relation to the materiality of painting?

These questions tend toward one overall question here that I will return to. How can we evaluate *critical* or *operational* thinking through David Pagel's term *the embodied effects of aesthetic?* - which I believe, may offer us a clue as to painting's relation both with simulation and the virtual. As a precursor to Pagel's conjoined equation that "perhaps the most exciting aspect of painting today is that it is equally indebted to Pop Art's exploitation of mechanical reproduction and High modernism's focus on the embodied effects of aesthetics"(1998,p.27), I will explore whether Bois and Krauss' *Informe* can be transformed as *decorative* surface in relation to Abstract Expressionism. Bois and Kraus pay particular attention in *Formless* to the relation between abstraction and the wordless, or rather the ontological, therefore, in the next section, I will examine a possible relationship between Bois and Krauss' *Informe* and decoration as a *critique*, so that we may begin to understand what the *critical* as an *operation* could come to be.

## The Informe as Decorative Surface, or how to re-deal Abstract Painting

So how does the *Informe* open up issues between form and the formless? Bois and Krauss argue that modernism "that is the 'mainstream' evoked by the history books - the most coherent version of which is Clement Greenberg's"(1997,p.25) offers the *correct* "interpretation of modern

art, which is an extraction that dares not speak its name”(1997,p.25). Bois and Krauss say that modernism in the Greenbergian form “partakes above all in an ontological project; once art was liberated from the constraints of representation it had to justify its existence as the search for its own essence”(1997,p.25). Bois and Krauss suggest that this ontological exercise rests on certain postulates and exclusions. Firstly, that “visual art especially painting, addresses itself uniquely to the sense of sight”(1997,p.25), and secondly, that the “tactile that art history addresses is only the visual representation of tactility; matter does not exist for it except as informed, made over into form”(1997,p.25). But, they argue, this is not the only interpretation, a fissure can take place in this mode of unified representation, that “through the opposition of formalism and iconology (modernism) will be fissured from within and that certain works will no longer be read as they were before”(1997,p.21). As an example Bois and Krauss say that Jackson Pollock’s *Full Fathom Five*, looks like and can also be read as resembling a fried egg, “or that a work by Jean Fautrier owes more of its pathos to its falsity than to its professed expressionism which is to say that it is kitsch in the same way that the snake-skin shoes”(1997,p.21) are that the artist wore for his opening solo show. *Kitsch* intrusions are seen by Bois and Krauss as constituting a fall in modernism’s belief in its exalted standards of separatism - a base materialism.

But are these *fissures* between form and the formless thwarted by a structural(ist) desire (such as Greenberg’s) with its attendant desublimation? - Bois and Krauss’s critics may provide an answer. In Ben Highmore’s review of *Formless: A Users Guide*, called ‘Spiders, Spit and Frock Coats’, he describes their project as “constituting a shift from the study of the culture of dissident surrealism to a dissident surrealist study of culture”(1999,p.137). For Highmore, *Formless* orchestrates a meeting between modern art and base surrealism where, “ironically the disruptive potential of base surrealism is managed and contained by treating it as a *structuralist* activity, by formalising the deployment of the formless”(1999,p.137). Highmore argues that true to the original notion of base materialism (eg. Bataille’s interest in squashed spiders or spit as somehow challenging the conventions of correct form in modernism), Bois and Krauss’s formulation or result “is an approach to modern art that corresponds symmetrically with the project of Greenbergian modernism. *Formless* ends up looking like a reformed modernism, where its alleged attack on Greenbergian modernism produces not an undoing of this tradition but a re-doing”(1999,p.138). Paraphrasing Hal Foster who also asks these questions of Bois and Krauss’ *Formless*, Highmore goes on to add that

Foster’s criticism attacks the very heart of the project by suggesting that Bois and Krauss not only retain the very structure and structuring conditions of the canon, but also evacuate from the *informe* its insistence on a base social materiality. Rosalind Krauss’s reply to this is telling; ‘You’re saying that we’re cleaning it up, making it a clean machine’ (1999,p.138).

The opposition of clean to dirty appears to offer an easily assimilated polemical, hierarchical narrative as Highmore argues, and he goes onto complicate his review; "Bois's and Krauss's project is limited to an attempted undoing (not a de-frocking) of a relatively inconsequential art-historical and art-critical paradigm while invoking artworks whose job must be confined to being taboo *only* in relation to this paradigm" (1999,p.139). Highmore claims that the reason for the limitations of this project is clear, *Formless: A User's Guide* has "a double mission: it sets out not just to undo the edifice of Greenbergian modernism (an edifice that *Formless* has a structural reliance on); it also has its sights on what it sees as a more deadly enemy - practices of art and art criticism that reference socially thematic material"(1999,p.139). Highmore then questions the reliance on the art historical terminology that Bois and Krauss employ to separate their project from the social.

It is because this second mission is the one with which they are primarily concerned, that the undoing of Greenbergian modernism becomes a re-formulation of it that maintains and supports its implicit structuration. Greenberg would have to be *worth* undermining, his pernicious hegemony would have to be such that re-reading Pollock would make this a valuable and effective counter-attack...Formless, then, is the tool that Bois and Krauss use to undo modernist understandings of art while protecting it from contamination by extra-artistic matter (1999,p.139).

But Highmore's criticism of Bois and Krauss, that there is a structuralist sub-text, I think overlooks the importance of Greenberg (with regard to my proposed re-investigation of his writings) and does an injustice to Bois and Krauss's interpretation of him. Highmore's complaint that Bois and Krauss are *re-doing* Greenbergian modernism could be interpreted differently (as I have begun to argue and will continue to explore in Chapter Four), besides, Bois and Krauss do not hold up Greenberg as an edifice of modernist faith that needs to be '*worth undermining*', but on the contrary, they condemn Greenberg's reading of Pollock's paintings as 'pure visuality' (as they condemn Rosenberg for describing Pollock's paintings only as an event):

This radical break in pictorial practice, this new orientation, was either ignored at the time by Greenberg's modernist reading, according to which Pollock's 'drip paintings' are 'mirages' wherein matter has been atomized by some kind of illusion of 'pure visuality', or thematised by the existential pathos of Harold Rosenberg, who could see in Pollock's canvases nothing but the trace of an event the result of which was of little importance (Rosenberg was struck more by the bare canvas - an 'arena for action' - than by the finished works, which he avoided describing) (1997,p.28).

But Daniel Adler also takes issue with Bois and Krauss's sub-textual formalism by describing how they seek to direct the reader toward a re-inscription of form not as 'pure visuality' or as an 'event' but as debased,

...it is the sheer violence of the desublimatory act (as exercised in the linguistic realm by the utterance of a dirty word) to which that reader should attend. The reader is

encouraged especially to resist the seductions of ironic or metaphorical thought in general: such epistemological habits inhibit the unmediated experience of the 'act' (1998p.115).

Adler adds that the outcome or effect of isolating the performative terms of the operation of the *informe* is that

such terms are reiterated and repeated (with regard to artistic and theoretical examples) to the extent that the authors' notion of the *informe* is, for the reader, gradually transformed from that which is the *really* 'low' or that which is always 'squashed' (ie. as suggested in Bataille's resolutely defeatist dictionary definition) to that which has, to some extent, been resublimated. The resublimation is enhanced by the privileging of several prized moments of release from the epistemological constraints of 'good' form (1998,p.117).

Adler argues that there is no need to rely on re-sublimating the *low* of *bad form* as a riposte to *good form* - it need not be an issue at all, relying as it does on a binary desire to offer categories which would limit a re-reading of say painting. But how would it be if Highmore and Adler didn't set themselves up to only *sniffing out* the structuralist sub-text to Krauss's remark that the *Informe* becomes a *clean machine*, and that somehow they could offer an(other) reading of the *Informe*? If Bois and Krauss are correct, and the *Informe* is an *operation* of *base-materialism* (it is neither a theme, nor a substance, nor a concept), and not simply a re-sublimation, how can we re-deal abstract painting? Can we re-deal abstraction by sliding across, through and on the surface of simulation? Is there a way to frame an argument within the familiar territory of hyperreal painting (David Pagel's *Abstract Painting, Once Removed*) that doesn't seek to separate, in a linear fashion, the high/low, real/non-real or ironic/classical binaries?

Whereas Highmore and Adler's critiques are a useful reminder of the pitfalls of re-thinking the division between form and content in terms of its art historical references, can we consider re-contextualizing Pellizzi's ornamental theory that attempts to detach itself from form? Pellizzi says that "ornament, by subsuming and negating the wall that is supposed to sustain and justify it, ends up also nullifying itself as such and becomes 'residue', an inherently layered image"(1990,p.101), arguing that this is an unformed, or formless form which exists as a set or system of signs divorced from the object(ive). If we put the *residue* of ornament alongside Bois and Krauss' *Informe* theory which argues that "*formless* constitutes a third term which stands outside the opposition of form and content, outside binary thinking which is itself formal"(1997,cover notes), we can begin to work around the distinctions between form and content or terms such as post-value and the separation of ornamentation from structure. In conjunction, and as a meeting point between the *residue* of ornament and the *Informe*, we could re-inscribe painting alongside Baudrillard's notion of simulation. This relational model may

provide a change in the reading, or re-dealing of paintings nostalgic relationship to its historical past, by working with Highmore's "contamination by extra-artistic matter"(1999,p.139), which I would argue, is engendered by painting's relation to the reproduced, popular image. It maybe that Krauss' term the *clean machine* could be re-interpreted as a simulacral understanding of material (dirty) painting.

However, the *clean machine* is a term of negative criticism for Krauss since Highmore suggests that "the deployment of formlessness as clean machine"(1999,p.138) means that it becomes simply "an academic clean machine"(1999,p.138). But, I would argue, the *informe* is anything but clean, after all, Krauss suggests, that the ordered politeness of the academic is always disrupted by Bataille's notion of 'matter' which is demonstrated by "shit or laughter or an obscene word or madness: whatever cuts all discussion short, whatever reason cannot drape with a 'mathematical frock coat' whatever does not lend itself to any metaphorical displacement, whatever does not allow itself to be in-formed"(1997,p.29-30).

But if we re-position the term *clean machine* to mean a crossing over or confusion of good/bad clean/dirty or high/low binaries, then the opposition of form and content in painting becomes re-configured through the *residue* of flat simulation that is itself once removed or at a distance from the object it depicts. Because of simulation's pristine surfaces or finishes (photography, film, digital), simulation could be seen as clean because it rarely displays the physicality of dirt but rather the *image* of dirt, and, as I will argue in Chapters Three and Four, it is the imagination of the image that changes the bodies relation to the physical - simulation in this sense is 'dirty' because it does not conform to the control of the body (or hand-crafted).

But, for me, one of the obvious problems with advocating a (dirty) simulation of abstract painting entails a relational system of formal, hand-crafted, aesthetic conventions of pictorial design, and its oppositional partner: non-relational painting which relies on a deliberate distancing or mechanization of the hand as a self-conscious rhetorical manouvre. For example, the pictorial invention of Kandinsky, or later Hans Hoffman in the 1950s supports the former; whilst Frank Stella's early work, that sets a distance to the decision making of pictorial invention by insisting on the limits of materiality, through to contemporary materialists such as Jason Martin, represents the latter. If one were to argue for a relational system of aesthetic conventions the problem could be seen as a simple simulated re-hash of abstract pictorialism via modernism; and with non-relational painting, as a postmodern ironic undermining of those abstract conventions. Both positions are born from their relation to classical, abstract pictorialism, so aren't they asking one of the same thing? How, for example, could a painting possibly be made if the traditional modernist conditions on which they are conceived have been deconstructed (via Derrida for example)? What is the difference between making an abstract painting that re-appropriates modernist abstraction as simulation, such as the 1980s Neo Geo movement (or its more recent incarnation as 'baroque decoration'), and an abstract painting that attempts to offer

its existence as the search for its own essence as an emotive relation? Is the goal of painting to be seen as a hyperreal *sofa art*, either ironically or once *removed*? Or is originality as a carrier of expression(ism) the same as hyperreal *sofa art*? Indeed is this a dilemma at all?

Let us go back for a moment and rethink Rosalind Krauss's retort to Hal Foster's criticism of *Formless: A Users Guide*, as representing a *clean machine*. This *clean machine* could be considered not only an aesthetic of simulation but the product of simulation, a re-formulation of the *Informe* re-considered as a re-dealing of decorative surface. But in order to do this we need to think through the pretext of the condition of simulation; a kind of how did we get to simulation as a distancing from the object? Therefore, I will examine Walter Benjamin's theories from the 1930s that explained how the relationship to the original hand-made work of art had been altered by the reproduced image, which Jean Baudrillard argues, destroys the relations between the original object and its simulated image.

### Walter Benjamin and Mechanical Reproduction

Benjamin argued that the process of printing, via Greek coins and later mediaeval engraving and etching, had begun a change that was to continue up until the "beginning of the nineteenth century (*when*) lithography made its appearance"(1936,p.219). But, Benjamin added, "only a few decades after its invention, lithography was surpassed by photography. For the first time in the process of pictorial reproduction, photography freed the hand of the most important artistic functions which henceforth devolved only upon the eye looking into a lens"(1936,p.219). This relation to photography as a mediator between the hand produced and its representation through mechanical reproduction seems to me to be crucial if we are to understand contemporary painting - especially parodies of expressive painting. Parodic expressivity has been well documented by artists such as David Salle or Richard Prince in the 1980s, or more latterly by Glenn Brown. Brown's methodology, which replicates impasto *gestural/expressive* painting by replacing it with flat painted copies, borrows not from the original art work it seeks to parody, but from a reproduction of that work; in this sense his work is indebted to Benjamin's relation to reproduction. But for me, Brown's circular reliance on the *effects* of simulation which claims that expressivity is only acceptable through parody, suggests a romantic/nostalgic, unfulfilled loss of *original* expression, which, by default, aims to *work against* the seduction of the simulacrum. For me also, Brown is caught up in a dependence upon expressions' art historical precedence because of his confidence in the idea that expression is missing. In order to counter this nostalgic mourning, we need to further explore, or re-contextualize a wider reading of the *operation* of decoration, not as a direct replacement of parody, but by integrating it as somehow embedded within a notion of the *once removed*. We need to re-re-re-read again the complexities of the conditions that are brought about through reproduction.

If, as I have discussed, we consider Krauss's *clean machine* as *once removed* to become an overlapping with and through the ornamental *residue* of flat simulation, the *clean machine* could circumnavigate the binary movement between *high and low art* (or postmodernism in favour of modernism), and resemble Benjamin's critique of classicist beauty as ritualised authenticity; that reproduction changes our understanding of the unique object. Benjamin argues this as an *operation* of politics:

We know that the earliest art works originated in the service of a ritual - first the magical, then the religious kind. It is significant that the existence of the work of art with reference to its aura is never entirely separated from its ritual function. In other words the unique value of the 'authentic' work of art has its basis in ritual, the location of its original use value. This ritualistic basis, however remote, is still recognizable as secularized ritual even in the most profane forms of the cult of beauty. The secular cult of beauty, developed during the Renaissance and prevailing for three centuries, clearly showed that ritualistic basis in its decline and the first deep crisis which befell it. With the advent of the first truly revolutionary means of reproduction, photography... Art sensed the approaching crisis which has become evident a century later...But the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice - politics (1936,p.220).

If *politics* now predicates the function of art (and especially contemporary art) because politics takes the place of firstly, the imagination of the ritual, and secondly, secular beauty through reproduction which denies the unique existence of the work of art by re-dispersing tradition, then could we understand *politics* in terms of Yves-Alain Bois's model of the game of painting from *Painting as Model?* "first by what it is not and opposes, that is, in each case according to its position, its value within a field-itself living and stratified - which has above all to be circumscribed by defining rules"(1990,p.254-255). Bois asks us to consider a strategic reading in the contemporary that re-configures notions of *originality* because the model of the strategic/political which recognizes only the shift of capital through the popular "is strictly anti-historicist: it does not believe in the exhaustion of things, in the linear genealogy offered us by art criticism"(1990,p.256).

Bois's strategic reading, I would contend, is a result of Walter Benjamin's interpretation of the change that reproduction brings to the unique work of art, and that this is a long term understanding. Instead of there being simply no return to traditional, classical values - classical values become problematised in the contemporary by offering skewed echoes of their former meanings; they become signs. I would also argue that the strategic model of mechanical reproduction is never far away when we consider the hyper dimension of recent painting such as Kevin Knox's work in 'Painters Painting' at the Approach Gallery in London in 2000 (illustration 25). Knox's painting deliberately mimics grand American expressionist painting - not



to mock it as parody, but as the press release argues, to re-inscribe both a distance from that style of painting, whilst simultaneously re-signifying the hand made gesture as a metaphor for expression.

Knox is of interest when we reconsider the idea of re-mining both modernist and postmodernist painting that *repositions* our sense of history - but there are problems. Although Knox's work is a deliberate resurrection of an outdated and discredited art form, namely 1950s expressionism, the strategy for its re-introduction is partly based on our acknowledgement of a historical amnesia toward the contextual meanings and intentions of the 1950s. On the one hand this *amnesia* could be reinvested through my formulation of the *Informe as simulation as embodied effect of aesthetics*, and on the other, Knox claims that criticizing commodification and the institutionalisation of painting is a *dead end* strategy because, as the press release acknowledges, that criticizing the commodity and the institution is not the same as escaping them. If the latter is the case why bother just fiddling around with the 'style' of abstract expressionism rather than search for the gap or crack that offers a critique. It seems he cannot make up his mind whether to criticize as a binary, in a postmodern fashion, the limitations of modernism in abstract art of the 50s, or whether he should pretend to relive and celebrate those original intentions. Add to that the further confusion of realizing that these two options have been re-worked ironically (more successfully?) by many postmodern artists such as John Armleder, Olivier Mosset, or Richard Prince (illustration 26), then Knox seems destined to be overwhelmed by the simulacra or simulated images from modernism. Knox's pretence at nonchalance hides the significance of his actions which for me are potentially interesting, namely, that although he is 'playing the game' of fey pretence at abstraction *as itself*, as a dismissive strategy that critiques historicism, he fails by rendering the paintings as copies (you could be mistaken for thinking that the works were produced by a *first order* expressionist). Knox gives no indication of difference from the 50s originals.

Richard Reynolds also demonstrated, but tried to make more sense of this confusion a year earlier in a *Flash Art* review of the painting show 'Elastic Abstract'.

The making of non-representational painting is, in its lowest form, nothing more than an empty style. Easy to copy but much harder to invent, the many avenues and dead-ends abstract language has gone down have become a text book of references that anyone in the whole world can dip into for whatever reason. Processed cerebrally and then reduced materially with a residue of content that might fit the living room of an anonymous retirement bungalow...The referencing or copying is so highly filtered and absorbed that each individual artist...has shown that to be abstract is to be as personal and subjective as any other form of representation... 'Elastic Abstract' exists in a no man's land. An area of potency that has risen to the surface through the settling down of fifty years of influence. Where the memory of what it meant to be abstract has been erased, the faint marks of its existence still show through. This is a place where

making or dealing with materials is not the sole criteria for what the end product means. Process is played upon, but also played down (1999,p.62).

But to argue for a critical relation to these conventions becomes increasingly difficult because it seems to be searching for a gap or crack within existing ideologies. So rather than remain rooted within a historicist interpretation of criticality in order to discover an *emancipation*, could we re-consider Bois and Kraus's *Informe* which is "neither a theme, nor a substance, nor a concept"(1997,p.15) as a re-dealing of decorative surface that doesn't seek to separate, in a linear fashion, the high/low, real/non-real, or ironic/classical binaries? Could we marry this re-interpretation with the effects of mechanical reproduction with regard to the (still) produced unique (painted) object? Is this relational approach a more fluid and contemporary model of criticality?

I will attempt to tackle these questions toward the end of Chapter Three by mapping-out the theoretical position of Jean Baudrillard's simulation theories (that are theoretically born out of Walter Benjamin's critique of authenticity through the relation of photography to artistic production), to determine the status of both the problems and the potential for (i) Bois's *game of painting* as *politics*, and (ii) in relation to my re-formulation of Kraus's term the *clean machine* as a simulated *image* of 'dirt'.

But in the meantime, in the next Chapter, I will examine the historical overview(s) of the how, or why, or what, that contemporary writers on painting (that I have reviewed) base their models of influence. Also, and by contrast, I will offer a critique or re-evaluation of paintings value in the contemporary by examining Andrew Benjamin's *What Is Abstraction?*, which aims to re-configure recent developments in abstraction by developing an ontological/philosophical framework that allows for the re-interpretation and renewal of the tradition of abstraction as a historical repetition, or rather, as a *staged* becoming of the yet-to-be-resolved object.

## Chapter 2 Modernism, Postmodernism and Arthur C. Danto's 'After the End of Art'

In order to explore in more detail the philosophical and ontological issues of both the re-staging of contemporary painting and the reproduction of the simulacral, it will be necessary to examine and make clear the terms of reference for the conditions in which painting finds itself today. Firstly, Clement Greenberg's writing will be sourced from the 1940s to the 1960s with regard to modernism and painting; secondly, a review of 1960s Pop Art; and thirdly, Hal Foster and Thomas Lawson's 1980s texts that work against Greenberg in a postmodern context will be examined. These texts have been chosen so that the terms *modernism*, *postmodernism* and *irony* can be more fully understood within the context of painting. Arthur C. Danto's *After the End of Art* will then be examined to show how the postmodern condition that Foster and Lawson supported has left us in the 1990s/2000s with the term *the contemporary*, which "manifests an awareness of a history of art but no longer carries it forward" (1997,p.5). This diagnosis will be followed by a fuller examination of David Pagel's *Abstract Painting... Once Removed*, which argues for a conjoining of Abstract Painting and Pop Art. Pagel's text has arisen in the light of Danto's argument that anything in art is possible because of an historical shift away from modernism to the postmodern.

Because it is *generally* recognized that a condition of postmodern pluralism is upon us, Danto's argument is that the situation of art is post-historic; art no longer relies on the grand narratives of modernist critiques such as Greenberg's. Danto argues that postmodern art lacks narrative direction, "and is less of a style of making art than a style of using styles" (1997,p.10). It is because of a *style of using styles*, which has been in operation in painting since the late 1970s, that Pagel *attempts* to divorce current painting from postmodernism's lineage to modernism. Pagel implies this by arguing that painting is *beyond* style or irony, or rather, that it does not rely on modernist painting as a stylistic crutch. JJ Charlesworth's also re-evaluates contemporary formalist abstraction suggesting that it is

not a return to modernist certainties but rather a contemporary reconciling with the plurality of practices in which questions of form, experience and context may once more be negotiated. This is not a 'return' of history, but the reinvestment of certain conditions that persist in art practice today, conditions that result from the critical and institutional dead-end of the previous decade (2002,p.12).

As a consequence of this 'contemporary reconciling', Andrew Benjamin's *What is Abstraction?* will be examined (at the beginning of Chapter Three) with regard to the repetition, over time, of contemporary abstraction. Benjamin's project aims to re-configure recent developments in abstraction, which he claims, have rendered the theoretical and philosophical models of Greenberg inadequate. Instead, Benjamin examines concepts of historical time and the notion

of complexity, developing an ontological framework that allows for the re-interpretation and renewal of the tradition of abstraction.

The desire to question how the contemporary and the postmodern (according to Danto and Pagel) transforms, and makes meaning of modernism, has led me to a re-reading of Greenberg's writings in an attempt to reconsider his theory of materiality and flatness. This re-reading is not meant as a resurrection of the *ideals* of *purity* in painting, but will attempt to separate utopian idealism from the practical assets of the materiality of paint as a re-reading of materiality in relation to the multi-media simulated, visual landscape. A lot of flat recounting will need to be done in this Chapter, to give an overview and to set up, in Chapters Three and Four, a re-viewing of painting as a process led materiality in relation to the systems of production which produce, distribute, and give meaning and value to the various modes of painting practice today. These processes, I will argue, change and are made manifest through paintings relation to both the digital and architectural Hypersurface. This Hypersurface will then set up my Conclusion to argue the philosophical implications of the act of making paintings in the contemporary.

In this Chapter the purpose of re-reading or recounting modernist and postmodernist texts is threefold; (i) to examine Foster and Lawson's differences *against* Greenberg's modernist project, (ii) to simultaneously re-consider the relationship between Greenberg's materiality of paint or 'stuff', and (iii) to graft materiality with the simulated finish of photographic or cyber technology and production. I will argue that Greenberg's material theories of painting can be reappraised as, and within, simulation but not as David Pagel argues in *Abstract Painting... Once Removed* - that simulation is an ironic strategy particular to the painting of the 1980s that needs combating. This reappraisal will lead to an examination by me of Pop Art, so that we may reconsider Pagel's conjoining of Pop Art with Abstract Expressionism as the dominant strategy for contemporary painting.

In order that a contextual overview of Greenberg's work in general is set up, I will refer firstly to 'Modernist Painting' from 1960. I have chosen this text in particular because it is referenced as a primary source for modernist painting by writers such as Arthur C. Danto, Yve-Alain Bois, T.J. Clark, Hal Foster and Thomas Lawson. It is due largely to these writers that Greenberg has become synonymous with modernist writing about painting. In many ways, my understanding of postmodernism and painting is founded on an oppositionality or difference from Greenberg by such writers, or more specifically, how post modernism dealt with what it perceived as an ending to Greenberg's project. To preview the argument briefly, Greenberg argues for flatness and materiality as *standing in* for classical perspectival picture making. But postmodernism, as distinguished by Foster and Lawson (on the contrary), seeks ways to disrupt Greenberg's notion that the *purity* of the medium is the true means by which painting can claim its modernity. They argue that re-introducing the *pictorial* as a *picture of painting* - albeit as an ironic, parodic

or pastiche deconstruction of either Greenbergian abstract materialism or as figurative perspectival picture making - circumnavigates the certainties of Greenberg's ultimately limited historical theories; namely, that his project had a built-in ending of history that needed re-examining by looking backwards into art's past.

## Clement Greenberg and Modernism

Before embarking on a more detailed analysis of Greenberg's texts, it is necessary to historically place Greenberg with regard to Danto's assertion that art today is post-historic, or that all art made in the wake of modernism could be endlessly termed the *contemporary* (and this includes, but is not exclusive to postmodernism). Greenberg is widely acknowledged as the critic who defined painting as a modernist activity, giving it a language with which to criticize itself. He claimed, perhaps for the first time, that the medium became the sole means of this activity which did away with the need to represent nature as realistic - or, as Greenberg says when he attempts to historically differentiate modernism from the enlightenment,

Each art had to determine, through its own operations and works, the effects exclusive to itself. By doing so it would, to be sure, narrow its area of competence, but at the same time it would make its possession of that area all the more certain. It quickly emerged that the unique and proper area of competence of each art coincided with all that was unique in the nature of its medium. The task of self-criticism became to eliminate from the specific effects of each art any and every effect that might conceivably 'pure', and in its 'purity' find the guarantee of its standards of quality as well as its independence. "Purity" meant self-definition, and the enterprise of self-criticism in the arts became one of self-definition with a vengeance. Realistic, naturalistic art had dissembled the medium, using art to conceal art; Modernism used art to call attention to art. The limitations that constitute the medium of painting - the flat surface, the shape of the support, the properties of the pigment - were treated by the Old Masters as negative factors that could be acknowledged only implicitly or indirectly. Under Modernism these same limitations came to be regarded as positive factors, and were acknowledged openly (1960,p.86).

Greenberg quite clearly defines a blueprint for modernist painting practice, and he goes to great lengths to locate modernism historically via the enlightenment in 'Towards a Newer Laocoon' (1940) so as to give it its *correct place*. Greenberg begins by criticizing a form of historical purism that is "the translation of an extreme solicitude, an anxiousness as to the fate of art, a concern for its identity"(1985,p.23). He offers a re-reading of *purity* as an abstract art of 'pure' form that can manifest itself only in its materiality, thereby destroying centuries of realistic pictorial space. He claims that this has come about because of other 20th century art movements such as cubism.

Greenberg's 'Modernist Painting', as a task of self-criticism that defines its own sense of purity, sought vigorously to support many of the American Abstract Expressionist painters of the 1950s such as Pollock, De Kooning, Rothko, Still and Hoffman. These artists were expected, in Greenberg's terms, to be re-interpreting the visual plane by refusing both perspectival picture space and the *conceit* of representing the sculptural world of objects in 2-dimensions. This would be achieved by ignoring the rules of renaissance perspective to concentrate on both the non-representational or abstract use of form through the self-conscious recognition of the role of its application, namely, the material fact of paint onto canvas onto support, as flatness.

With this Greenberg hoped to achieve the acceptance of the work of these artists (with his support) into history by determining the terms *purity* and *quality*; that the *content* of these terms would be inherent through form and therefore shine through to the initiated without questioning their value. The difficulty for postmodern writers has become the unproblematic use of these terms and the implications of their meanings. Robin Murriner, for example, in his conference notes for the exhibition 'Elastic Abstract', gives a synopsis of Clement Greenberg's interest in colour field and *flat* modernist painting as follows:

Abstract painting, particularly American abstract painting, came to hold a position of dominance in the expanding international art culture of the 1950s to 1970s. Accompanied by some of the most hard working criticism of the century, abstract work was described (and perhaps at times in advance of the works being made, prescribed) as the form, above all others within contemporary culture that could provide notions of quality and significant meaning comparable to the best art of the past (1999,p.1).

Murriner goes onto prefix the contemporaneity of the 'Elastic Abstract' show by historically locating a dialogic polemic.

Conjoining a *hierarchical* Hegelian concept of history with essentialist notions from aesthetics, the criticism framed and located the work of *American abstract painting* within the 'logic of development' of a project that was claimed to have commenced in the nineteenth century; wherein painting began an examination of the nature of itself as medium. More rigorously than any work before, it was argued, did the abstract work of the 50s and 60s pursue that examination through its rejection not only of representation, but of external reference, in favour of an exclusive concern with issues specific to the 'essential nature' (*or the medium*) of painting itself... It provided both a 'project' for painting and a criteria for notions of progress, in so far as it was based on the notion of an 'end' to which painting was working, perhaps inevitably it had to prove problematic. The closer painting *moved* towards the culmination of its project, the smaller *became* the space and the narrower the 'agenda' on offer to practitioners within which to develop individualised preoccupations (1999,p.1).

This synopsis of course owes much to what Greenberg himself, would describe in his 1960 essay 'Modernist Painting' when he states that "the essence of Modernism, lies, as I see it in the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticise the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence"(1960,p.80). Arthur C. Danto charts and acknowledges the inevitable historical consequence of this position which is based on doctrines of humanism and the enlightenment that, in Greenberg's day, were considered as the preconditions of avant-garde thinking. Danto states that

Interestingly Greenberg *himself* took as his model of modernist thought the philosopher Emmanuel Kant; 'Because he was the first to criticise the means itself of criticism, I conceive of Kant as the first real modernist'. Kant did not see philosophy as adding to our knowledge so much as answering the question of how knowledge was possible. And I suppose the corresponding view of *Greenbergian* painting would have been not to represent the appearance of things so much as answering the question of how painting was possible (1997,p.7).

Greenberg's project was supposed to give American Abstraction a place in the history of art through asking how the tradition of painting could be possible in the modern.

## Clement Greenberg: Flatness in Painting

This section will provide a synopsis of the historicity of Greenberg's actual texts. These synopses will not be examined to provide a re-instigation of their primary values, a return to some idea of a Greenbergian Arcadia, nor to agree with Hal Foster's oppositional premise that Greenberg is no longer relevant to (postmodern) painting because Greenberg's theories were sealed off into a historical moment, but rather, as a re-evaluation of Greenberg; to determine whether his writing may be appropriate for painting today. Although there will be a lot of flat recounting of Greenberg's texts (this is done to familiarize the reader with the extent of Greenberg's influence on subsequent painting), having been reviewed, they will be compared to subsequent interpretations by Foster and Thomas Lawson. These comparisons will be constructed firstly; to test the assumptions made by Hal Foster as to the importance of Greenberg's role as a force in modernist painting, secondly; to determine whether something important is being overlooked in Greenberg, and thirdly; that through analysis, a re-contextualisation of his work may offer a space for painting that hitherto has not been addressed (or has only been addressed in opposition or conservatism). It is hoped that a programmatic review of his essays will offer a methodological tool to examine how contemporary painting can gain from this re-reading of Greenberg in a totally changed historical climate and context. It is my aim therefore to construct an *alternative* relational narrative(s) between high modernist thought and contemporary painting, and by doing so, avoiding the dialectical tropes which have by now become all too familiar (such as Hal Foster's).

This re-appraisal of Greenberg means that I will analyze those essays that attempt to give an overview of the historical relevance of advanced modernist abstract painting. I will not in the main concentrate on his art criticism and catalogue texts, as unlike the essays they do not on the whole lay out his blueprint for flatness as visual material fact. Instead, Greenberg's essays will be examined to determine what he means in terms of their historical context, their meaning and interpretations in relation to each other, and how they can be productive for contemporary painting. This re-assessment will take into account both the limitations and meaning of his refinement of criteria for abstract painting and the changes of his ideological position from 1939-1969.

After the assessment of the essays, I will examine ideas that set out to hybridize Greenberg's modernist painting philosophy by a brief review of Pop Art and then David Pagel's quote (below) that integrates the two historical movements. This examination will ask a number of parallel questions; (i) What is the reason for utilizing Greenberg in particular, what is his claim to the historical, conceptual and the aesthetic in the framing of painting today? (ii) What exactly does Greenberg mean by 'flatness'? (iii) How is Greenberg's notion of flatness appropriated by Pagel's *embodied effect of aesthetics*, and why can this be a stratagem for painting now? (iv) Does a re-writing of Greenberg need to take into account notions of the simulacral and the digital/virtual?

It is intended that David Pagel's notion of the *embodied effects of aesthetics*, which melds together High Modernism with Pop Art be understood as a rhetorical statement of intent regarding Greenberg. And in advance of *digging into*, and *discovering again*, Greenberg's actual texts it is worth bearing in mind Pagel's statement throughout, which is:

That having been off limits for several generations, formal exploration has become once again a rich and open-ended area of enquiry. Perhaps the most exciting aspect of painting today is that it is equally indebted to Pop Art's exploitation of mechanical reproduction and High Modernism's focus on the embodied effects of aesthetics (1998,p.27)

I have chosen Pagel's statement to represent a rhetorical overview for contemporary painting as I believe that it offers the potential for a historical shift from Greenberg's insistence that *material flatness* is the deterministic operation which entrenches abstraction as the only option for advanced painting. Pagel's view though doesn't appear particularly original, or to be covered in any depth in his essay, neither does it offer anything other than a vague truism regarding a whole gamut of contemporary painting practice. However, the relation between what he claims for formal exploration as having *been off limits*, and the hybrid of Pop Art and High modernism, is left tantalisingly open for examination and may offer a foundation with which to understand more fully the *historical legacy* of my own painting practice. In many ways a re-reading of both Greenberg and Pagel may present a key with which to unlock the relationship



between Greenberg's material reflections on painting with my wish to discover whether his *materialism* is appropriate now, and also, whether it can be grafted, via Pop Art, with the simulated finish of photographic or digital/cyber technology and production. The latter aspect is important because I want to argue in the longer term of this thesis for painting's contemporary relevance within simulation - that painting now as a historical discipline is embedded within the very discourse of cyber production, but only through, or in relation to, painting's understanding of its history. Could it be that the *embodied effects* of High modernism that Pagel refers to mirrors, and is in tandem with, what could equally be understood as the *embodied effects* of simulation even though they are seemingly opposed. I feel that Greenbergian aesthetics has a lot to offer when conjoined with theories of the simulacrum and in particular Jean Baudrillard's, so consequently a review of five of Greenberg's texts will precede the combined arguments that I am proposing.

### *Greenberg; Avant-Garde and Kitsch*

Very early on, in Greenberg's first major essay 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch' (1939), he sets out to define the importance of abstract art. He opens by setting up a dichotomy between what he perceives as *high culture* and *kitsch*. *Kitsch* he understands as a *fake* or second order product of the industrial revolution which is a derivation or bastardisation of *high art's* originality. For Greenberg, *Kitsch* had come to prominence as a result of industrial mass production replacing hand-crafted production, and as a consequence, the ruling classes no longer had the powers of patronage needed for high culture to exist, that they were no longer the sole arbiters of taste for original or one-off art productions. This coupled with the spread of mass-produced goods created a steady rise in the economic power of both producers and recipients threatening the values that set *high art* apart from the *popular*, "the masses have always remained more or less indifferent to culture in the process of development. But today such culture is being abandoned by those to whom it actually belongs - our ruling classes"(1940,p.8). These *high cultural* values had become unstable precisely because of the increase of the easy reproduction of original objects of art, so Greenberg argued that the tradition of western aesthetics, which are determined by the rules of uniqueness and originality, were in a crisis of identity where hierarchical distinctions had become exhausted and confused.

A society, as it becomes less and less able, in the course of its development, to justify the inevitability of its particular forms, breaks up their accepted notions upon which artists and writers must depend in large part for communication with their audiences. It becomes difficult to assume anything. All the verities involved by religion, authority, tradition, style, are thrown into question, and the writer or artist is no longer able to estimate the response of his audience to the symbols and references with which he works (1939,p.5).

This *crisis* of monopoly for *high art* and culture created a rupture for the self-identification of a project for (modern) artists which traditionally had stemmed from the values of classicism. It is

this recognition, or desire to find a place for modern abstract art within the hegemony of Western art that drives Greenberg's enquiry into arguing for avant-garde art (later painting in particular), and to do this Greenberg would claim that abstract art had to separate itself from both the *malignant popular* and the *impotent ruling classes*.

And here, it is worth bearing in mind, that Greenberg's division between *high and low culture* is often mirrored in firstly, contemporary painting as distinct from modernism or postmodernism, and secondly, the historicism of the tension between *high and low culture* as the basis for an antagonism between the abstract and the figurative that I described in Chapter One.

Greenberg's separation of abstract art from both the high and the low was later developed more clearly to mean painting, or a project for abstract painting in the historical. Greenberg argued that painting was the one art form that was capable of extending an enlightenment hegemony, and abstract painting in particular, was to be given historical privilege and credit for having achieved total *flatness* even if this meant the entire destruction of three-dimensional representational space. Greenberg made this clear in his later essay 'Modernist Painting'.

The limitations that constitute the medium of painting - the flat surface, the shape of the support, the properties of the pigment - were treated by the Old Masters as negative factors that could be acknowledged only implicitly or indirectly. Under Modernism these same limitations came to be regarded as positive factors, and were acknowledged openly. (1960,p.86).

The self-critical development in 'Modernist Painting' which overturned the *value* of the picture plane would not be to the detriment of classical pictorialisation, but on the contrary, would ground advanced non-representational abstract painting further into its own historical area of painterly competence. "Each art had to determine, through its own operations and works, the effects exclusive to itself"(1960,p.86), enveloping itself-within-itself as a discipline in which "the unique and proper area of competence of each art coincided with all that was unique in the nature of its medium"(1960,p.86).

Greenberg's investigations into materiality supported his role as spokesperson for abstract painting in America in the 1950s and 60s. But prior to this, and before he had fully formulated his ideas on painting as unique to its area of competence, when writing 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch' Greenberg aimed to replace the vacated space of bourgeois patronage - seeing it as his duty alone to examine the historical conditions that advanced avant-garde painting (in 1939) found itself in, and to give it an identity as a movement. Greenberg proposed that the avant-garde was to be seen to rebel against both the ruling classes and popular culture to create a new set of values that would determine which painting(s) and which artists deserved the judgement of *quality*. He argued that although the early avant-gardist's took up revolutionary ideas *against*, or as a *rejection* of, bourgeois society (the traditional patrons of *high avant-garde*

*art*) artists had also to reject the recent and more powerful *enemy* - the new capitalist markets of mass reproduction. The *advanced* modern artist then had to take up arms against more than his avant-garde predecessors, to sever the final ties with the once powerful bourgeois hand that feeds him and also, to reject mass produced *kitsch* which destroyed arts uniqueness and one-off originality. This *retreat* for artists and art from both *high* and *low* culture (and not just painting but all *advanced* arts), meant that *advanced* abstract art was expected to discover a new sense of itself as *Art for Art's sake*.

Retiring from public altogether, the avant-garde poet or artist sought to maintain the high level of his art by both narrowing and raising it to the expression of an absolute in which all relativities and contradictions would be either resolved or beside the point. 'Art for art's sake' and 'pure poetry' appear, and subject matter or content becomes something to be avoided like a plague (1939,p.3).

The ambitious artist, in order to detach himself *mentally* from both the bourgeoisie and the new power of capitalist mass production, would be asked (or often told) by Greenberg to seek the *essential abstract purity* in the mediums or carriers of production in the various arts. This could not be achieved by total detachment from all systems of human criteria - as a *divine absolutism* - because a painting that is validated on its own terms without reference to a system of analyses can only imitate through representation a *notion* of the absolute. Instead a non-representational painting "if it is to have aesthetic validity, cannot be arbitrary and accidental, but must stem from obedience to some worthy constraint or original"(1939,p.7). This constraint can be found not by renouncing the external world in an absolutist god-like fantasy, but through the "very processes or disciplines by which art and literature have already imitated (but not actualized) the former (the absolute)"(1939,p.9). The *content* of a painting therefore, would sidestep the woolly introverted thinking of the painter's consciousness which acted as a substitute for God-like representations, by replacing absolutist consciousness with an alternative (humanist) model of introversion through the processes of the painter's medium. In effect, Greenberg was asking for art to be free from the encumbering problems of the avant-garde's recent history of bourgeois patronage/resistance on the one hand, and, on the other, to not be reliant on transforming the materials of popular culture such as Cubism had previously done because popular materials were debased materials.

This *mythology* of the criteria for a programme for art would be unwittingly paralleled by postmodern critics such as Hal Foster, not as a curtain call to a return to the opposition of the bourgeois, but as a notional form of resistance to the hegemony of a more powerful, historical enemy. Foster says that the "postmodernism of resistance... arises as a counter-practice not only to the official culture of modernism but also to the 'false normativity' of a reactionary postmodernism"(1985,p.xii), and "is concerned with a critical deconstruction of tradition, not an instrumental pastiche of pop-or pseudo-historical forms, (but) with a critique of origins, not a return to them" (1985,p.xii).

And, for Greenberg, in defining the limitations (or programme) of both the bourgeois and popular capitalism by warning against the absolutist concepts of the painter's consciousness by re-inscribing the medium as the carrier of meaning or content, Greenberg roots his early writing in socialist politics. Though Greenberg's political position changes over a twenty year period from socialism to *high-cultural* commentator, this does nothing to lessen the central consistency and repetition of his argument from 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch' in 1939 through to *Modernist Painting* in 1960 that painting sees itself as a unique art form as distinct from other art forms like music. This central-core of the uniqueness of painting is pressed into service to suit both the socialist moral high ground of his first major essay 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch', and also, perhaps as a result of a growing contradiction later in his career (by the early 1940s he was unable to argue for socialism in painting), to root himself within an abstract principle that finally *becomes*, or makes claim to, the status of a *high cultural* extension of the history of western painting.

Could it have been that Greenberg was sublimating a desire to maintain an *ideological* moral-ground regardless of his affiliations? I will not take up Greenberg's political affiliations here because the effects that his politics had on his formulation of flatness has been more fruitfully covered in TJ Clark's essay, 'Clement Greenberg's Theory of Art'. Instead, I will focus on Greenberg's antagonistic distaste of *kitsch* as a contamination of materiality because it is this separation or fear of the popular as somehow invading the *purity* of material content that may provide a lever with which to prize open, and understand, the use and transformation of popular imagery in much contemporary painting.

In Part II of 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch', Greenberg develops more fully the idea that avant-garde painting was the natural heir to a debased high culture by insisting on its sense of a continual re-interpretation of its own values, a *progressive movement* forward within a historical continuum. However there were further hindrances to this movement from the popular realm. For Greenberg, High modernist painting was also interrupted by a second or rear-guard phenomenon of *Kitsch* which was more invidious than the simple replication of *inferior* versions of original artworks. This rear-guard *kitsch* came in the form of such popular arts as comic books, commercial art, magazine covers, and advertisements which Greenberg likened to Folk Art. Rear-guard *Kitsch* claimed its *own* validity without direct recourse to the replication of high culture because the twentieth century urban masses demanded, through their increasing wealth and modern comforts, a luxury culture of their own which was no longer dictated to by the old privileges of the ruling classes. The problem for Greenberg, however, was that these alternative versions, or *pretensions* to a luxurious life meant that an ersatz culture was being created; "kitsch (is) destined for those who, insensible to the values of genuine culture, are hungry nevertheless for the diversion that only culture of some sort can provide"(1939,p.12). *Kitsch* is a simulacrum of *genuine* or high culture, because it is mechanically mass produced. It is a *fake* that cannot possibly exist without "the availability close at hand of a fully matured

cultural tradition, whose discoveries, acquisitions, and perfected self-consciousness kitsch can take advantage of for its own ends”(1939,p.12). For Greenberg then, *true culture* (which was *unique*) could never become *kitsch* other than by cynical manipulation. The capital gains offered by producing and manufacturing *kitsch* or *kitsch art* are for Greenberg, to be resisted by ambitious avant-garde artists.

By contrast, in contemporary art practice (and we need to remember this throughout my introductory reviewing of Greenberg’s texts), abstract painting produces what Ralf Christofori refers to as a cross-over of these previous autonomies of *high* art and *low* culture. For example, the abbreviated pictorial language of abstraction coupled with computers and comics transforms the viewer’s ability to form a narrative context onto the canon of a fundamentally abstract tradition of painting.

During the 1950s and 1960s, abstraction displaced its expressive qualities onto a primarily ‘wordless level’, in subsequent painting, by contrast, it seems to have (re)developed a narrative rhetoric. The codes that have emerged here are different from those in the early forms of the picture story, but like them they function within a framework of narrated action. As pictorial and also cultural vocabulary, they are handed over to the viewers, who construct picture stories of their own, each according to his or her experiential horizon (1999,p.28).

But there were two issues in ‘Avant-Garde and Kitsch’ that Greenberg had yet to tackle in greater depth, firstly, that he had not yet fully formulated his ideas on painting as representing the *purist* of art forms, and secondly, to produce a more clear manifesto for American painting that would distinguish itself (with his help) from Europe’s avant-garde dominance.

### *Greenberg; Towards a Newer Laocoon*

In Greenberg’s next major essay, ‘Towards a Newer Laocoon’ (1940), he attempts to locate the pursuit of *purity* in art as a continuum of the historical in much the same way as in ‘Avant-Garde and Kitsch’, except here, *continuity* is used to distinguish the differences between the various arts by claiming that they observe the distinctions between their various mediums and how those mediums perform within their limitations. Greenberg argued that classicist painting had been biased toward a rationalist, illusory representation, rather than the methodology and practicality of the medium. Therefore, he argued, modern abstract painting could now distinguish itself as a *method* of art rather than as a kind of *effect*:

Yet it is true of western painting that in so far as it has been the creation of a rationalist and scientifically-minded city culture, it has always had a bias towards a realism that tries to achieve illusion by overpowering the medium, and is more interested in exploiting the practical meaning of objects than in savouring their appearance (1940,p.27).

This antagonism sees a more confident Greenberg argue for modernist painting's destiny. But having understood the difference between illusory painting and the abstract use of the medium, this still does not provide him with an example of the kind of *purity* that painting's medium could (or should) generate. Greenberg instead appropriates from musical interpretation the methodological tools which would contribute a parallel example of *purity* as an *equivalent* form of abstraction, the effects of which could not be directly copied by painting because it had yet to discover its *sense of itself* via the medium. Greenberg had no desire to see painting as a lesser art form to music "but to borrow its principles as a 'pure' art, as an art which is abstract because it is almost nothing else except sensuous"(1940,p.32). For Greenberg, music acts as *pure sensation* in-and-of-itself and this abstract sensuousness provided the evidence of a *purity* of a *method* of art rather than an *effect* of art that would later be applied to painting. Music, "because of its 'absolute' nature, its remoteness from imitation, its almost complete absorption in the very physical quality of its medium" (1940,p.28), offers a separated abstract blueprint of immediate sensation or *pure form*. Music would allow abstract painting to understand itself through the nature of its own material constituents to allow painting to become a *wordless* attaining of its own sense and criteria of ontological *sensation*, because

only by accepting the example of music and defining each of the other arts solely in the terms of the sense of faculty which perceived its effects and by excluding from each art whatever is intelligible in the terms of any other sense or faculty would the non-musical arts attain the 'purity' and self-sufficiency which they desired (1940,p.32).

Greenberg's insistence on the separation for painting of the *purity of a method* will become a key issue later in this Chapter as a re-configured relational intertwining of the materiality of painting and its representation as a sign. For example, David Pagel asks us to re-consider current abstract painting's self-reflexive activities of *effect* that pay particular attention to the "social space paintings occupy rather than the psychological depths many viewers presume to read into their surfaces, the (works) favour insistent superficiality"(1998,p.25). By superficial, I take Pagel to mean without recourse to Greenberg's habit of investing in notions of the self-serving nature and "complete absorption in the very physical quality of its medium" (1940,p.28). Instead, painting will be read in Chapter Three (with relation to Merleau-Ponty's claim of an ontological *overlapping* of the interior and the exterior world of the painter), as a system of (sensational) signs that are not tied down to a programmatic reading of painting's own internalized *sensation*.

However, to return to the pretext of Pagel's statement; Greenberg provides a further corollary with painting as *pure sensation* by returning to the relationship with materiality, insisting once again through repetition, almost as a paranoid defence, a lengthy prelude of how painting arrived at the fact of "flattening out and pressing together the fictive planes of depth until they meet as one upon the real and material plane which is the actual surface of the canvas"(1940,p.35). This prelude goes one step further by distinguishing the difference with

cubist paintings' habit of employing actual objects and printed letters or chiaroscuro. Greenberg argues that unlike abstract expressionism, Cubism, by using these forms, only emphasizes and re-iterates the classical traits of pictorial illusion thus failing the new abstract painting project of flatness, or rather, *sensational flatness*. Cubism, although limited by both the pre-eminence of pictorial illusion in its use of the medium, and its lack of colour to represent (fragmentary) form, is given a cursory historical avant-garde status as a precedence to abstract flatness; "avant-garde painting is a progressive surrender to the resistance of the medium; which resistance consists chiefly in the flat picture plane's denial of efforts to 'hole through' it for realistic perspectival space"(1940,p.34).

### *Greenberg; On the Role of Nature in Modernist Painting*

Sensational flatness, or rather, sensuousness is not directly referred to in 'On the Role of Nature in Modernist Painting' (1949), but Greenberg's search for the wider implications of what the flatness of the medium can represent is translated, or transferred to mean visual experience in relation to physical space. After having once again described the differences between the visual structures of classical painting and modernism, Greenberg attempts a reading of modernist painting as an inflection of classicist space; "Space, as an uninterrupted continuum that connects instead of separating things"(1949,p.173). This inflection he claims is the opposite of classicism because of classicism's reliance on depicting space as sculptural effect - that the notion of space is open to the placement of individual objects within it. This means that modernist or abstract painting (but not cubism because of its reluctance to sever its ties completely with illusion), comprehends space as a total object which then becomes its own *portrayal*.

As a precursor to all-out abstract painting however, Greenberg does maintain that Cubism's later phase, Synthetic Cubism, predicted flatness as a total object by re-integrating images back into the surface. This re-integration was achieved by images "being drawn out of fictive depth and flattened against the surface as silhouettes, to certify thereby that the picture surface 'really' coincides with the seamless spread of the visual"(1949,p.173). However, Synthetic Cubism still relied on silhouettes of something representational so that for Greenberg it didn't fully coincide with the seamless spread of the visual. Abstract art had to learn from Synthetic Cubism that although the surface was being acknowledged it was the *picturing* in the surface that had to be avoided. Greenberg then argues that the spread of the painting's surface represents a continuum of the object-surface by describing itself by what it is not - that tactile nature has been re-organized as a unity of the visual as opposed to a *peering through*, or re-integration of silhouettes into the surface, because "the picture plane as a total object represents space as a total object"(1949,p.173). For Greenberg, if any of the new American abstract art failed to convey a "sense of the resistant plane surface as a likeness of the visual continuum"(1949,p.173), then (like synthetic cubism) it would violate his sense of coherence and unity; and he warned in the sternest of terms that this failure would condemn abstract art to

'mere decoration' and therefore 'dehumanise' it. For Greenberg, "the picture plane as a whole imitates visual experience as a whole"(1949,p.173).

Having thought of abstract painting as escaping the rectangular frame and leaking out and occupying the physical or sculptural world of objects in space, Greenberg sets up a case for "the unity and integrity of the visual continuum, as a continuum"(1949,p.173). This continuum supplants the renaissance idea of tactile nature as the sole detached model of the "unity and integrity of pictorial space"(1949,p.173).

Here, we need to remember Francesco Pellizzi's *decorative*, postmodern interpretation of Philip Taaffe's paintings, which he also says escape their frame to occupy the *unity and integrity of the visual continuum* as Greenberg would ask. But, Pellizzi argues, because in the postmodern ornament operates as a detached *thing in itself* it rejects the form that it clothes; ornament does not seek refuge in form but hovers like "pure 'evanescences', presences in dissolution, translucent super structures built on nothingness, architectures of air and colour spread out in subtle flatness, one-dimensionable even as they give the appearance of a play of perspectives"(1999,p.101). For Pellizzi, ornament in postmodernism aims to "apply to the 'superficiality' of ornament the 'substantiality' of structure"(1999,p.100), to become a *new form(less)*, "thus inverting, though certainly not negating, the modernist approach"(1999,p.100). This will be further explored in more to detail in Chapter Four when I compare it with Stephen Perrella's Hypersurface as an overlapping of the visual sign within digital embodiment.

In the meantime, the modernist approach of the substantiality of structural form that Greenberg explores through the spatial continuum, as an act of viewing through the eyes in relation to the body will be taken up in 'Abstract and Representational', which he understands as disembodied and which I will critique in Chapter Three through a reading of Merleau-Ponty's *overlapping* embodiment theories. Firstly however, Greenberg's disembodied relation to the picture plane needs to be examined.

### *Greenberg; Abstract and Representational*

'Abstract and Representational' (1954) begins as a defence of abstraction against a *philistine* return to classical painting as a pastiche. Consequently, Greenberg appeals to the future for a wider appreciation and understanding of abstraction because of the difficulty abstraction was having with being accepted as a historical art form. With this plea, Greenberg argues for abstract painting to be judged on whether it is *good or bad*; whether painting measure up to *his* criteria of *quality*. The *quality* he seeks must accept as a notion *aesthetic wholeness*, which means that no single element of a painting may be judged in isolation from the *all-over* whole because "how much any part is worth aesthetically is decided solely by its relation to every other part or aspect of the given work"(1954,p.187). By viewing or *experiencing* the artwork



directly, in its objectness or *wholeness*, this *experience* is superior to *imagining* or *anticipating* its *quality*.

Later Greenberg criticizes the proliferation of "second-hand or second-rate painting"(1954,p.189), that appropriates versions of this *wholeness*. There are for Greenberg, two types of second-rate painting; the first, attempting to reverse the abstract progressive tendency by returning to figuration as a simple pastiche, and the second, that most but not all abstraction, although stylistically modern, is equally pastiched and therefore just plain *bad* - pastiched abstraction being just as much of a copy except more recent. *Second-rate painting*, he claims, does not possess the *qualities* or "kind of satisfaction we have traditionally looked for"(1954,p.189). An apologist, or rather, a pastiched comparison to art of the past, or the very best of abstraction, fails to accept the *originality* and *uniqueness* of the embattled conditions of the times.

The comparisons Greenberg makes about both trends is not intended as a back-tracking of his overall thesis but as a demand that abstract art live up to the *great* values of past art by recognizing a traditional or a historicist evaluation of what is *good or bad* - that *progress* in the *highest* degree is achieved by comparison, and also, that abstract art develops a sense of itself within its own terms as a historical (modernist) *destiny*. If abstract art does not take up the challenge of a comparison to past values then "painting and sculpture (will) fail to realize the values that our time is capable of creating in their sphere" (1954,p.189).

As with 'On the Role of Nature in Modernist Painting', Greenberg once again returns to the issue of spatial equivalence but this time to counter the resistance to abstraction. Although Greenberg never states who the resistant parties are (we can only assume that there is resentment or worse, philistinism) he examines the *cause* or *uncomfortableness* of abstract painting. Greenberg collates both the visual language of abstraction along with its spatial order as the main contributing factor for this difficulty, claiming that the *narrowness* of pictorial translation or its sole means of representation through materiality has yet to be fully comprehended as its meaning. Abstraction's *narrowness* is a virtue for Greenberg, and he defends the abstract picture against popular resentment by arguing that it exists in the same spatial arena as our bodies, or has an equivalence familiar to our bodily relation to classicist sculpture; "it has lost its 'inside' and become almost all 'outside', all plane surface"(1954,p.191). The viewer can no longer metaphorically *escape into* pictorial representation because there is no conceit by which to travel, as viewing itself is bodily returned to the space in which the picture is being viewed. This in turn concentrates the viewer toward the optical or the relation of colour, shape, and line that are divorced from descriptive connotations. The eye is therefore returned to the self-awareness of its position *outside* the painting as it traverses and interchanges such elements as the foreground and background. And, as the eye does so, the various components of the abstract picture cannot be distinguished individually but as a whole,

as one single continuous centre of interest both visually and bodily “which in turn compels us to feel and judge it in terms of its over-all unity to the exclusion of everything else”(1954,p.191)

### *Greenberg; Modernist Painting*

The pinnacle of Greenberg’s theory that abstract painting represents itself as a self-criticism through materiality, spatial relocation, or sensation, was most clearly articulated in ‘Modernist Painting’ (1960). This text is written almost at the end of his career and in retrospect of the events of abstract expressionism, charting the work of Jackson Pollock through to Helen Frankenthaler and Morris Louis, and later, the colour field painting of Kenneth Noland and Jules Olitski. In ‘Modernist Painting’ Greenberg systematically, and much more clearly, demonstrates the main points of his overall thesis which had been lacking in the preceding essays.

Greenberg begins by stating that Modernism’s tendency toward self-criticism grows out of, but is not the same thing as the critical tendency of the enlightenment: “The enlightenment criticised from the outside, the way criticism in its accepted sense does; Modernism criticises from the inside, through the procedures themselves of that which is being criticised”(1960,p.85). Greenberg’s assertion that modernism *criticises from the inside* would guarantee for painting a narrowing of its area of competence through the unique nature of its medium. It thereby finds its own sense of *purity* through its physical presence whilst simultaneously sharing an alliance with *purely optical effects* (or sensations). However, these *effects* which were created by the application of paint mean that material *flatness* itself is not always totally flat, as demonstrated by Jackson Pollock (image 20):

The heightened sensitivity of the picture plane may no longer permit sculptural illusion, or *trompe-l’oeil*, but it does and must permit optical illusion. The first mark made on the 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. The Old Masters created an illusion of space in depth that one could imagine oneself walking into, but the analogous illusion created by the modernist painter can only be seen into; can be travelled through, literally or figuratively, only with the eye (1960,p.90).

The gaze of the eye refused the bodily conceit of *travelling through* the picture plane and Greenberg likens this reading of the optical with both the Neo-Impressionists, who utilised science for optical purposes, and Kant, whose philosophy of self-criticism had found expression in the various science disciplines. Visual experience Greenberg argued, “makes no reference to anything given in any other order of experience, it is a notion whose only justification lies in scientific consistency”(1960,p.91). He later warns that although modernist painting shares similar pragmatic traits with scientific consistency this promises nothing in the way of aesthetic *quality*. It is here, in the wake of arguing for flatness and the optical as the inevitable consequence of western historical art, that the problem of attributing or judging *quality* in

modernist painting becomes apparent. Once the project of modernism has found its destiny, how were individual painters and their works to be aesthetically judged? How was *quality* to be equated with *purity*? Greenberg's answer was that the "immediate aims of the Modernists were, and remain, personal before anything else, and the truth and success of their works remain personal before anything else"(1960,p.91).

In order to demonstrate his criteria for *quality* as a personal mission of intent, Greenberg referred once again to the art of the past. He claimed that modernist art was based on observation and experiment which is then and only then tested by the theoretical possibilities of the medium. It was the *actual practice* (of flatness) coupled with an *actual experience* (or sensation) of art that would not only be modernism's claim to historical subversion, but also the criteria upon which modernism had not fully dispensed with historical value judgments "and yet continue to offer the experience of art in all its essentials. The further fact that this demonstration has left most of our old value judgments intact only makes it the more conclusive"(1960,p.92). Greenberg's *quality* then is historicist - that modernism has a dual role to appear as different to classical art in *style and content* but that it maintain its standards of excellence in its aesthetic, material laws in relation, otherwise "Modernist art would lack both substance and justification"(p.93,1960). On this point Greenberg ends 'Modernist Painting'.

## Pop Art

Pop Art supposedly worked against the ideals of Greenbergian *purist* abstraction as an art movement. I have chosen to briefly examine three critical Pop anthologies in their historical context from the late 1960s for the following reasons; (i) to understand how writers on Pop viewed the changes that were purportedly brought about in the wake of abstract expressionism; (ii) to re-engage with their writings in a contemporary context, similar to my reviewing of Greenberg's *original* texts; and (iii) to get to grips with David Pagel's understanding of Pop as conjoined with High Modernist abstraction: "painting today *conjoins and* is indebted to Pop Art's exploitation of mechanical reproduction and High Modernism's focus on the 'embodied effects of aesthetics' "(1998,p.27).

In Lucy Lippard's 1966 anthology *Pop Art*, she introduces Pop as "an American phenomenon that departs from the cliché of big, bold, raw America that became current when Abstract Expressionism triumphed internationally"(1966,p.9). Pop was meant as a youthful, fun loving reaction to abstract expressionism, it claimed a purchase on *readymade* advertising and low-cultural imagery to be found in (often youthful) popular culture, and re-introduced it as *high* or *fine* art as an ironic rebuke to the rarefied language of high cultural abstraction. Pop, although ostensibly figurative was not *correctly figurative* in the classical sense because pictorially it utilized shallow space, lack of modeling, and flat expanses of colour etc. Neither was it abstract in the Greenbergian sense. In fact it was a hybrid of both, *designed* as a deliberate reaction to

two abstraction-dominated decades. As such, Pop could be seen to be the reactive heir to abstract expressionism, its self-conscious appropriation of popular imagery becoming a *critique* of the new humanist hopes of abstract expressionism.

Yet Pop was not a nihilistic trend towards high art. It was rather, to be perceived as a positive antidote:

Despite its carnival aspects, its orgiastic colour and giant scale, Pop Art's alternative to the emotional and technical impastos of its immediate predecessor was clearly based on a tough, no-nonsense, no-preciosity, no-refinement standard appropriate to the 1960s. The choice of a 'teenage culture' as subject matter contains an element of hostility towards contemporary values rather than complacency; it marks a new detachment from the accepted channels of art (1966,p.10).

Pop Art, then, in its urgency to rid itself of the vestiges of abstract expressionism, went to great lengths to produce works whose subject matter was based on the recognizability of popular cultural products. This, in tandem with mass-production's need to provide ever increasing *novelties* for the consumer market, furnished Pop Art's artistic philosophy with an instantaneity and throw-away aesthetic that had previously been frowned upon by Greenberg as *kitsch*. Greenberg argued that *kitsch* claimed its *own* validity without direct recourse to the replication of high culture because the twentieth century urban masses demanded, through their increasing wealth and modern comforts, a luxury culture of their own which was no longer dictated to by the old privileges of the ruling classes. The problem for Greenberg was that these alternative versions, or *pretensions* to a luxurious life, meant that an ersatz culture was being created in which "kitsch (is) destined for those who, insensible to the values of genuine culture, are hungry nevertheless for the diversion that only culture of some sort can provide"(1939,p.12). Lippard argues however, that because of the rise of mass conspicuous consumption in America, Pop Artists and their audiences sought to deliberately embrace *kitsch*. Pop Art sought not to display artists introverted feelings, as had been the case with high cultural abstract expressionism, but rather, artists like "Andy Warhol presents objects we can equate with the public feelings of an artist"(1966,p.10), (illustration 27). According to Lippard, it was the freshness of this detachment of both artistic persona and the choice of subject matter that marked Pop Art as critically appropriating (whilst paradoxically being seduced by) the advertising and machine aesthetic to which it referred for inspiration. Pop had become Greenberg's nightmare of an urban mass who demanded an entertaining version of high culture's exclusivity.

A more robust and wider cultural understanding of 1960s Pop is undertaken by Mario Amaya in *Pop as Art; A Survey of the New Super Realism*, where he suggests that advertising plays an important role for artists inspiration:

Because of the immense power and spread of advertising and mass-media communications through publications and television since the Second World War, we have taken for granted a whole new set of signs, symbols, emblems and imagery, which has settled into our subconscious as a commonly shared visual experience (1965,p.11).

Because of this spread of mass-communication, Pop artists began to be inspired by the ready-made objects and imagery they found around them in the urban environment (in the tradition of Duchamp). According to Amaya, it was this desire for a directness of *borrowed* expression that contributed to the rejection of Abstract Expressionism's notion that the artist rely on his *individual or existential* subconscious for inspiration, an inspiration that had been understood previously as a personal gesture of primary emotion demonstrated via the virtuoso display of hand crafted *painterliness*; "the abstract expressionist of a previous generation relied on his subconscious and his alienation from a hostile society to demonstrate a personal gesture on the canvas-arena"(1965,p.11). Borrowed expression was also in marked contrast to the abstract artists' mythological claim that the conditions of art be determined by an alienation from a hostile popular culture and also, from a *high* bourgeois elite. A younger generation of Pop artists then were "not painting about 'life' itself so much as about an ad-mass attitude to a way of living, as experienced through certain commercial idioms"(1965,p.12).

For Amaya, many of the Pop artists felt that all the battles of modern art had been fought and won by their elders, and were therefore determined to have fun with modern art rather in the manner of the surrealists, except that now the jokes would take a "stylish form of wit whose codes of address would be accepted and exchanged by in-groups"(1965,p.20). And concurrent with Pop Art behaving ironically as *Art*, "this mode of expression has been taken up in a pseudo-fashion by the world of advertising and glossies, which treat seriously what is surely meant to be done lightly and with tongue in cheek"(1965,p.20). Amaya calls this wit 'camp' which he defines as "a mid-twentieth century brand of twisted or ironic humour" (1965,p.20); 'camp' being expressed by a love of things being what they are often not by ambiguity, paradox, and inverse humour, which is manifested as a thrill for *surface* or *artifice*. Pop reproduces 'camp' imagery from what in popular culture could be thought of as *passe* or out of style, such as reproduced imagery from the immediate past like 1940's 'pin-up' girls, or cars from the 1950s. Amaya claims that this imagery was chosen because their use-value and style were just out of reach of the Pop artists' immediate *day-to-day* culture. Amaya adds that because it was too soon to place those images within a sealed off history their re-use was meant to make fun of, and have fun with, what was at hand as a recognizable if somewhat dated and well known cross-generational image.

Amaya then argues that the historical and cultural divisions that separate the fine, or applied high abstract arts from manufactured or commercial art become arbitrary. Pop then, if it is to be

*accepted* as high art, means that it has to understand itself as art - it has to behave as high art "no matter how closely it might resemble its manufactured model"(1965,p.21). This *high* versus *low* debate was very prevalent and at the heart of Pop's quest for identity, and it prompts Amaya to contextualise this identity as 'New Super Realist', by historically relating Pop to the late nineteenth century tradition of realism in painting; "What exactly is realism in art as compared to reality in life?"(1965,p.21). Although I would argue that this is a naive question based on certain assumptions that the *real* is a shared, omnipresent, and historically binding set of values in art, it is a useful question to understand the context in which Amaya thought he found himself in - a context of *historical shift* or trajectory via Greenberg and abstract expressionism. And, in the Greenbergian tradition, I would argue that Amaya displays an anxiety to historicise Pop:

The nineteenth-century *Salon* painter and Academician believed realism to be the development of illusionistic art techniques from the Renaissance onward; the Pre-Raphaelite believed it to be truth to nature observed minutely. The New Super Realist sets up an ambiguous situation with his realistic images. He does not make them into something else, as the Assemblage Artist does, nor are they excuses for flights of fantasy into the world of the sub-conscious as with the Surrealists (1965,p.21).

Amaya claims that for Pop Artists, the re-figuring of *recognizable* popular images means that both the notion of art historical Realism, and the Super Realism of the 1960s, creates a new frame of understanding or reference. Super Realism sources from the *popular* and turns those images into fine or high art simultaneously and somewhat ambivalently (ironically), returns those references to the *real* world from which they were sourced. This *taking away from art to make art* is neither a perfunctory appropriation of the values of popular imagery from low culture, nor is it the case that Pop becomes a separate or *pure* fine art, but that their co-existence becomes not high culture versus low (or via versa) but the two things all at once.

Like Mario Amaya, Michael Compton in *Movements of Modern Art - Pop Art*, believes that both irony and nostalgia play a central role in Pop. Compton takes as an example the re-viewing of old films claiming that when viewed afresh they take on a form of *just-past* nostalgia, which paradoxically provides a simultaneous datedness and actuality. This *present*, although it may have been filmed years earlier, is forever sealed in its nostalgia as if *new*. Compton explains that the "actors in the old films are, naturally, just as convinced by their own clothes, styles of speech and actions as they were when the films were new. They are not in costume any more than the actors in contemporary films"(1970,p.14).

Compton goes onto suggest that many Pop artists who viewed new films when they were young have a different and more sophisticated understanding of them when viewed later, they treat the films as *ironic style*.

Old feature films are self-contained and emotionally and ideologically simplified, they can be brought intact into the present more easily than old news or documentary films, not to mention personal memories. The more corny the film, that is, the more it is enclosed in the blinkers of its own period, the more they enjoy it (1970,p.14).

This experience of old films takes on a detached notion of *total style*, and Pop artists become seduced through an ironic understanding of difference from styles past. *Style* for Compton also becomes ironically analogous with the *straightforward* consumption of brand names as a mock loyalty to the surface pleasure of mechanical reproduction; the brand name becomes cultified making explicit a fetishized *low culture* glamour. Compton's example of ironic cultifying also extends to old records or products like the Coca-Cola bottle, which although designed in 1915, remains the same but is continually being represented alongside cheap American goods or images of women, that by proxy, reinforces the bottles shape. Compton claims that to European eyes this form of advertising tries to capture an imaginary American golden age of the past in which the sex imagery of female figures and hairstyles is firmly fixed.

### Post Modernism: Resistance or Neo-Conservatism?

Before building up to David Pagel's conjoining of Pop with High abstraction, I will first argue that Compton's understanding of Pop as *ironic style* echoes much of 1980's Postmodern painting which also seeks to work against (Greenbergian) modernism, but as a deconstruction. To some degree postmodern *ironic style* borrows from the strategies of Pop Art in its appropriation of popular imagery, especially in the manner of Compton's assertion that Pop artists enjoyed old feature films because the "more corny the film, that is, the more it is enclosed in the blinkers of its own period"(1970,p.14), the more funny they found them. For postmodernism (like Pop), ironic style meant enjoying mechanically reproduced nostalgia both as humour and also as a critique of High Modernism.

Postmodernism, it was claimed, was to be a response not only to the problematics of insular and self-referential Greenbergian aesthetics (art as art), but also as a way of responding to popular imagery in the simulacral that was denied by Greenberg as *kitsch*; postmodern painting in particular was to be an ironic reaction to not only Greenbergian ideals, but also the breezy optimism of Pop. This desire to engage with imagery from advertising and the media (as a critique), presented painters such as David Salle (illustration 28) or Sigmar Polke in the 1980s with an opportunity to relinquish paintings insistence that it is a *high art* and reinvest it with forms from popular culture - a kind of negation of authority or *culture war*. These painters sought to oppose Greenbergian flatness by reintroducing a multiple-layering of images and abstract forms that denied the material purity which Greenberg sought. By working this way they hoped to re-establish a relationship with the fictive *conceit* of the representation of the 3-dimensional (sculptural space) into the 2-dimensional or re-presented (pictorial) space that

Greenberg had virulently argued against as *traditional*. This meant that *representational conceit* could be employed as an ironic, *contrived* realization of painting by joining hands with the simulacral and its representation of the subject in both art history and popular culture - painting was to *lack conviction* in its own activity if it was to be critical. At least this is my understanding of postmodern painting, but this is how Hal Foster presented the project for painting in *Recodings*:

The contemporary western artist is faced with two new conditions: modernism has largely receded as a historical formation and the culture industry has advanced intensively. Indeed, two of the basic modernist positions on mass culture are now partly eroded: neither an austere refusal of the mass-cultural nor a dialectical involvement with its imagery and materiality is necessarily critical today (1985,p.33).

As a consequence, Foster later suggests that contemporary artists artfully play the fool with both modernist art and mass-cultural forms as their only option of criticality in art. David Salle for example,

would pose an art that rehearses how our own representations subject us. To this end he contrives an art that plays on our faith in art to cast doubt on the 'truths' mediated by it, a 'dead' painting that saps conviction in painting, that undermines its own claim to truth, authenticity, consent (1985,p.52).

This duplicitous, ironic relation to modernist painting (indeed Pop) as a dead project was deemed necessary to remove the strictures of a self enveloped philosophy that Greenberg wished for, and got, with much imitative abstract art in the 1960s and especially the 1970s. But for me, it is this binary that sets the agenda to re-think further, or re-deal Greenberg's materiality not as a form of *purity* in and of itself, but as a component of process and form in painting that circumnavigates the closed postmodern critique of Greenberg's argument. It does not necessarily follow that representation presented as a *conceit* of fictive space, or *dead painting that saps conviction* should also be criticized in order to argue for a new understanding of painting, but the contrary - to allow for a cross referential shifting between these binaries which includes these oppositions all at once, for example, a painting that is abstract, figurative and sculptural all at the same time and which also demonstrates the simulacral *conceit* of 2-dimensional representation.

But with regard to Greenberg's evaluation of painting, it is appropriate to examine postmodernism's own understanding of its historical role in relation as an ironic reaction, a role which rejected Greenbergian formalism in favour of an *interpretive* relation to the meanings and reading of painting. Viewed in this context, postmodern painting was no longer expected to rely on the constituents of its own craft through authorial control - the artist expressing himself through formal juxtaposition within the field of material exclusivity - instead, according to Hal Foster in '(Post)Modern Polemics', painting was to be read like a text by its audience, it was



supposed to demonstrate the constructs of visual culture as based on signs both visual and linguistic. When creatively juxtaposed, these signs or historically formal constructs were meant to simultaneously critique, as a re-presentation, the very forms of modernist painting which were often appropriated by various ideologies such as feminism and post colonialism, to represent issues through visual art that had previously been restricted only to formalism. Foster wrote in more detail on this in 'Readings in Cultural Resistance'.

This adoption of the socio/political and popular worked against the grain of Greenberg's theories. In order to contextualise Greenbergian modernism as a re-examination in or of the postmodern, it is therefore necessary to distinguish between two strains of the postmodern, or two different use values for painting in the writings about postmodernity. This analysis is based on Hal Foster's model in his introduction to *Postmodern Culture*, where he proposes a clarification in postmodernism, one aspect of which is resistant to the hegemonic effects of modernism, and another, an aspect which is only a stylistic appropriation of past art. The former is a polemical leftist form of postmodern *resistance* which is interpretive, and the latter is a conservative (or neo-conservative) which is *reactionary*. Foster favours a

postmodernism of resistance, that, arises as a counter-practice not only to the official culture of modernism but also to the 'false normativity' of a reactionary post modernism. In opposition (but not *only* in opposition), a resistant post modernism is concerned with a critical deconstruction of tradition, not an instrumental pastiche of pop-or pseudo-historical forms, with a critique of origins, not a return to them (1985,p.xii).

In particular, Foster had in mind a particular criteria or project for artists, who under the umbrella of *criticality*, attempted to ask questions of the origins of their practice, a model which presumed a re-hash of art and history as an *end-game crisis* - a crisis brought about by the fear that Greenberg's blueprint for art was no longer relevant. It is in this sense that the *resistant* needs to be explored as it potentially offers arguments that critically deconstruct the very idea(s) of this tradition; the *resistant* opposes the co-opted neo-conservative values of maintaining modernism behind the stylistic mask of the postmodern.

However, I would argue that the grafting of Foster's *resistant* political model onto art practice is questionable, partly because of its reliance on treating modernism as a monolith to be overcome, and partly as a hegemonic Marxism discussed as post Marxism. Craig Owens points out that the political model employed as art is "always reducible to an argument in favour of the totalising ambitions of Marxism's claim to account for every form of social experience as a division of labour" (1985,p.63).

The pursuit of *resistance*, with all its attendant baggage of a leftist cultural politics which aimed to create a critical dialogue for neglected or under-represented groups in the field of *high art*

(feminism was often adapted in this way during the 1980s), has come to be understood as a flawed project. The power structures of the art institutions and the capital which gave financial value to art easily assimilated and felt very comfortable with *radical critiques* because they were categorizable. *Critical art* sold - it was bought by the museum and labeled; political resistance had become nullified.

The term *critical*, or 'critical art' (and its subsequent institutionalization) was also attached to the re-defining of more *traditional* genres such as painting or sculpture, except that these re-definitions were harder to categorize as either *radical* or *traditional*. This is made apparent by Douglas Crimp in 'On the Museums Ruins' in *Postmodern Culture*. Owens discusses how Robert Rauschenberg, in the early 60s, disrupted the possibility of his work being represented solely as a painting when Rauschenberg introduced photographically silkscreened images of the Rokeby Venus into it. Rauschenberg enabled these works to be seen as a critique of the values of modernist flat painting because of the juxtaposition of elements and techniques not normally associated with easel painting. The museum that purchased them were unable to categorize these *works* as the "notions of authenticity, originality and presence that are essential to the ordered discourse of the museum are undermined" 1985,pp.53-54). The museum simply filed and labeled them as *photographic reproductions* of works of art.

However, writers such as Foster continue to talk of *cultural resistance*. Although Foster recognizes this as a disposition he readily admits to a romantic streak as he continued in the 1980s to search for practices of *resistance* that made knowing gestures toward the inevitability of cultural assimilation. This ultimately trapped double-bind colours much of Foster's pursuit for the correct form of *resistance*. But it is the term *resistance* itself (which seems to me to be deeply rooted within a modernism that Foster purports to critique), and its use value which needs to be examined.

Foster attempts to argue that modernism has a historical limit, especially when it comes to *avant-garde* art, a limit which is to be sealed off into history and marks a definitive boundary. This boundary he says constructs a difference, *an* other or an ahistorical category, and the question in the 1970s and 80s seemed to be that if the values of modernism seemed exhausted as a project, what were the values for art without a definite project of progress? Foster claims that this problematic sets up the model of the postmodern, as a tool with which to diagnose Greenberg's assertion that modernism is a historical moment:

One can say, with Paul de Man, that every period suffers a 'modern' moment, a moment of crisis or reckoning in which it becomes self-conscious as a period, but this is to view the modern ahistorically, almost as a category. True the word may have 'lost a fixed historical reference' (Habermas), but the ideology has not: modernism is a cultural construct based on specific conditions; it *has* a historical limit and one motive of these essays is to trace this limit, to mark our change. A first step, then, is to specify what

modernity may be. Its project, Habermas writes, is one with that of the enlightenment: to develop the spheres of science, morality and art 'according to their inner logic'. This program is still at work, say, in postwar or late modernism, with its stress on the purity of each art and the autonomy of culture as a whole (1985, pp.ix-x).

Foster's collection of assembled essays in *Postmodern Culture*, based on the *resistance* to modernist thought in contemporary art and intellectual culture, crucially formed my early undergraduate understanding of postmodernism as cultural politics - as finding a reason to be against both the *authority* of modernism that emphasized Greenberg's desire to find *purity* in detached materiality, and also, the myth that the modern artist is a lonely, separated, garret dwelling genius shunning the everyday world so as to concentrate on his art. But Foster was not the only role model who argued for a *resistant* postmodernism.

Thomas Lawson in 'Last Exit: Painting', originally published in *Artforum* in 1981, shared Foster's values of reviving a *criticality* in art and not a neo-conservative return to the values of a past art. Lawson argued that the re-use of artistic styles simply reflected modernist notions of idealism and purity of intention. This form of postmodernism, Lawson reasoned, allowed neo-conservative artists (neo expressionists) to collude in the fantasy that the art of the past contains substantive values over the present:

Following the lead of architectural critics these symptoms have been hailed, rather carelessly, as 'postmodern', with that term standing for a nostalgic desire to recover an undifferentiated past. According to this understanding any art that appropriates styles and imagery from other epochs, other cultures, qualifies as 'post-modern'. Ironically, the group that has been enjoying the most success is made up of pseudo expressionists like Jonathan Borofsky, Luciano Castelli, Sandro Chia, Francesco Clemente, Enzo Cucchi, Rainer Fetting, Salome and Julian Schnabel. Despite the woolly thinking behind this usage, the claim does have some merit, but in the end the work of these artists must be considered part of a last, decadent flowering of the modernist spirit... These young painters ingratiate themselves by pretending to be in awe of history. Their enterprise is distinguished by a homage to the past, and in particular by a nostalgia for the early days of modernism. But what they give us is a pastiche of historical consciousness, an exercise in bad faith. For by decontextualising their sources and refusing to provide a new, suitably critical frame, they dismiss the particularities of history in favour of a generalising mythology, and succumb to sentimentality (1981,p.42).

By contrast, Lawson later offered David Salle as an example of a painter who represented historical images as a *critical discourse* by using

established conventions against themselves in the hope of exposing cultural repression. Salle occupies a central position in this polemic, for he appears to be

balancing precariously between an empty formalism of the sort practiced by Clemente and Schnabel, and a critical subversion of such formalism. His work has long shared certain characteristics with the work of these artists, particularly in the deliberately problematic juxtaposition of heterogeneous styles and images. But whereas the work of Clemente and Schnabel remains narcissistic at base, Salle's has always appeared more distant, a calculated infiltration aimed at deconstructing, prevalent myths (1981,p.42).

Lawson's synopsis of the *challenge* for postmodernism in painting is meant as a blueprint for artists like Salle to construct a difference from modernism and from Greenberg in particular. Lawson virulently argues for a *radicality* that reveals cultural repression and myth making but seemingly suffers from the same problems of historicity as Foster. However, whereas Lawson explores the differences of approach in postmodern artists as a way of making sense of the (general) terrain of 1980s thinking in painting, by contrast, Foster relies solely on postmodernism's position as an overarching *historical* determinacy. As a consequence, I would argue, Foster unconsciously displays a Greenbergian, modernist identification with the continuation of tradition (albeit *radical*). For me, Foster's project for *resistance* as a residual, hegemonic version of art history means that by seeking to identify a historical problem as a justification he exposes his reliance on the linearity of history as having an end to its project - that by adopting this position of difference from modernism Foster hopes to *deal with it*. This seems self-enclosed in the extreme, a self-closure of history *per-se* - a problem is imagined as having an identity so that it can be further imagined as a *resistance*.

So (Foster's) *imagined* argument runs something like this; if art has come to the end of its historical project (after the historical positioning of modernism), then how can any distinction or choice in art be made? The answer lies on the one hand, in a fabricated choice similar to Lawson's, that is, to re-use art's past either as a critical examination of the construction of mythologies through interpretive meaning - like David Salle who deconstructs and renders *useless* the idealistic utopianism of avant-gardism in modernism. And by contrast, on the other hand, the capitulation of borrowing styles from past art by declaring their re-usage as bereft of historical meaning because of the *death* of their original intentions - thereby exercising the right to take liberties with those intentions.

The problem though is that this choice creates an easily assimilable binary opposition, a choice of left versus right. It is assimilable precisely because this binary is itself conservative - it needs to define itself by what it is not - as *an other* to be feared, challenged and repressed. This fabrication of external *other* somehow seems exclusive rather than inclusive to the art of the past. It assumes a position of moral or intellectual superiority toward those projects (of modernism) that no longer *appear* to represent the problematics of the present. Both the left

and the right positions, for me, are an unconscious mourning for the ideals of modernism when modernism as a project is no longer at issue.

### Arthur C. Danto: 'After the End of Art'

It is necessary here to re-introduce Danto's *After the End of Art* because unlike Lawson and Foster's interpretive, resistant postmodern arguments that Foster claims are "concerned with a critical deconstruction of tradition"(1985,p.xii) *against* an *imagined* modernism, Danto instead attempts to construct a notion of the *contemporary* in current (1990s/2000s) art practice by changing it to a debate about history. For Danto, the *contemporary* is an historical consequence of previous philosophical investigations about the nature of art after their conclusions, and not a condition which needs to critique them. But more importantly, for Danto, contemporary art is not an antagonism toward the projects of both modernism and postmodernism:

Contemporary art has no brief against the art of the past, no sense that the past is something from which liberation must be won, no sense even that it is different as art from modern art generally. It is part of what defines contemporary art that the art of the past is available for such use as artists care to give it. What is not available to them is the spirit in which the art was made.(1997,p.5).

Danto is important for my thesis because he offers a reading of contemporary art that is not locked into a progressivism of *change* like Foster's introduction to *Postmodern Culture*, where "modernism is a cultural construct based on specific conditions; it *has* a historical limit and one motive of these essays is to trace this limit, to mark our change" (1985, pp.ix-x). On the contrary, Danto claims that just as modern art has come to denote a style and even a period, the contemporary has come to designate something more than simply the art of the present moment, "it designates less a period than what happens after there are no more periods in some master narrative of art, and less a style of making art than a style of using styles"(1997,p.10).

Interestingly, a *style of using styles* could reflect Foster's complaint of a stylistic appropriation of past art, a conservative (or neoconservative) art which is *reactionary*, "an instrumental pastiche of pop-or pseudo-historical forms" (1985,p.xii); a *non-resistant* high cultural appropriation of the popular. JJ Charlesworth argues that for younger artists seeking to find "viable terms for a material practice after the epoch of postmodern critique, and reconciled to the exigencies of the market"(2002,p.11), what he calls *new formalist abstraction* means that there is not an assertion of cultural separation or independence of the artist away from the wider *popular* culture. Charlesworth claims that this non-separation could provoke the "criticism that such a resistance might also be conducive to the market's desire for objects that do not too much involve themselves in the world outside, but instead focus on the luxury and excess of the aesthetic

moment within the confines of the gallery”(2002,p.12). By contrast however, for Charlesworth, this criticism fails on all accounts because such a *separation* suggests that the rationalised terms of (traditional) formalism

were only ever an effect of these conditions, conditions that appear to reassert themselves now that the critical impulses in art practice have relocated elsewhere. But the terms of formalism were anyway always contradictory; prone to the rarifying and sequestering impulse of elite taste, formalism nevertheless attempted to attest to a common affective potential of aesthetic experience (2002,p.12).

Unlike Foster, then, Danto could be said to chime with Charlesworth’s more recent claim that the *common affective of aesthetic experience* is the only condition of the contemporary as a style of using styles. Danto argues that the most innovative form of painting practice in the late 1970s and early 80s was “the appropriated image - the taking over of images with established meaning and identity and giving them a fresh meaning and identity” (1997,p.15). For Danto, this development brought about multiple interpretations between the historical and the popular freeing-up the need to attach personal/political agendas to art:

I think the ending of modernism did not happen a moment too soon. For the art world of the seventies was filled with artists bent on agendas having nothing much to with pressing the limits of art or extending the history of art, but with putting art at the service of this or that personal or political goal (1997,p.15).

As a consequence, Danto argues, the *liberation* of the need to attach interventions to art by the ‘taking over of images by giving them fresh meanings’ is the precondition of the contemporary - that there is no such thing as a contemporary style, no sense of what history is holding out over the contemporary. And in this sense, David Salle’s appropriative paintings could be said to fall into this category. I would add that the art market has contributed a phenomenal proliferation of art and art styles since Salle’s ascension as an important artist in the early 80s, such as YBA’s, new formalism, neo-geo, and neo-conceptualism etc., etc. Danto argues that because of this acceleration of styles “there is no a priori constraint on how works of art must look - they can look like anything at all”(1997,p.16). JJ Charlesworth also proposes that this is not a return to conservative modernist certainties, but rather, a contemporary reconciling with the plurality of practices in which “questions of form, experience and context may once more be negotiated. This is not a ‘return’ of history, but the reinvestment of certain conditions that persist in art practice today, conditions that result from the critical and institutional dead-end of the previous decade”(2002,p.12).

Danto goes onto frame more clearly his term the *contemporary*. The plurality of the postmodern (which has dealt a linear style blow to modernism) means that the term postmodernism itself is changed into the *contemporary*. The *contemporary is the postmodern* it’s just that the term postmodern as a philosophy of historical difference is no longer relevant:

But that finally means that there can be no historical direction art can take from this point on. For the past century, art has been drawing toward a philosophical self-consciousness, and this has been tacitly understood to mean that artists must produce art that embodies the philosophical essence of art. We now can see that this was a wrong understanding, and with a clearer understanding comes the recognition that there is no further direction for the history of art to take. It can be anything artists and patrons want it to be (1997,p.36).

For Danto, artists in the *contemporary* do not rely on finding either a political, philosophical or historical position with which to take issue because notions of history, progress, and development are deemed to have shifted from their original narrative meanings. He claims that the *contemporary* is a long way from Greenberg's understanding of a progressive history from the enlightenment - from pre-modernist to modernist art or "the shift from mimetic to non-mimetic features of painting ...that had to become itself nonobjective or abstract" (1997,p.8). So for Danto the proving of difference from one movement in art history to another, for example abstraction as opposed to figuration, has become a wrong understanding of art, and that artists are free to do what ever they like - a kind of *anything goes*. Danto also relates this *freedom* for art to art criticism saying that "all styles are of equal merit, none 'better' than another. Needless to say, this leaves the options of criticism open. It does not entail that all art is equal and indifferently good. It just means that goodness and badness are not matters of belonging to the right style" (1997,p.37).

However, Danto's argument that *liberation as anything goes* is limited as an argument only in that he offers very few prognoses in terms of art or artists other than the paradoxically rendered flat/gestural paintings of David Reed, or the ironic paintings of Komar and Melamid - two artistic tropes which have become very familiar as 'signifiers' of the condition of the contemporary. The first trope, denying the heavy impasto gesturing of abstract expressionist painting, and the second, ironizing the status of contemporary art as high art. I would argue that Danto ignores the plethora of other *individual* art available that does not rely on such easily identifiable targets related to art history, and sells short the strength of his argument by lumping contemporary art all together as a *liberation*. He gives an historical overview similar to the grand scale that Greenberg imagined when he tried to define modernism as an extension of the enlightenment. By suggesting that value in art not be judged in terms of the *right* style Danto appears to suggest that artists and patrons can determine what art is and what its value is. Liberal as this is, it seems to leave all value judgment in the hands of what artists and their private patrons say (or pretend) their work is about. It is beside the point to argue against the control of capital in the art market if this simply collapses back into a Marxist philosophy of equal distribution, which is not at issue here. Instead, as JJ Charlesworth argues, that what "new formalism discovers is not the ideal of the autonomous object of formalism, but the conditional persistence of the terms of aesthetic experience, as it might be encountered within the secure conditions of the art

gallery”(2002,p.10).

## Yve-Alain Bois: Painting as Model

Yve-Alain Bois asks whether contemporary painting has any sense of its own relevance. And equally, like Danto, he works against the idea that painting is at an end of an historical lineage, claiming that recent apocalyptic pronouncements that *painting is dead* is not new but has been an active motivation for activity in painting throughout the twentieth century. In *Painting as Model*, Bois offers for me another text on painting (potentially) without recourse to historicist agendas, saying that the apocalyptic mourning for painting need not “necessarily become pathological; the feeling of the end, after all, (mourning) did produce a cogent history of painting, modernist painting, which we have probably been too prompt to bury. Painting might not be dead”(1993,p.243). Bois adds that

To claim that the ‘end of painting’ is finished is to claim that this historical situation is no longer ours, and who would be naive enough to make this claim when it appears that reproducibility and fetishization have permeated all aspects of life: have become our ‘natural’ world” (1993,p.242).

Bois asks us to cure our mania for melancholy and believe again in our ability to act in history “accepting our project of working through the end again, rather than evading it through increasingly elaborate mechanisms of defense (this is what mania and melancholy are about)”(1993,p.243). Instead he claims, that the desire for painting remains; it can be turned into a possibility instead of a non-pathological mourning.

Bois then goes onto say that painting *now* be understood as a game or match, and “that this strategic interpretation is strictly antihistoricist: with it, the question becomes ‘one of the status that ought to be assigned to the *match* of ‘painting’, as one sees it being played at any given moment in particular circumstances, in relation to the *game* of the same name”(1993,p.241). The match of painting becomes for me a more focused way of raising doubt about certain truisms - a way of re-considering both abstract and pictorial art (or both, and at the same time) as having a modified role rather than simply not fitting into a Greenbergian, or any other overarching theory of art (history). According to Bois, a side needs to be taken, and the strategic approach, rather like Danto’s overview of the *contemporary*, “has the advantage of deciphering the pictorial field as an antagonistic field where nothing is ever terminated, decided once and for all, and of leading the analysis back to a type of historicity that it had neglected, that of long duration”(1993,p.256).

Bois then goes onto quote Herbert Damisch’s ironic attitude toward the apocalyptic tone adopted by postmodern writers such as Hal Foster who understand painting as an impasse that is part of, or one of the many interrupted matches, to which history holds the secret. “The



problem, for whoever writes about it, should not be so much to write about painting as to try to do something *with* it, without indeed claiming to understand it better than the painter does,...(to try to) see a little more clearly, thanks to painting”(1993,p.257). Bois asks that we remain as close as possible to paintings objective, “deliberately situating oneself each time into the very heart of pictorial invention”(1993,p.167). Bois’ outlook is one of optimism for the future of a re-constituted painting that ignores prescribed historicist ‘rules’ and favours the conditions that painting finds itself in given the contexts of the moment, which in itself, may set up a more philosophical model to comprehend the act, making and contextualisation of painting - what JJ Charlesworth argues as the recognition of an

ambiguity towards reference and representation, the hallucinatory excess of material form, and the syntax that develops between elements once they are placed in relation to one another - all echo the past but are discovered (anew) because these aspects are default values, so to speak, the pragmatic reality of what was once mistaken for an essential (2002,p.11).

It is Charlesworth’s relation between *reference and representation* as a default value and Yve-Alain Bois’ need to “deliberately situate oneself each time into the very heart of pictorial invention”(1993,p.167) in contemporary painting that will be argued through later in the next Chapter by examining Andrew Benjamin’s *What is Abstraction?* Benjamin offers the notion of historical repetition as a *staged* becoming, an ontological, yet-to-be-resolved presence for contemporary abstract painting, which

necessitates recognizing that the work of art - the continuity of the becoming object - already allows for its own productive repetition. Allowing art work its incorporation into an ontology of becoming repositions the ontology of the art work within those terms which it sets for itself. Furthermore, the interplay of becoming and repetition yields a site of judgment as that which is given by the nature of repetition. Repetition, within judgment, will always be mediated by what occasions it, namely the insistent presence of the becoming object. Abstraction continues therefore to be given - and to have been given - within its own becoming (1996,p.50).

## David Pagel; Abstract Painting... Once Removed

### *(i) Beyond Postmodernism?*

Before I begin to explore the fuller implications of abstraction as a repeated ontological exercise for the painter, I will re-visit David Pagel’s exhibition text in more detail as an example of the kind of abstract painting that both myself and Andrew Benjamin understand as *contemporary*, in the sense that “its incorporation into an ontology of becoming repositions the ontology of the art work within those terms which it sets for itself” (1996,p.50). Having sketched the relationship of two postmodern writers on painting (Hal Foster and Thomas Lawson) in relation to, or as opposed to Greenberg’s notions of flatness in painting, and having explored Danto’s re-

appraisal of the condition of contemporary art as *anything goes* as art when no master narratives are predominant, I will develop further the implications of the relations of High Modernism with Pop Art as a contemporary issue for painting - but not as a historicist binary. In this sense, we could interpret Pagel's understanding of *those terms which painting sets for itself* as a self-conscious, contemporaneous conjoining of the genres of abstraction and Pop art.

Pagel suggests that the relation between High Modernism and Pop is in contrast to postmodernist painting. For Pagel, the primary purpose of postmodern painting, or 'Art-in-quotation-marks' was to make

grand (tongue in cheek) propositions, and then by means of a sly wink, knowing nudge, or ironic twist, let insiders know that such goals were ridiculously overblown, even dangerously authoritarian. This insistence on making a mockery of modernism, first by turning the history of American abstraction into a simplistic cliché, and then by attacking this straw target, goes hand-in-hand with the idea that form and content are separable and that artists' intentions are easily translated to objects. It cynically treats the contemporary world as an incidental footnote to a vaunted history from which artists and viewers have become irredeemably alienated (1998,p.24).

Pagel understands postmodernist irony as having sealed off modernism into a historical *niche*, and claims that contemporary painting in the 1990's/00s offers marked *differences* from postmodernism; he argues that it is in fact High Modernism and Pop Art that are responsible in some way for the turn of interest in contemporary painting and not postmodernism's historicist dialectical tropes. This, Pagel claims, is because "having been off limits for several generations formal exploration has become once again a rich - and open-ended area of enquiry"(1998,p.27). As a consequence it has become safe for contemporary artists to re-visit High Modernism and Pop because of their *critical* unfashionability; the interest in these historical movements has come about as a result of contemporary (90s/00s) painting being "conceptually removed from many of the self-conscious strategies that have dominated the past decade"(1998,p.24).

Although Pagel opposes the postmodern irony of 1980's art, saying that it historically subjugates itself by creating *straw targets* to negate the modernist programme, could it be that he may have overlooked the potential for contemporary painting as an extension or expansion of the postmodern project and not as a *difference*? Instead of denying the discoveries of postmodernism, no matter what their limitations as a historicist binary programme, could Pagel's hybrid statement be unpicked to provide contemporary painting with a context that utilizes the virtues of postmodern writers such as Hal Foster, who argues in *Recodings* that the contemporary western artist is faced with two new conditions: modernism has largely receded as a historical formation and the culture industry has advanced intensively. Indeed, two of the basic modernist positions on mass culture are now partly eroded:

neither an austere refusal of the mass-cultural nor a dialectical involvement with its imagery and materiality is necessarily critical today (1985,p.33).

Because of Foster's claim for the redundancy of a modernist agenda (or any agenda come to that) for or against the media, can we re-think Foster's understanding of the *critical* in painting through Yve-Alain Bois' challenge that

to claim that the 'end of painting' is finished is to claim that this historical situation is no longer ours, and who would be naive enough to make this claim when it appears that reproducibility and fetishization have permeated all aspects of life: have become our 'natural' world? (1993,p.242).

Equally, Greenberg's project for High Modernism - or rather Amaya's critique of "the abstract expressionist of a previous generation (who) relied on his subconscious and his alienation from a hostile society to demonstrate a personal gesture on the canvas-arena"(1965,p.11) - could be re-thought *in relation* to Amaya's claim that Pop artists were not painting about the expression of self "so much as about an ad-mass attitude to a way of living, as experienced through certain commercial idioms"(1965,p.12). Amaya (and possibly Lippard and Compton) could underpin and make more explicit an expansion of how contemporary abstract painting is interpreted in relation to the simulacral that Pagel so far has only hinted at.

For me the primary question will come out of High Modernism's focus on the 'embodied effect of aesthetics' *via* Pop Arts relation to mechanical reproduction. And I mean here, mechanical reproduction as described by Walter Benjamin (which I covered in Chapter One), which changed the way art was perceived. To briefly paraphrase so that we may maintain Benjamin's interpretation throughout this thesis, Benjamin argued that there have been three main historical phases in the construction of the *idea* of art produced by an *original* artist. In the medieval period, artworks were only conceived as purely ritualistic objects and were produced by anonymous craftsmen. But later, as part of the secular cult of beauty in the Renaissance, artworks were fetishized as individual objects created by individual authors. In the nineteenth century however, "with the advent of the first truly revolutionary means of reproduction, photography" (1936,p.220), art no longer had a claim to the Renaissance programmatic of original authorship - photography challenged the claim to original production because images could be produced mechanically rather than by hand-crafted *skill*. As a result, Benjamin concurred that a crisis had occurred in the placing and identity of the author/artist as sole producer of unique artworks because "the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production the total function of art is reversed"(1936,p.220) - belief in art as individual had to be re-thought.

I will argue, that like Foster's or Lawson's desire to engage with imagery from mass-cultural forms, but unlike their need to re-assemble these forms as *radical critiques* of modernism, that

part of the contemporary fabric of the culture of reproduction still has huge consequences for painting. Therefore, the next stage will be to flesh out how Pagel's term *embodied effects of aesthetics* (as embodied, digital reproduction), becomes a contemporary dialogue and not as; (i) a simulacral, postmodern *resistance* to modernism; (ii) a Pop Art irony that claims expressionism in high art is dead; or (iii) a Greenbergian cliché for self-embodied indifference in painting. In fact, the *embodied effects of aesthetics* could be explored through painting's ontology in relation to Bois's claim that "reproducibility and fetishization have permeated all aspects of life: have become our 'natural' world" (1993,p.242).

### *(ii) High Modernism, Pop and the Stylistic 'Effect' of Contemporary Painting*

As we have seen throughout this Chapter, postmodernism's project for painting as an antagonistic yet dialectical reading of Greenberg by writers such as Hal Foster appear at first to close down a re-reading of Greenberg because Greenberg's project has been deemed to have come to an historical *end*. Over the coming pages, I will argue that Greenberg's essays may bear up to a re-evaluation of painting as a rhetorical trope, because as David Pagel suggests, contemporary painting is marked (sometimes in ignorance or self-deception) by the historical rootedness of Greenberg's determinism. Although this may at first appear to be the sort of argument that Hal Foster may approve of - a paradoxical rhetorical critique that is both reliant on, and opposed too Greenberg - my task will be to examine the full implications of David Pagel's essay which attempts to tease out a project for the re-instatement of painting as an *alternative* to, or rather as a *viable* narrative of both Greenbergian abstraction and Pop art. But there are problems. Unwittingly, Pagel's *alternative*, like Foster's *resistance*, chooses a historicist reading (as I described in Chapter One). But despite this historicism, it is essential to review Pagel because his text is one of a growing number of exhibition catalogue texts in the international museum sector which argues that a re-emergence of contemporary painting acts as a critical re-appraisal of High modernism and Pop.

By reviewing Pagel I hope to discover, with the *aid* of Greenberg, and not as a *closure* of his writing as a foregone historical conclusion, whether contemporary painting might benefit from or exploit a claim to a *critique*. Or, more to the point, whether the term *critique* becomes a relational exercise of historical dialogues firstly, through Yves-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss's claim in *Formless*, which attempts to re-think or re-deal modernism by opening up its history to the present without just repeating modernism's patterns, dialogues and claims. And secondly, through Andrew Benjamin's claim that painting is manifested as a historical repetition of *staged* becoming, or ontological, yet-to-be-resolved presence which "necessitates recognizing that the work of art - the continuity of the becoming object - already allows for its own productive repetition"(1996,p.50).

Pagel's claim that "perhaps the most exciting aspect of painting today is that it is equally indebted to Pop Art's exploitation of mechanical reproduction and High modernism's focus on

the embodied effects of aesthetics”(1998,p.27), has been a consistent statement throughout this text. Although it appears as a general catch-all (or handy catch-phrase) for contemporary painting, and could be argued as a yet another postmodern consequence to Greenberg, Pagel’s statement will be used to determine and test whether there are wider implications for the future of painting as an interrogative medium. A number of questions begin to emerge: (i) How does Pagel equate Pop Art with High Modernism? (ii) What exactly does Pagel mean by mechanical reproduction and the embodied effects of aesthetics? (iii) What does this binding of the two movements mean for painting now and can this be used as a methodological tool for its context? (iv) Why the importance of resurrecting Greenberg through Pagel? (v) Does Pagel represent a positive solution to the negative representation of the simulacra by Jean Baudrillard? (vi) What becomes of a discourse around painting and its materiality when faced with the seeming *incongruity* of the digital?

Pagel’s essay ‘Once Removed from What?’, begins by distinguishing the geographical differences of the artists from the exhibition, claiming that the various works are “multilayered objects that shape their surroundings as much as they’re shaped by them”(1998,p.23). Pagel suggests that New York is no longer the dominant art-making scene that needs to be passed through in order to make painters visible, and that by extension, the term *once removed* also means that painters work *outside* the loop of what was once the dominant, modernist discourse centred in New York in the 1950s and 60s.

Pagel later goes on to chart a course for contemporary painting that is also *once removed* from both modernist self-absorption and the more recent self-conscious strategies of the 1980’s which utilized irony to make a mockery of modernism’s self-centredness. And although Pagel leaves his co-writer Dana Friis-Hansen to plot the development of postmodern painting as at *one remove* from the specific *historical* development of abstract modernist painting, Pagel asks us to re-consider current abstract painting’s self-reflexive activities that pay particular attention to the “social space paintings occupy rather than the psychological depths many viewers presume to read into their surfaces, the (works) favour(ing) insistent superficiality”(1998,p.25). By superficial, I take him to mean without recourse to modernism’s habit of investing in notions of original authorship as demonstrated through personalised gesture, a “cool detachment, intellectual rigour, and material veracity (which) take precedence over urgent expressivity and inward-turning emotionalism”(1998,p.25). Pagel argues that unlike the postmodern understanding of the *superficial* as an ironic dualism, contemporary painting does not rely for its impact on a one-dimensional negation or criticism of previous works, recent styles or current social practices, but actively seeks to re-engage with painting and its history as an “*aposition* rather than an *opposition*” (1998,p.525). *Aposition* is important because I will also develop it as a notion in regard to both Andrew Benjamin’s understanding of painting as an ontological re-staging along with Stephen Perrella’s architectural Hypersurface theories.

In the meantime, Pagel looks to the American painters Monique Prieto and Ingrid Calame to re-engage with modernist painting's recent past. Both of these artists Pagel argues, transform rather than negate 1960's colour field formalist abstraction, that until recently had been considered critically out-dated and unfashionable. It is because of a lack of recent interest that these styles, he claims, are able to be revived or redeemed with a fresh intention, namely, without the baggage and reasons of their original historical contexts. They become *styles* of abstraction. By collating Prieto's and Calame's paintings *stylistically* with the works of a previous generation of modernist painters, Pagel states that although this younger generation of painters appears formally, or rather, *stylistically* as if the same, the difference is that the contemporary works source imagery from areas *other* than High or (Greenbergian) Modernism by incorporating graphic design techniques or architectural and computer-generated images etc.

It is here that Pagel brings together the *art historical* genres of High Abstraction and Pop Art, and my reading of his conjoining is that it is a rather vague and casual form of catalogue journalism of the type that I critiqued in my Introduction and throughout Chapter One. However, Pagel does provide a context for the borrowing of imagery from outside the restricted field of High Modernism which has also been successfully recorded by Pop Art as a reaction. Equally, and somewhat paradoxically, Pagel also understands these historical movements as redundant *critical* programmes, or rather, as Arthur C. Danto says,

contemporary art has no brief against the art of the past, no sense that the past is something from which liberation must be won, no sense even that it is different as art from modern art generally. It is part of what defines contemporary art that the art of the past is available for such use as artists care to give it (1997,p.5).

For Pagel, this lack of a brief for art, and in particular painting, leaves open a space for a *rhetorical* understanding of painting as a *stylistic*, and insistently extravagant, production of *effect*. Stylistic difference in this context is available to be re-appropriated as *effect*. By replacing negative *criticality* as a hybridizing of various art historical elements with imagery from popular and digital culture, stylistic effect becomes a re-configured *surface sensuality*. Contemporary painting Pagel says, "transform(s) physically weighty (if conceptually lightweight) decorations into shimmering instances of blazing immateriality"(1998, p.16). Pagel could have been interpreted as saying that painting, through its embodied medium, is re-positioned as an *image* (whether figurative or abstract or both) but only when it parallels the re-presentation of images via the flatness of the *disembodied* computer or television screen. Jean Baudrillard describes this parallel *appearance* in *On Seduction* as a construct of the simulacral, a challenge to the enlightenment notion of *deep truth*, an assault on hidden meaning: "Appearances, which are not at all frivolous, are the site of play and chance taking the site of a passion for diversion - to seduce signs is here far more important than the emergence of any truth"(1979,p.149). For

Baudrillard *appearances* cause havoc with methods of quantifiable interpretation or *hidden truths* by diverting and displacing discourse.

What actually displaces it, 'seduces' it in the literal sense, and makes it seductive, is its very appearance; the aleatory, the meaningless, or ritualistic and meticulous circulation of signs on the surface; its inflections, and its nuances. All of this effaces the content value of meaning, and this is seductive (1979,p.149-150).

### *(iii) Mechanical Reproduction and the Embodied Effects of Aesthetics as an Apposition*

In order that Pagel's hybrid be understood more clearly as a recent phenomena of *embodied appearance* (via the disembodied screen) it needs to made clear how Pagel interprets contemporary painting's simultaneous appropriation of Greenberg's *purity* of medium, Pop Art's irony, and postmodernism's negation. This in turn poses the question of what such a cross-disciplinary mix means for contemporary painting's sense of project, and what means contemporary painting can then employ to ensure hybridity as a *surface* strategy in relation to Baudrillard's simulacral effacing of the *content value of meaning*.

David Pagel says, that for a younger generation of artists who nostalgically *reflect* as a *given* Pop Art's ideology of breaking down the distinctions between high and low culture, "suggest only a slight degree of separation, one in which connections, echoes, similarities, and affinities play as important a role as do differences and distinctions"(1998,p.25). Pagel's re-formulating of High Modernism and Pop Art, or a continual jumbling of hierarchical frames of reference, becomes an *apposition of reflection* for younger artists. *Apposition*, in this context, avoids both a postmodern binary and a pastiche of the differences between Pop and High Modernism, instead presenting these movements as source materials that can be borrowed from as *appearances* without recourse to their original intentions; they become "once again a rich - and open-ended - area of enquiry"(1998,p.27).

But Pagel's *borrowing without recourse* to historical intentions is not the only recent example on offer. Lane Relyea in another museum catalogue essay *Colour Me Blind*, also maps out a course for painting via High Modernism and Pop, but also includes Colour-Field painting. Relyea suggests that contemporary painters now mix four master tropes as *operations of practice*; metaphor, synecdoche, metonymy and irony, and that this has come about as the result of the rejection of the historicist readings of postmodernism.

Unlike such rigid dualisms as modernism versus postmodernism, the four master tropes represent more fluid modalities: They're always available, and are in fact hard to keep separate from one another. Indeed, despite the prevalence of a more or less ironic mode (or at least the prevalence of artworks that seem rhetorically divided against themselves), it's impossible to completely repress the simultaneous use of the other three modes (1999,p.17-18).

According to Relyea, rather than focusing exclusively on the historical concerns of the aesthetic, painting is to be considered simultaneously with other conditions of interpretation. Further evidence of simultaneous interpretation is given in David Ryan's catalogue essay 'Hybrids' when he cites John Rajchman's *Constructions* as follows:

The relation between mediums (and abstraction in mediums) is not one of negation but of connection, of 'and' rather than 'not'... For this world is what abstraction is all about: abstraction is the attempt to show - in thought as in art in sensation as in concept - the odd, multiple, unpredictable potential in the midst of things of other new things, other new mixtures (Rajchman,1998,pp.75-76, cited Ryan,2001,p.17).

Painting, for Pagel, is likewise caught up in the wider implications of a complex web of social and media-linked associations. This non-binary inter-weaving, sets up the conditions for painting as an *apposition* that seeks to incorporate art history as one mode of operation amongst other visual sources simultaneously. Painting's presentation through the medium, I would argue, is then infused with the representation of mechanical reproduction and digital imagery that it finds around it - this would have been in direct contrast for example to Greenberg's *Hi-Lo* cultural distinctions in 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch'.

Once it has been determined that contemporary painting crosses-over from art historical to contemporary representations of the popular and visa-versa, it becomes necessary to understand the painter's relation to these *overlapping* demands and begin to come to terms with what painting represents through its physical application of the medium. If, as Greenberg describes in 'Modernist Painting', that all painting is reliant on the surface as a figure-ground relationship since the "first mark made on the canvas destroys its literal and utter flatness"(1960,p.90), how can the demands of the surface *in* relation to the thinking and seeing subject be connected to the contemporary visual world of surfaces as it is described by Baudrillard? How is this connected relay played out through the painter's ontological relation to art history and the popular? Is the representation of form on a surface a cipher for understanding or re-interpreting both the painter's experience as a subject and that which is being represented? Could this subjective/objective *overlapping* begin to link-up with Pagel's, Relyea's, and Rajchman's arguments that painting consists of a complex relation of hybrid relations between history, popular culture, and the simulacral? Any one of these questions could be applied to an account of painters at the time of both High Modernism and Pop Art, but the difference with contemporary painting, as I have argued throughout, is that firstly, it doesn't attempt to seal painting off as a materialist, self-absorbed concern as High Modernism did, or secondly, become an ironic, *mechanically reproduced* Pop as an antidote. Contemporary painting instead occupies the non-position of *apposition* and is to be considered simultaneously with other conditions of interpretation.



In the next Chapter, I will explore the relation between painting, history and ontology by trying to determine what it means to be embedded within the *condition of hybridity* as a practicing painter. I want to determine how the painter works on the surface of a painting, via the medium, as a representation that mirrors both him/herself as a *subject* and the presence of objects in the *external* world. This will be done through firstly, Andrew Benjamin's *What is Abstraction?*, which argues for a re-staging of abstraction's history as an embodied yet-to-be resolved presence in painting. And secondly, through Merleau-Ponty's 'Eye and Mind', which develops an ontology for painting by examining painting's use of colour, depth and line as an *overlapping* or reversibility of the painter's intentions. In the latter parts of the Chapter I will compare the phenomenological *fleshiness* of 'Eye and Mind' with Jean Baudrillard's *unfleshy* simulacral theories so that we may reconsider the question of painting's *flatness* as surface.

Chapter Four will then consider Stephen Perrella's *Hypersurface* theory which proposes a non-subjective, deterritorialised, architectural parallel of the digital as a transparent, fluid system of multi-dimensional signs in which the contemporary subject traverses. I will argue that the symbolic virtual changes the body's sensuous relation to time and space and is central to contemporary painting's criticality. And lastly, in the Conclusion, we can explore actual examples of painter's *unique* modes of approach that are biographically/digitally embedded within their personal *styles*.

### **Chapter 3 The Relation of Embodiment to Phenomenology as a Re-Staging of Abstract Painting: Andrew Benjamin's 'What is Abstraction?' and Merleau-Ponty's 'Eye and Mind'**

#### **Andrew Benjamin: What is Abstraction?**

What does it mean to have a physical relation to the act of making paintings given Pagel's intertwining of Pop Art and Abstract Expressionism, Danto's claim that anything goes, and the contemporary emphasis on the simulacral? How does a desire for painting remain given these variable conditions? And how do these relations affect the embodied experience of painting for the painter now? Rather than follow conventional historical genres, and before I cross reference painting with other conditions of interpretation (through the digital in particular), I will aim to convert Greenberg's physical determinism by using Andrew Benjamin's notion that contemporary abstract painters re-stage a repetition of the historical/modernist premise of the unresolved painting by transforming the conditions of the painting's making as a contemporary ontology.

Benjamin's re-staging will then come to be understood as a 're-styling' of abstract painting as surface which is then examined as an ontological conjoining of Greenberg's material flatness, with Merleau-Ponty's claim that the painter transforms the relationship between the body and a painting by overlapping the interior sense of self with the world of external objects. I will argue that contemporary painting can offer a philosophical dialogue between the painter's subjectivity as a mirroring of the painter's personal style through objective ornamental materiality.

In *What is Abstraction?*, Benjamin begins by developing a case for recent abstract painting by framing an ontological/philosophical discourse. This discourse allows for the re-interpretation and renewal of the tradition of abstraction by offering the notion of historical repetition as a *staged* becoming - or ontological, yet-to-be-resolved presence for contemporary painting which necessitates recognizing that the work of art - the continuity of the becoming object - already allows for its own productive repetition. Allowing art work its incorporation into an ontology of becoming repositions the ontology of the art work within those terms which it sets for itself. Furthermore, the interplay of becoming and repetition yields a site of judgment as that which is given by the nature of repetition. Repetition, within judgment, will always be mediated by what occasions it, namely the insistent presence of the becoming object. Abstraction continues therefore to be given - and to have been given - within its own becoming (1996,p.50).

Throughout this Chapter, I will discuss how and why I'm looking at Benjamin's book, and what my overall interest in his argument may mean for the practicing abstract painter in the

contemporary, because to me, *What is Abstraction?* appears to offer a contemporary study of the ontological/philosophical in painting that may help re-position Merleau-Ponty's forty three year old text 'Eye and Mind'. Also, Benjamin's text will hopefully lead us to cross-reference the ontological in contemporary painting with the ontological in the digital, and in particular, Stephen Perrella's architectural Hypersurface theories.

*(i) Irreducible Determinations: Painting, Materiality and History as a Twofold Procedure*

The third section of *What is Abstraction?*, titled 'An Economy of Abstraction', sees Benjamin argue for a historical and ontological repetition of abstraction by claiming (like Baudrillard against materialist reductionism) that an economy of completion for the reductive picture plane - as advocated by Greenberg - does not take into account the full relation between the subject and object. Greenberg's viewing subject, whose *at-onceness* assumes that there is "a unified singular entity which in a single moment confronts a work that is given in its absolute simplicity"(Greenberg cited Benjamin,1996,p.27), is taken to task by Benjamin. He claims that opticality need not be defined or limited by an economy of completion and exhaustion because a "relation between a subject and an object will still exist even if the object is redefined in terms of the ineliminable complexity that can be taken as marking the nature of the art object"(1996,p.28). In other words, the positioning of the subject will be traversed by a number of "irreducible determinations such that the subject comes to be at any one moment an effect of these determinations"(1996,p.28). For Benjamin, these *irreducible determinations* call to task Greenberg's limited notion of the undifferentiated subject as the foundation of subjectivity. Benjamin promotes a "presence of complexity (in painting) that is marked by a necessary irreducibility"(1996,p.28). Equally for Benjamin, the art object is transfigured to include an ontological experience with both the eye and the mind, "in the same way as the object resists the possibility of finality or completion this also relates to experience."(1996,p.28).

For Benjamin, the repositioning or *irreducible determinations* of the subject and the object in the optical has an historical precedent, which places an emphasis on the bodily time/space relations by arguing that the literalness of the art object is changed by its abstract representation;

Abstraction could be understood as the movement in figuration in which there is no longer any reference to the literal. Abstraction, therefore, would be the furthest from the literal since it no longer carries with it even a figural determination of what was assumed to be there initially; ie. the prior founding literality (1996,p.29).

Benjamin goes on to relate the *literal* to Greenberg; "one of the consequences of this position is that from within Greenberg's perspective there would not be anything incompatible between an argument for the priority of the literal and abstraction (or 'modernist painting'). Abstract works would be literally what they are"(1996,p.29). Or, as Greenberg himself says, "the picture plane

as a whole imitates visual experience as a whole, the picture plane as a total object represents space as a total object”(1949,p.173). For Benjamin, this characteristic of modernist painting is a direct result of a negation or state of suspension in which a dormant condition is liable to a revival. But, importantly, he goes onto argue that “once this position is no longer determined by the Greenbergian insistence on singularity and the simple, abstraction needs to be relocated”(1996, p.30).

For Benjamin the literalness of abstraction *after* Greenberg “can be understood as the presentation in, and as, the work of painting of that which refers to the history of figures in art. To this extent it is a crystallization within a more generalized movement of becoming”(1996,p.30). Benjamin explains that this crystallization should not be thought of as “the movement inside of what was outside”(1996,p.30), but rather, as the work of the material of paint itself; “A juxtaposition of colours and an assemblage of forms take the place of the literal since part of this set-up refers to the already present existence of ‘literal and ‘figural’ elements in painting”(1996,p.30).

Benjamin argues that part of the re-positioning function of the literal is to describe an oscillation between the resolved and the yet-to-be resolved, or rather the interconnection of ontology and signification. Benjamin cites as an example Jasper Johns’ pivotal painting *Flag* (1954), (illustration 29) which is

not abstract, since it does not refer to the history of abstraction, (but) it depends upon certain abstract principles in that it maintains as central to its work the necessary impossibility of absolute identification... What it allows is for meaning to take on an ontological force because henceforth the work of meaning - ie. signification - is located in the work of the object (1996,p.30-31).

If for a moment we look at Max Kozloff’s description of *Flag* in his book *Jasper Johns*, it is apparent why Benjamin reaches this conclusion. Kozloff says that Johns presents “a thing rather than portraying a symbol... a flag is an object made out of cloth as well as a symbol, and nothing about the appearance of (this) work suggests cloth”(1967,p.17). Kozloff goes onto describe the dual contradiction of *Flag* as an *object/painting*.

By taking only one of the properties of the social icon - its flatness - and displacing it by the flatness of a pictorial surface, Johns brings object and symbol as closely together as possible. But even this becomes a dilemma only because the relationship between the two things is one of equivalence rather than incorporation (1967,p.17).

For Kozloff, this equivalence is achieved through the material manipulation of the sign, which he says, is made visible by the way the *Flag* is built up.

It’s façade is composed of newsprint scraps dipped into wax mixed with (coloured) pigment and affixed to the canvas. In addition, the medium, coming through the paper,

has been augmented by more wax, brushed sometimes in simulation of, sometimes in opposition to, a flag's stripes (1967,p.16),(illustration 29).

Kozloff observes that this *hidden* collage asks whether the constituents of the collage process has been reversed, that "the 'real' is whatever is underneath, partially withheld from sight"(1967,p.16). The resulting bas-relief is "composed as bare structure, and yet literal in appearance"(1967,p.17), incurring an ambivalence toward both the physical construction of the surface and its material representation that is aware of a "philosophical play upon the identity and usage of images that transcends the merely personal"(1967,p.14).

Benjamin, I would argue, translates this understanding of Kozloff by referring it back to the issue of abstraction as an ontological sign, warning that abstraction "is not prior to the literal in that abstraction seems to be the pure presence of the yet-to-be-resolved; (as) pure becoming"(1996,p.31), but rather, that "abstract painting holds to the generic relation whilst holding to the question of painting and the nature of the medium as central. It holds to it as an integral part of its work as a painting"(1996,p.31).

Benjamin lays great emphasis on the notion of *the work of painting* through its materiality, and goes onto distinguish "between 'abstract' paintings (non-representational paintings) which do no more than repeat certain determinations of abstraction's history, and others which hold to the twofold procedure of addressing abstraction's history while at the same time working with the question of painting"(1996,p.32). Benjamin favours the latter, and then goes onto describe painters such as Fabian Marcaccio (illustration 30), Jonathan Lasker (illustration 31), and David Reed (illustration 34) as adopting this twofold *procedure* which I will also address.

Benjamin's *twofold procedure* demonstrates a *complexity of paintings work* in the contemporary which not only addresses abstraction's history, but simultaneously works with the material constraints of paint or stuff, - in form, colour, depth and line. This doubling allows Benjamin to privilege, as an early historical example, Jasper Johns' *Flag*. I understand *Flag* as being produced toward the end of what has become known as Abstract Expressionism and just prior to Pop Art, and was seen as a crucial crossover between the two movements. Norbert Lynton says in *The Story of Modern Art* that *Flag* allowed Johns to overturn "one of the most popular dogmas of modernist art - that art must separate itself from words, from literature, in order to elicit a more instinctual and therefore more vital response"(1980,p.289).

Although Benjamin may accept Lynton's linear reading he works against a polemical description of Abstraction versus Pop, saying that it is, or has become, an institutionalized argument. Benjamin claims that "*Flag* is only possible because it exploits the reality of abstraction. What is exploited is not abstract. It is rather that the founding truth of abstraction comes to be displayed - perhaps literally - within the work"(1996,p.32). Johns' dual reliance on the materiality

of paint onto painted canvas mimics the relations to paint on a *real* flag, opening up an ambiguous reading of both the signification of a *real* flag, whilst simultaneously maintaining the painting's painterly presence as an art object. But, Benjamin explains, seeing *Flag* as purely patriotic is to already to pre-see the American flag as representing the American people in their totality, and it may be that Johns intended this, but "nonetheless, with the flag the possibility of its representing a synthetic whole is to miss the political complexity of the flag and hence of *Flag*"(1996,p.36). He then suggests that to see *Flag* as a representation of a flag itself, or as the intrusion of kitsch into the domain of modernist art, (as a critique), is to miss the complexity that inheres in identity.

As such it works to rob *Flag* of its inherent politics, rendering it banal by viewing it as the 'icon', 'emblem', etc. of mass culture. By its incorporation of abstraction *Flag* stages the problem of identity. It works by continuing the process of abstraction once abstraction is no longer conflated with abstract painting or the negation of representation (1996,p.36).

For Benjamin, the incorporation of identity in abstraction that no longer negates representation is a refutation of Greenberg's totalizing view of linking the optical with *at-onceness*; that time will allow for "the retention of opticality by providing it with a more complex temporality and spatiality than that which is given by Greenberg's 'at-onceness' "(1996,p.36).

### *(ii) Painting as an Act of Process: The 'Yet-to-be-Resolved' Object*

We need to hold onto Benjamin's relation of 'identity in abstraction' which no longer negates representation to more fully understand the remainder of Benjamin's argument. In turn, this will help to clarify my issue of 're-styling' abstract painting in the digital as surface, so that an ontological conjoining of Greenberg's material flatness can take place with Merleau-Ponty's claim that the painter transforms the relationship between the body and a painting by overlapping the interior sense of self with the world of external objects.

In the next section, 'Abstraction's Repetition', Benjamin argues for the interplay of the resolved and the yet-to-be-resolved in contemporary *abstract painting* but as process rather than through a totalizing psychological explanation. Through the act of process Benjamin asks two questions: firstly, what does it mean to take a chance in painting? And secondly, what would the chance effect be in painting? Benjamin references Jean-Francois Lyotard's writing on the tensions in Sam Francis' 'Meaningless Gesture' (1958); on the fidelity of words compared to colour and gesture in painting. Lyotard brings together words, colour and gesture as an *obscure power of possibility*. Benjamin links this to his two questions by saying that as a consequence 'several ways are open'.

Once the possibility of art - Lyotard writes of 'the obscure power that makes it possible' - is no longer explained in terms of the artists psychological make-up, then an opening exists in which it becomes possible to return to the question of production. Psychology

will only ever re-inscribe a humanism that will fail, necessarily, to account for art's own production (1996,p.37).

For Benjamin, the way ahead for painting is "provided by the recognition of the potential power of words and of painting; by retaining presence of the way ahead (as a continuity) and by holding to the necessity of chance"(1996,p.37). Benjamin argues that what is central here, as a question, is the staging of the relationship between the finite and the infinite which brings with it a recognition of the art work's ontology, whereby "the continuity of art must involve the recognition that the finite cannot be equated with the infinite; art's work has to do with their productive co-presence"(1996,p.38). This, along with the act of the art works interpretation provides chance with its setting.

This determination is history. Yet the history in question is not the history of the cultural historian who simply accepts given determinations and meanings. History is the recognition that each art work has to repeat the conditions of possibility for its being art. Recognizing the place of history means recognizing the productive centrality of repetition (1996,p.38).

It is this repetition, I would suggest, that prompts David Pagel to write that for a younger generation of artists, who nostalgically *reflect* as a *given* the signs of abstract expressionism, abstraction in the contemporary suggests "only a slight degree of separation, one in which connections, echoes, similarities, and affinities play as important role as do differences and distinctions"(1998,p.25).

Benjamin however, argues that this *historical repetition* has been circumscribed by modernist criticism which held as central the repetition of genres and types within art's history, where the divisions were determined by the nature of the medium. Benjamin says that the "importance of historical thought in terms of a repetition is that, because any new art work must be a repetition, it demands that the question to be addressed concerns the nature of that repetition"(1996,p.38). This allows for the recognition that part of the repetition will comprise abstraction's own ability to engage with its history. Therefore, 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 work, will be a staged encounter with earlier determinations and thus forms of abstraction"(1996,p.38). For me, this, and what immediately follows in Benjamin's argument, is vital if we are to comprehend the making of abstraction not only in the contemporary, but also in regard to the temporality of the digital which I will take up in Chapter Four.

### *(iii) Historical Repetition and Interpretive Time*

Benjamin goes onto distinguish between a pre-given history of existing paintings that provide the historical overview of the genre of abstraction, and abstraction as a relationship between

the resolved and the yet-to-be-resolved. These two distinctions taken together, need to be understood as a repetition of the overall genre to the extent that “the nature of resolution must maintain a relation to the history of abstract painting”(1996,p.39). For Benjamin, this condition produces the idea that intrinsic to painting is a continual reference to production, which in turn holds open the possibilities for painting as a question. For me, as a practicing painter, it becomes clear that possibility opens into chance, demanding that the determinates of chance become the nature of abstraction, and simultaneously, that chance presents itself as a continual questioning of the status and genre of the work’s work. Benjamin says that the repetition of abstraction always involves risk; “Chance and risk combine in providing that continuity of abstraction which cannot be thought of in terms of a seamless continuity”(1996,p.39), as Greenberg would have wished. So for me, contemporary painting is able to utilize chance and risk as re-configured rather than following historical abstract conventions.

But for Benjamin, there are still two further moves available, firstly, the deployment of a sustained reading of major historical works within abstraction, and secondly, how recent developments within abstraction offer two different possibilities for repetition. The importance of the first question, Benjamin says, is that far from abstraction being dead or obsolescent, the “reinterpretation of what could tentatively be described as the founding paintings within abstraction would not only free them from the stultifying conventions of art history, but it would also allow them to be used in arguments concerning the nature and the politics of interpretation”(1996,p.39). Benjamin then insists on a rejection of the pre-given divisions of interpretation that mark the traditions of abstraction, by re-configuring the interpretive task. He reasons that once the contemporary work is given an ontological description it “locates (the work) in the continuity of its being given - thus re-given - for interpretation, stilling the movement, although part of the process of interpretation, cannot still the continuity of the work’s own becoming”(1996,p.40). For Benjamin then, what endures is the continuity of the art work re-configured as the becoming object.

But Benjamin complicates his thesis by having doubts and breaking down his claim for the continuity of interpretation:

From the moment the work is taken as necessarily incomplete then the possibility of a founding criterion for judgment - the work itself - vanishes. Judgment will have become both uncertain and essential. The limits of the aspiration to present a total history and the necessity for the continuity of intervention make pursuing a systematic reinterpretation of abstraction’s history inappropriate in this context (1996,p.40).

Consequently, Benjamin decides to abandon the notion of the inescapability of the project of reinterpretation, by favoring the other side of repetition. This other move, he says, already allows for abstraction’s own repetition as reinterpretation, by locating it within the work as part of the *work* of painting; “a repetition marked by the twofold movement of engagement with the



genre and the affirmation of the centrality of production”(1996,p.40). Central to this premise is time, and Benjamin argues that far from legitimizing historical time as a pre-given certainty - and also understanding abstraction as a self-critical (Greenbergian) operation which resists the imposition of unity - that there is more than one *time* in reinterpretation. Although the “connection between abstraction and the modern still holds even with the re-description of abstraction”(1996,p.40), what continues to define the realm of abstraction is the way in which it sticks “to the question of art and therefore with the continuity of self-definition”(1996,p.40). Chance, risk and interpretation become linked to the *process of interpretive time*, and it is this temporality which informs the relationship between painting and historical time.

For Benjamin, the *process of interpretive time* means that “the specific site of intervention is taken as that which has to be repeated”(1996,p.41) which precludes any utopian gesture that attempts absolute definition. Also, Benjamin observes, that the *process of interpretive time* renders apparent the unquestioning lack of the continuity of self-definition of “those repetitions that simply mime or act out the genre’s presence; in sum the repetition of the same”(1996,p.41). Chance and risk, if they are to be allowed the *process of interpretive time*, “involves a staging of the centrality of art’s work as part of its work”(1996,p.41), whilst simultaneously acknowledging that art’s production is bound into the continuity of experimentation.

#### *(iv) The Re-Configuration of Painting’s Surface in the Contemporary*

Prior to Benjamin’s descriptions of artists such as Fabian Marcaccio and Jonathan Lasker, who he sees as claiming the territory of the continuity of experimentation through the process of repeated interpretive time, he discusses the relations between Greenberg’s conception of modernist painting as flat surface, and the *surface* as re-configured in the contemporary. This re-configuration of surface is crucial if we are to understand later, in this and the next Chapter, not only abstract painting in the contemporary, but also as way of introducing the embodied ontological style of the painter in the digital.

Benjamin says that “once the link between flatness and immediacy is severed a concern for the surface does not vanish”(1996,p.42) because its re-introduction is now an “open space without a single and unified texture”(1996,p.42). For Benjamin this Greenbergian/contemporary contradiction means that the interplay between flatness and immediacy, brought about initially by the modernist painter as an instant and physical application of paint, is maintained as abstraction, but only as “a painted recognition of the impossibility of that immediacy”(1996,p.42). Benjamin does not mean this as a lament or mourning for the historical passing of abstract art’s self-critical tendencies, instead he advocates an “interplay between a holding - the retention of the genre - and an opening out”(1996,p.42) as an affirmative possibility. This affirmation demonstrates a criticality which asks that the work of painting maintains a *complexity* through the “work of the surface as the site of activity”(1996,p.42), and this is painting’s ontology.

The ontology of painting will be examined in more detail in the next section but from the perspective of Merleau-Ponty's essay 'Eye and Mind' as a way of determining how we can interpret embodiment in relation to looking and making paintings, or rather, the painter's act of painting paintings. So for the time being, enough of a re-determining of aesthetics, which, so far, we have contemplated in terms of the relation of the historical conventions of the genre of abstract painting with its re-configuration as a painted recognition of the impossibility of at 'once-ness', so that we may consider the philosophical/ontological as a relation. This will be done in order that we gain an insight into a Merleau-Pontyan *overlapping* of the painter's interior sense of self with the world of external objects, which determines his/her personal *style*, so that we may ask the bigger question; What does it *mean* to paint in the Hypersurface of the digital?

## Merleau-Ponty: Eye and Mind

Merleau-Ponty's major text on painting 'Eye and Mind' was written toward the end of his career. According to Galen A. Johnson in the compilation *Merleau-Ponty an Aesthetic Reader*, it is a study of painting as a renewed inspiration for philosophical work, in this case for developing a new metaphysics... Merleau-Ponty wrote, and his essay undertakes a study of modern painting in order to develop his philosophy beyond phenomenology and beyond structuralism toward a new post-Cartesian ontology of visibility and invisibility (1993,p.35).

By being critical of both scientific operationalism and Cartesian ontology Merleau-Ponty develops a *new* ontology for painting by thinking about painting's use of colour, depth and line as an *overlapping* or reversibility of the painter's intentions - these intentions being made visible as a mirror vision of the world onto the *self as being* and *being as self*.

Studying Merleau-Ponty here will make clearer the re-presentation of David Pagel's statement that hybridizes "High Modernism's embodied effects of aesthetics with Pop Art's mechanical reproduction" (1998,p.27), as an *overlapping* of Greenberg's *purity* of the medium, its bodily application, and the disembodied *gaze* of reproduced signs.

In order to think about contemporary painting in relation to 'Eye and Mind' it is worth revisiting, as a comparison, Clement Greenberg's modernist essay 'Abstract and Representational' which was written in 1954 just six years earlier. In this essay Greenberg discusses abstract painting's relation as a visual language with spatial order; that the modernist painting whilst bereft of old master pictorial illusionism, still *alludes* to the viewer viewing in a space outside the picture plane by thinking of the painting both visibly and as an object in the same space. This, Greenberg claims, is because human beings possess a familiarity with *objects in the world* through their bodily relation to classicist sculpture. "The (modernist) picture has now become

an object of literally the same spatial order as our bodies, and no longer the vehicle of an imagined equivalent of that order. It has lost its 'inside' and become almost all 'outside' all plane surface"(1954,p.191). In Greenberg's modernism, the viewer can no longer metaphorically *escape into* old master pictorial illusion because the viewing itself is done through the self-consciousness of the eyes as a vehicle of the body; viewing and returning both the gaze onto the painting as an object in sculptural space. This in turn concentrates the viewer toward the optical or the relation of a paintings colour, shape, and line that are divorced from descriptive connotations so that the eye is returned to the self-consciousness of its position *outside* the painting, whilst simultaneously judging the painting as a continuous centre of interest, both visually and bodily, as an all-over unity to the exclusion of everything else.

Greenberg's description is I feel, only a partial account of the relation between the body and the object/painting and that which is being represented. Greenberg's account, although helpful as an introduction to the idea of the *phenomenology* of the painter painting and the viewer viewing, is flawed because as Andrew Benjamin argues, "from within Greenberg's perspective there would not be anything incompatible between an argument for the priority of the literal and abstraction (or modernist painting). Abstract works would be literally what they are"(1996,p.29). Or, as Greenberg himself says, "the picture plane as a whole imitates visual experience as a whole, the picture plane as a total object represents space as a total object"(1949,p.173).

Therefore, *through* Merleau-Ponty, I hope to discover both the phenomenological links of painting as *being in the world* and the particular or peculiar means with which a painter negotiates his/her sense of self in the act of seeing, through making, in the contemporary. This will also necessitate referencing two secondary sources from contemporary texts about Merleau-Ponty (Alphonse de Waelhens', 'Merleau-Ponty: Philosopher of Painting', and Galen A. Johnson's, 'Ontology and Painting; Eye and Mind'), since these contemporary readings will help to develop our understanding of embodiment in relation to the digital.

### *(i) A Critique of Scientific Operationalism*

*Eye and Mind*, although written in 1960, interestingly shares certain ontological premises with other postmodern philosophies of the *self* such as Jean Francois Lyotard's, *Postmodern Condition*, where in the Chapter, 'The Nature of the Social Bond: The Postmodern Perspective', Lyotard describes the *self* as not being an island, as had previously been believed in the grand narratives of the enlightenment, but on the contrary, that "each (*self*) exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before... one is always located at a post through which various kinds of messages pass"(1979,p.15). We need to bear Lyotard's quote in mind as I explore Merleau-Ponty's ontological claims for the painter painting, because Lyotard is one of a number of postmodern philosophers that Galen A. Johnson (presumably) describes as *reflecting* Merleau-Ponty's decentering away from the authority of the subject which impresses upon the *reversibility* of the painter's intentions.

'Eye and Mind' was written at the height of American and European Abstract painting, and is loosely based around the work of Paul Klee and to a lesser extent Giacometti and Robert Delaunay. However, my hunch is that Merleau-Ponty's desire *to go beyond* phenomenology and structuralism as a reflection of the *self as being* - both in terms of seeing the world as much as being seen by it - may not only provide a structure with which to contextualize contemporary painting, but more importantly to construct an understanding of; (i) The act of (my) painting, (ii) The impulses and desires that situates painting uniquely as an artform through the bodily use of the medium, (iii) The overlapping relations of colour, form and line, (iv) The use of popular imagery in relation to abstraction, (v) The use of contemporary mediums, and finally, (vi) Painting as a multi-layered activity that both physically and metaphorically represents the chasm or gaps between the eye, the body, and the mind as determining functions in the world of objects.

I want to avoid simply reflecting on Merleau-Ponty's texts on painting by adopting a 1960s critical conception of abstract painting, and, similar to my previous reviewing of Greenberg's major texts, I hope to articulate the relevance of painting as an act of bodily movement in the world of objects *in relation to* the digital. I want to argue that that the digitalized form of spectacular simulation does not interrupt the classicist understanding of bodily space as Jean Baudrillard says, but rather, *overlaps* the gaze, the mind, and the body, *with the disembodiment* of the simulacral when reflecting on *the act* of painting. This *overlapping* of the embodied with the disembodied is central to the rest of the thesis and will be developed throughout this Chapter, Chapter Four, and also the Conclusion.

'Eye and Mind' is a complex text. To do it justice and also to demonstrate its importance to understanding the relations between the painting, the painter's body, the painter's intentions in and because of the world of objects, a lot of flat recounting of this text will take place over the next seven pages or so. This is done to more readily set up Merleau-Ponty's notion of *overlapping* with Andrew Benjamin's staged becoming of the yet-to-be-resolved object/painting. This will in turn lead up to a further *overlapping* with Stephen Perrella's digital interpretation of architectural Hypersurface.

'Eye and Mind' is divided into five parts, and it opens with a critique of scientific operations or the deterministic presumption of testing out and recording pre-determined data to develop a new theory based on *facts*. Science "operates within its own realm, it makes its constructs of things; operating upon these indices or variables to effect whatever transformations are permitted by their definition"(1960,p.121). To *think* in scientific thought requires that when a model of a *worked-up* theory has been devised it is then used as the *basis* for a number of other models elsewhere. Merleau-Ponty warns that this notion of experimental control, which is based on the notion of thinking as a system of testing-out in order-to-transform, means that

“to say that the world is, by nominal definition, the object *x* of our operations is to treat the scientist’s knowledge as if it were absolute, as if everything that is and has been was meant only to enter the laboratory”(1960,p.122). Merleau-Ponty further argues that science needs to re-think the *objective*, or *at-a-distance*, to return their definitions to a position of the *there is* - that the physical body that determines systems of scientific data is not looked upon as from above as an information machine, but that the “body is what I call mine, this sentinel standing quietly at the command of my words and acts”(1960,p.122).

If scientific thinking fails to acknowledge, for all its systematic flexibility, that like the body it is itself a “construction based on a brute, existent world”(1960,p.122), its opaqueness will adamantly ignore coming face-to-face with the *real world* to which it purportedly defines. For Merleau-Ponty it is art and only art, especially painting, that “draws from the fabric of brute meaning which operationalism would prefer to ignore”(1960,p.123). It is the painter that, often in full innocence, looks at the world of *brute meaning* without being obliged to appraise or give operational value to what he sees.

On first reading, this statement appears as concurrent with certain modernist perceptions of painting prevalent in 1960 (such as Greenberg’s ‘Modernist Painting’); “the Modernists were, and remain, personal before anything else”(1960,p.91). This could suggest an unproblematic phenomenological response to the world of objects in which those objects are perceived in their *true* or *pure essence*. But it is worth pursuing Merleau-Ponty’s line of enquiry because of the emphasis he places on the relations between phenomenology and the actions and decisions made by the body’s interdependence with the gaze when making (or feeling) meaning in the act of painting, which, Merleau-Ponty claims, runs counter to the limited logic of the systems of scientific operationalism.

### *(ii) The Overlapping of the Thinking and Seeing Body with the World of Objects*

Part Two of ‘Eye and Mind’ sees Merleau-Ponty discuss his key notion of *overlapping*, a notion which attempts to explain how a painter’s body sees and thinks *in painting* and how the body functions as an intertwining of thought, vision and movement; “Everything I see is on principle within my reach, at least within reach of my sight, and is marked upon the map of the ‘I can’’. Each of the two maps is complete. The visible world and the world of my motor projects are both total parts of the same Being”(1960,p.124). Merleau-Ponty argues that this *overlapping* “forbids us to conceive of vision as an operation of thought that would set up before the mind a picture or a representation of the world, a world of immanence and of ideality”(1960,p.124). It is as if *being in* the world means that the body (parts of which are visible to itself and wholly to others), is simply immersed within the world. This immersion takes place through vision since “the seer does not appropriate what he sees; he merely approaches it by looking, he opens onto the world”(1960,p.124), and also, at the same time, by using the motion of his/her body:

My movement is not a decision made by the mind, an absolute doing which would decree, from the depths of a subjective retreat, some change of place miraculously executed in extended space. It is the natural sequel to, and maturation of vision. I say of a thing that it is moved; but my body moves itself; my movement is self-moved. It is not ignorance of self, blind to itself; it radiates from a self... (1960,p.124).

Looking or vision, for me, is the prime motivating force for all bodily function which is then engaged as thought, and this sense of *self as seeing* in the world understands this simultaneously with reference to other bodies who also see. Consequently, the recognition of *others* helps articulate the sense of the body which *is mine*; my body is caught in the fabric of the world of objects which Merleau-Ponty calls the “the undividedness of the sensing and the sensed”(1960,p.125). He adds, “that which looks at all things can also look at itself and recognize, in what it sees, the ‘other side’ of its power of looking. It sees itself seeing; it touches itself touching; it is visible and sensitive for itself”(1960,p.124).

This apparent paradox of a visible and mobile body amongst things disrupts the rationality of prefigured, operational thought because

it is a self, not by transparency, like thought, which never thinks anything except by assimilating it, constituting it, transforming it into thought - but a self by confusion, narcissism, inherence of the see-er in the seen, the toucher in the touched, the feeler in the felt - a self, then, that is caught up in things, having a front and a back, a past and a future (1960,p.124).

Merleau-Ponty's extraordinary poetic description here marks out the pattern for the rest of the essay as he attempts to relate the phenomenological notion of the *visible body in the world* to painting. Merleau-Ponty suggests that the *secret visibility* within the body is in fact due to things-in-the-world having an internal equivalent - that through the act of *seeing*, things are transformed through the body which *I call mine* as a carnal formula of their presence - they are re-inscribed (or re-rendered visible again) through bodily function, and it is this *internal equivalent* that is demonstrated when a painter paints. “Since things and my body are made of the same stuff, vision must somehow come about in them; or yet again, their manifest visibility must be repeated in the body by a secret visibility. ‘Nature is on the inside’, says Cezanne”(1960,p.125).

Here though, Merleau-Ponty stumbles upon the problem of how a visual image is actually constituted or drawn-up from the *imaginary* through its *bodily* re-presentation. He dismisses the classicist idea that a drawing is a direct tracing or copy of an object which represents that object as if it were a second copy of itself. Merleau-Ponty argues instead that painting is not a question of an actor's mimicry, but that the construction and perception of a painting relies upon the *imaginary relation* to the actual which is filtered through the body *I call mine* as a *diagram*:

the imaginary is much farther away from the actual because the painting is an analogue or likeness only according to the body; because it does not offer the mind an occasion to rethink the constitutive relations of things, but rather it offers the *gaze* traces of vision, from the inside, in order that it may espouse them; it gives vision that which clothes it within, the imaginary texture of the real (1960,p.126).

These imaginary textures as ciphers of the visible are only apparent for the gaze by the physicality of the medium which is manifested by the traces of the hand. And these ciphers as traces (through the body) are integral to a painter's selfhood.

### *(iii) The Bodily-Imaginative Production as a Mirror of the World of Objects*

For Merleau-Ponty, painting is thus a simultaneous mirror of the world of objects manifested through a *bodily-imaginative production* which does not constitute a system of operational rules as with science. It is not a question of a painter learning by rote the secret of mirroring the ciphers of the visible, but a process of trial and error from a starting point of invention, or a series of questions that are not known in advance and which are addressed to what is being thought and felt within the painter. In turn, the painter makes his project *seen within himself/herself* from "actions most proper to him - those gestures, those tracings of which he alone is capable and which will be revelations to others because they do not lack what he lacks, to him they seem to emanate from the things themselves"(1960,p.129). Later in Chapter Four, I will locate the *imaginary texture of the real* as a relational overlapping with Stephen Perrella's Hypersurface as factors in the construction and motivation for contemporary painting.

But in the meantime, Merleau-Ponty says that the painter's relation to himself *being in and of the world* demonstrates a mirror image which "anticipates, within things, the labour of vision...*between* the seeing and the visible body"(1960,p.129). Merleau-Ponty suggests that the mirror allows the visible see-er to translate and reproduce a reflexivity of the world; "in it my externality becomes complete"(1960,p.129). In the mirror, the see-er recognizes himself (herself) as others do whilst at the same time projecting his internalized diagram of the world onto both himself and others, converting "things into spectacle, spectacle into things, myself into another, and another into myself"(1960,p.130). For Merleau-Ponty, the mirror's extraordinary imitative habit of *reproducing*, or rather extending and making more complex the see-er's understanding of his/her reflexivity, becomes a means of disrupting scientific operationalism. "Essence and existence, imaginary and real, visible and invisible - painting scrambles all our categories, spreading out before us its oneiric universe of carnal essences, actualised resemblances, mute meanings"(1960,p.130).

In order to demonstrate the historical rootedness of scientific operationalism in relation to vision, Merleau-Ponty then turns his attention in Part Three of 'Eye and Mind' onto the operationalism of philosophy, and in particular, Descartes's *Dioptrics*. This operationalism, he argues,

relegates vision to a stage that is subordinate to the authoritative brevity of thought, warning us that the *Dioptrics* is an unequivocal, hegemonic, rationalised attempt to brush aside the *overlapping* and slippage of perception provided by visions relation to the body as being within itself. Merleau-Ponty argues that whilst being seen by others to be itself, the *Dioptrics* operationalism

...is the breviary of a thought that wants no longer to abide in the visible and so decides to reconstruct it according to a model-in-thought. It is worthwhile to remember this attempt and its failure. Here there is no concern to cling to vision. The problem is to know 'how it happens', but only enough to invent, whenever the need arises, certain 'artificial organs' which correct it (1960,pp.130-131).

For Descartes, the light which enters our eyes and regulates our vision is reliant on comparisons through thought to explain its properties as *known* as opposed to seen. Merleau-Ponty claims that these *known* properties of light, which are then able to be utilized by science as a *system of knowns*, is understood as an action by "contact - not unlike the action of things upon the blind man's cane. The blind, says Descartes, 'see with their hands'. The Cartesian model of vision is modelled after the sense of touch"(1960,p.131). This Cartesian model of vision, which is based on touch, demonstrates a one-way traffic in sensual perception; it eliminates action at a distance relieving us of the body's understanding of vision as omnipresent or within the reach of the body that *I call mine*. Merleau-Ponty challenges the sense of touch which denies *unreal duplications* of things with the mirror image or reflection as a thing in itself.

These unreal duplications are a class of things; they are real effects like a ball bouncing back. If the reflection resembles the thing itself, it is because this reflection acts upon the eyes more or less as a thing would. It deceives the eye by engendering a perception which has no object (1960,p.131).

This *deceit* of the *real thing* however, does not affect our conception of the object.

In the world there is the thing itself, and outside this thing itself there is that other thing which is only reflected light rays and which happens to have an ordered correspondence with the real thing: there are two individuals, then, bound together externally by causality (1960,p.131).

But the resemblance of the thing and its mirror image for the Cartesian mind is an external denomination belonging to thought which becomes an unequivocal relationship of projection. The Cartesian mind does not see him/herself in the mirror, "he sees a puppet, an 'outside', which, he has every reason to believe, other people see in the same way, but which is no more for himself than for others a body in the flesh"(1960,p.131).

Merleau-Ponty then rapidly jumps to a description of etching and then to painting. It is here that he really takes off into a descriptive critique of firstly, the Cartesian mind as refusing to accept



that the flattening of an inked image onto a plane surface is a cipher of vision, secondly, that the inked image is an icon whose representation is summoned up by the unequivocal means for forming an idea of the thing that does not come from the icon itself, and thirdly, that painting provides through colour an anti-Cartesian view enabling the painter to present mood or feeling as *conceptless* representations of the world. On the basis of this critique, Merleau-Ponty proposes that painting for the Cartesian mind “is not a central operation contributing to the definition of our access to Being; it is a mode or a variant of thinking, where thinking is canonically defined as intellectual possession and self-evidence”(1960,p.132).

I would argue that the Cartesian view sees colour as mere ornament that the power in painting for the Cartesian lies in drawing which is understood as intellectual self-possession. Colour in painting is understood as an artifice that is only *similar* to the projection of the world of things, and therefore, not an extension of self-possessed thought. Merleau-Ponty says that drawing’s power “rests upon the ordered relationship between it and objective space established by perspectival projection”(1960,p.133). Drawing, in this (Cartesian) sense, makes painting possible but only as an extended representation of the world of existing things.

So far, Merleau-Ponty has distinguished the difference for the Cartesian mind between perspectival drawing as an extension of self-possessed vision, and painting as a simulacrum of that extension. Merleau-Ponty then turns to Cartesian *depth* as an extension of the self-possessed subject, describing it as a third dimension which is derived from the other two dimensions; dimension one being the flat picture as a thing, and dimension two the contrivance of the world of objects through perspective. Merleau-Ponty suggests a paradox within this third dimension claiming that although objects are seemingly hidden from each other when *seen*, depth “is not visible, since it is reckoned from our bodies to things, and we are (as Cartesians) confined to our bodies... I do not really see depth or, if I do, it is only another *size*”(1960,p.133).

Cartesian depth in a painting is then an illusion produced on a flat thing, and *becomes* the third dimension - the Renaissance window onto space. This windowed space is *within itself*, it is *to be in itself*. It is where objects are ordered according to the presence of the *thinking body* which is *seeing*. “The proof of this is that I can see depth in a painting which everyone agrees has none and which organizes for me an illusion of an illusion”(1960,p.134). Cartesian space then, is without hiding places, and gives an identity to *being*; “Every point of space is, and is thought as being, right where it is - one here, another there; space is the self-evidence of the ‘where’. Orientation, polarity, envelopment are, in space derived phenomena linked to my presence” (1960,p.134). For the Cartesian mind vision does not exist before thought.

Merleau-Ponty criticizes Cartesian depth in painting as extending vision from the body from *only* one angle; through thought, seeing “things encroach upon one another *because they are outside one another*”(1960,p.134), but simultaneously, he argues, that it is a useful starting point

providing that it is not empirically dominated by elevating “certain properties of beings into a structure of Being”(1960,p.134). Merleau-Ponty claims by contrast that *Being* itself needs to be re-thought (as thought) as a multiple *overlapping* of Cartesian space, an ontological overlapped reversal that

understands that space does not have precisely three dimensions... that dimensions are taken by different systems of measurement from a single dimensionality, a polymorphous Being, which justifies all of them without being fully expressed by any (1960, p.134).

There is also a subtle difference between the *thought of seeing* in retrospect, and the *vision in act* in the here and now, which Cartesian philosophy does not do away with - both aspects being *thought* united with a *body*. But for Merleau-Ponty, this still does not entirely explain the *idea* as lived from the *inside* of the conscious body. He argues against the *Dioptrics* that space is a network of relations between objects, and that it is not witnessed and reconstructed from outside the seeing body, it is rather, “a space reckoned starting from me as the null point or degree zero of spatiality. I do not see according to its exterior envelope; I live it from the inside; I am immersed in it. After all, the world is around me, not in front of me” (1960,p.138).

#### *(iv) Depth, Space and Colour as Reversibility*

Part Three of ‘Eye and Mind’, concludes with Merleau-Ponty asking us to consider the inter relations between depth and light, not for the mind to cut them off from the body, but for depth and light to be suffused *through* the body since they are elements which both pass through and surround us. And it is in Part Four that Merleau-Ponty gives free rein to this philosophy, which he suggests, animates the painter, “not when he expresses opinions about the world but in that instant when his vision becomes gesture, when, in Cezanne’s words, he *thinks in painting*” (1960,pp.138-139).

Merleau-Ponty finally decides on how depth is to be interpreted before he more fully discusses the relationship of colour in painting. He says that once we accept that there is a bond between things in the world - that because each thing is in its own place whilst simultaneously eclipsing each other, in their exteriority, they are known (to me) through both their envelopment *and* their mutual dependency in their autonomy. This paradoxical relationship can no longer be called a third dimension, but rather the reversibility of the measurement of dimensions, as conceivably the first dimension. This about-turn of depth becomes possible because “everything is in the same place at the same time, a locality from which height, width, and depth are abstracted, a voluminosity we express in a word when we say that a thing is there”(1960,p.140). Merleau-Ponty then relates this paradoxical *reversibility* to cubism, claiming that the external form or envelope is secondary and derived from the projection of thought through the measurements of perspective, that cubism shatters Renaissance perspective to reveal form from *within*. “Thus we must seek space and its content *together*”(1960,p.140).

Space and content together are, according to Merleau-Ponty, best represented through colour. Colour is unstable when determining space from an internal law of construction, it is not bound solely by distance, line, and form; “the question is not of colours, ‘simulacra of the colours of nature’, the question, rather, concerns the dimension of colour, that dimension which creates-from itself to itself-identities, differences, a texture, a materiality, a something”(1960,p.141). Merleau-Ponty’s metaphysical description of colour as *a something* that resembles, but is not intended as a simulacra of things in the world, finds him claiming that colour gets to “the heart of things, but this heart is beyond the colour envelope just as it is beyond the space envelope”(1960,p.141). For Merleau-Ponty, there is no key with which to universalize colour as the Cartesian mind would have us wish.

Depth, space and colour become paramount in the organization of painting as an ontological reversibility called *overlapping* and these constituents are made manifest by the inter-relations of vision, thought, and the body of the painter;

The painter’s vision is not a view upon the *outside*, a merely ‘physical-optical’ relation with the world. The world no longer stands before him through representation; rather, it is the painter to whom the things of the world give birth by a sort of concentration or coming-to-itself of the visible. Ultimately the painting relates to nothing at all among experienced things unless it is first of all ‘autofigurative’ (1960,p.141).

Merleau-Ponty also talks of *overlapping* as a prerequisite for *modern painting*, not as choosing between the arguments of line or colour, nor between figurative depiction and the creation of signs (abstraction), but that the effort of *modern painting* “has been toward multiplying the systems of equivalences, toward severing the adherence to the envelope of things”(1960,p.142). He goes on to suggest that this *effort* may require the creation of new materials or a new expression, but more interestingly, he suggests that new or fresh means of expression can be achieved by the re-examination and re-use of materials at hand.

In many ways for me, it is hard to divorce Merleau-Ponty’s readings from the prevailing modernism in painting at the time (which includes the many references to the painter as a he), and consequently, it makes re-writing about those readings problematic as Merleau-Ponty had no idea of the deconstructive developments that would take place in painting throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Merleau-Ponty’s *poetic* use of language appears rather wistful today, but it is worth pursuing his line of enquiry because firstly, there are shortcomings to the cynical irony of postmodernism that I covered in the Postmodern section of this thesis, and secondly, as a consequence to these shortcomings, to understand more fully what the notion of *overlapping of being* means to painting. Merleau-Ponty claims that painting is the only artform which calls this phenomenological question into being, as for him, painting uniquely understands the value of

the relationship between the body that *I call mine*, and a projection of that experience through physical means, to represent the paradox of *being through vision in the world*.

But, I would ask, what of contemporary painting in relation to this notion of 'overlapping'? Can Stephen Perrella's architectural "mutation of form, structure, context and programme into interwoven patterns and complex dynamics"(1998,p.11) be re-integrated with Merleau-Ponty's *overlapping* to provide a re-contextualisation of Greenberg's economy of completion for the reductive picture plane, whose seeing subject assumes that there is "a unified singular entity which in a single moment confronts a work that is given in its absolute simplicity"(Greenberg,cited,Benjamin,1996,p.27)? Or, more to the point, is Andrew Benjamin's claim that painting should be read *through* the "work of the surface as the site of activity"(1996,p.42) a key link with Hypersurface as an ontological positioning? Can the positioning of the subject (according to Benjamin) be traversed by a number of "irreducible determinations such that the subject comes to be at any one moment an effect of these determinations"(1996,p.28), both in the act of making (on a surface) and viewing? More of these questions in Chapter Four, but in the meantime, in 'Eye and Mind', it is from here that Merleau-Ponty's concept of *overlapping* attempts an ontological relation with the *being* of painting.

#### (v) *Painting Practice as Auto-Figurative*

Part Five sees Merleau-Ponty explain *overlapping* as a cumulative *auto-figurative* inherence of the see-er in the seen, a sort of narcissistic effect of the painter's practice as itself. He argues that there are no separated distinct problems in painting concerning depth, colour, form, line, movement, contour, or physiognomy, and that these constituents are not opposed or partial solutions. Painters, he argues, can use some or all of these things at the same time as there is neither cumulative progress or irretrievable options.

Just when he has reached proficiency in some area, he finds that he has reopened another one where everything he said before must be said again in a different way. Thus what he has found he does not yet have. It remains to be sought out; the discovery itself calls forth still further quests (1960,p.148).

This discovery of what the painter *does not yet have* does not mean that he/she does not know what he/she wants, but that what he/she wants is on the other side of his/her immediate means and goals. Merleau-Ponty understands this *not yet having* as the highest point of reason stating that the goal of all philosophy is to ask the simple question; "*is that all there is to it?*" (1960,p.149). But Merleau-Ponty observes, in some senses, that this question is an irrelevant one, because it stems from the disappointment of a spurious fantasy of scientific operationalism's claim to test out the *there is* of data; it "claims for itself a positivity capable of making up for its own emptiness"(1960,p.149). Therefore, Merleau-Ponty's *not yet having* becomes a reversal of the highest point of philosophical reason precisely because it *denies* scientific operationalism by shifting between the see-er and the seen through vision, thought,

and body. The painter who *does not yet have* transforms *Being* by becoming *that which never fully is* and which he/she understands through making.

## Colour, Depth, Style, and Flesh as 'Overlapping': Secondary Readings of 'Eye and Mind'

In this next section, I will begin to map-out the full implications of the *overlapping of being* as a means of addressing how firstly, Greenberg's notions around optical/visual flatness can be accessed as a result of *overlapping*, and secondly, to understand *overlapping* in relation to the digital so that painting can judge itself as an aesthetic phenomenology prior to our understanding of painting in the disembodied digital.

To begin, I will discuss two major, recent texts on Merleau-Ponty's 'Eye and Mind' both published in 1993 in the Merleau-Ponty *Aesthetics Reader*. The first is Galen A. Johnson's, 'Ontology and Painting: Eye and Mind', and the second is Alphonse Waelhens', 'Merleau-Ponty: Philosopher of Painting'. Because of both the enigmatic and poetic nature of 'Eye and Mind' along with the fact that Merleau-Ponty never fully explained or followed up his ideas on painting, the reviewing of these texts is intended to explore further, and in more detail, Merleau-Ponty's understanding of painting as *reversibility and overlapping*. Later in this Chapter, I will also introduce *reversibility and overlapping* through Johnson's 'emigration of the painter's body which is encrusted in (its own) *flesh* as both an envelopment and a distance' of and for the body. This reviewing will extend the tools made available by 'Eye and Mind' to re-integrate the *bodily and fleshy*, which I will argue, are as much a part of contemporary painting's desire to adapt *appearances* or *signs* from the digital. These issues will later lead onto Merleau-Ponty's interests in *style, depth and colour*.

To introduce Merleau-Ponty's *overlapping* to the digital (in particular, through Ian Burkitt's, 'Modernity, Self, Embodiment, Technology and Motion') in Chapter Four, I will attempt a phenomenological reading of Jean Baudrillard's *On Seduction* (based on 'Eye and Mind') to determine on the one hand where the two essays respective interests *and* limitations lie in relation to each other, and, on the other hand, whether it is possible to cross-over these two contrasting philosophies when interpreting contemporary painting as the *embodied effect of aesthetics*. Could, for example, Jean Baudrillard's *unfleshy signs* be *fleshed-up*? Or is Baudrillard critiquing the use of the phenomenological in relation to both painting and the simulacral?

Toward the end of this Chapter and crossing-over into the next I will set up an argument for a phenomenological aesthetics/aesthetic phenomenology. Instead of simply affirming Hal Foster's postmodernism, or more recently Pagel's historicist, post-dualistic understanding of *apposition* as a re-interpretation of High Modernism with Pop, I will argue that painting is a

participant in, or product of, a continuing ontological de-centering away from the subject that is reflected by the re-configuration of aesthetics and its reception in the digital. Merleau-Ponty's *hyperreflection* will be re-thought *through* the physical/material act of making as a philosophical implication for picturing in relation to the digital *and* the simulacral.

## Galen A. Johnson: Ontology and Painting

Because, as I have already stated, 'Eye and Mind' is a complex text, once again I will descriptively review Johnson's and Waelhen's account of it in order to demonstrate its importance between the relations of painting, the painter's body, and the painters intentions in/because of the world of objects.

Johnson begins his text with a chronology, or itinerary of Merleau-Ponty's development which culminated with 'Eye and Mind'. For Johnson, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological essay *Indirect Language* which argued that "if every statement is incomplete and every expression is situated upon a silent tacit comprehension, then it must be that 'things are said and thought by a Speech and a Thought which we do not have but which has us'(1993,p.37). This suggests by extension that the "visible world appears in union with an invisibility that is the outline and depth of the visible"(1993,p.37). For Merleau-Ponty this union is bridged by the visual language of colour. Johnson states that this *intertwining* between the visible and in-the-visible, through colour, sees Merleau-Ponty at odds with the modern philosophical tradition from Descartes to Sartre which opposes being to nothingness, so Johnson sets about discussing Merleau-Ponty's belief "that the invisible depth and richness of the visible had been better approached through the colours of painters than through philosophy"(1993,p.37).

Johnson then explores Merleau-Ponty's next text 'The Visible and the Invisible', which traces the roots of Merleau-Ponty's development of his new ontology of the *hidden depths* that are indexed within colour, in this instance a red, or rather a

certain precise colour red (which) is bound up with a woolly, metallic, or porous texture and is already a variant or difference in its relations with the other reds and the other colours in its surroundings. As a concretion of visibility, it is also an opening to a fabric of invisibility (1993,p.38).

Johnson then elaborates by paraphrasing Merleau-Ponty's description of red objects in the world as punctuations in the field of red things, (tiles on roof tops, the terrains near Aix or in Madagascar, the flags of the revolution, the red garments worn by bishops and professors etc.), stating that "a visible thing is not a chunk of absolutely hard being that stops our vision, but a fossil drawn up from the depths of imaginary worlds"(1993,p.38), it is, Johnson says, a crystallization of visibility that is subjected through and toward unseen possibilities and latent

reflections - it represents the union between the visible and the invisible - the conjoining of thought and the visual.

Merleau-Ponty's reference to the *depths of imaginary worlds* in 'The Visible and the Invisible' is developed in counter-distinction to Heidegger's and later Sartre's account of the visible and the imaginary, which argued (in particular reference to an artwork) that it is a unique mix of both the thing and its sign. Johnson describes this mix of both the thing and its sign (through Heidegger's notion) that seeks to re-present, or squeeze an historical world into an artwork, "in the way that Van Gogh's painting of peasant shoes gathers the entire world of the peasant or a Greek temple gathers the entire world of ancient Greek culture and religion"(1993,p.39). Similarly, Johnson says, reflecting Merleau-Ponty's argument in 'Eye and Mind' discussed above, that "Italian Renaissance perspective painting and drawing is the visible sign of a world of scientific and technical domination"(1993,p.39), it is at the service of these dominant tropes.

By contrast Johnson argues, Merleau-Ponty thought of painting as a way of entering into the slippage or *overlapping* of the world of the palpating life of things, that there "are visibles through which appear invisibles"(1993,p.39). For Merleau-Ponty, it was incorrect to establish a *unique mix of thing and sign* as a generalised representation, and that it was also a mistake to collapse the distinct expressions of painting, speech, dialogue and writing. Painting then, could offer a unique form of representation the consequences being that a reflexive operation could be set up between the visual and the imaginary - between the overlapping of the eye and the mind and that its components could be assembled through colour, line and form.

Although 'Eye and Mind' does not distinguish between the figurative and the nonfigurative, an argument that Merleau-Ponty says is "is badly posed;... no grape was ever what it is in the most figurative painting and no painting, no matter how abstract, can get away from Being"(Merleau-Ponty cited Johnson,1993,p.40), Johnson recognizes Merleau-Ponty's increasing interest in abstract painting. When Merleau-Ponty published 'Eye and Mind',

he selected several reproductions of artworks for inclusion with the written text. These include oil paintings by Paul Klee and Nicholas de Stael, a watercolour by Cezanne, drawings by Giacometti and Matisse, and sculptures by Rodin and Germaine Richier (1993,p.39).

Later Johnson observes that Merleau-Ponty's "painting selections indicate the progress of his interest in painting toward more abstract forms of expression in which the integrity of the canvas as a two-dimensional surface is more prominent"(1993,p.40). If we compare this with Greenberg's assertion for modernist art that after Cezanne "it was the stressing of the ineluctable flatness of the surface that remained (for abstraction), however, more fundamental than anything else to the process by which pictorial art criticized and defined itself under

modernism. For flatness alone was unique and exclusive to pictorial art”(1960p.87), we can understand Merleau-Ponty’s shift that Johnson is suggesting.

However, Merleau-Ponty’s ‘Cezanne’s Doubt’ which was written six years earlier than ‘Eye and Mind’, allows Johnson to trace Merleau-Ponty’s burgeoning interests in painting as a vehicle with which to express his ontological concerns of *overlapping*, between the visible and the invisible lining of the visible, that seeks not to collapse distinct expressions such as painting or speech into the *unique mix of thing and the sign*.

## Cezanne’s Watercolours

Johnson points to Merleau-Ponty’s choice of *representing the presence* of Cezanne in relation to the painter’s watercolours of Mont Sainte-Victoire from 1900 (illustration 32). Johnson describes Cezanne’s watercolours as revealing different levels of depth than his oils as they allow for a more fluent and delicate orchestration of colour harmonies because of the transparencies of each colour modulation, which, in turn, create “many shifting planes superimposed on top of each other or blended into one another”(1993,p.40). Equally, some blank spaces of white paper are not filled in “but are surrounded by colours and thus incorporated into the scene as more or less brilliant highlights, unifying visible with invisible... both these features of Cezanne’s watercolours draw our attention to the surface composition”(1993, p.40). Or as Merleau-Ponty says, space “radiates around planes that cannot be assigned any place at all”(Merleau-Ponty cited Johnson,1993,p.40).

Whereas Cezanne highlights the use of planes of colour, a non-representational artist like Paul Klee favours the “use of line as a distinct element of composition in creating a hieroglyphic or sign system against a subdued background of colour”(1993,p.40). Johnson points out that although Merleau-Ponty is initially critical of the use of line as a “mechanical, prosaic line of Renaissance perspective painting and drawing as a form of domination that imposes a fixed, univocal perspective of godlike survey, he expresses new appreciation for the ‘flexuous line’ as a constituting power”(1993,p.41). For Johnson, Merleau-Ponty begins to develop an adjacent theory to colour, via Klee, by describing line as a movement toward simplification, the power of which is demonstrated through Matisse’s use of “a single organic line (which) discloses the essence of a scene”(1993,p.41, illustration 33). Line, when used sparingly by an artist like Matisse, seeks to capture the *essence* of that which it depicts setting in motion a disequilibrium within the space of a surface, and like colour, traces a *metaphysics of space*.

In the final and longest part of Johnson’s essay, he approaches the philosophical themes of ‘Eye and Mind’ which set out to interrogate painting as a unique vehicle that ontologically maps the nature of what exists in order to return “to the *there is*, to the site, the soil of the sensible and opened world such as it is in our life and of our body”(Merleau-Ponty cited Johnson,1993,p.44).



This *there is*, is interpreted by Johnson's reading of Merleau-Ponty as working against the presuppositions of modern scientific and philosophical traditions, an argument which Merleau-Ponty opens with in 'Eye and Mind',

Science manipulates things and gives up living in them. Operating within its own realm, it makes its constructs of things; operating upon these indices or variables to effect whatever transformation are permitted by their definition, it comes face to face with the real world only at rare intervals (1960,p.121)... Scientific thinking, a thinking which looks on from above, and thinks of the object-in-general, must return to the 'there is' which precedes it (1960,p.122).

The *there is*, is supposed to gain access to the *essential forms* of a pretheoretical experience of phenomena. In this context, Johnson argues, Merleau-Ponty joins a line of European philosophers starting with Schelling through to Nietzsche and Heidegger, who credit the painter with a special prominence in tracing the *nature of Being*. But the stylistic (poetic) and methodological dilemma or *suicide* of 'Eye and Mind' as a text is, as Johnson points out, that for all his apparent challenges to the philosophical tradition from which he comes, Merleau-Ponty encounters the same problems that faced Cezanne when attempting to express nature on canvas while denying himself the means for doing so. In seeking "to bring to written expression the silent and mute meanings of prereflective brute meaning"(1993,p.45), Merleau-Ponty discovered that the language he was employing only illustrated the relations between the visible and the invisible, but did not reflect its *essence* in the world of objects. Merleau-Ponty sought to identify the ontological rather than the theoretical link between the visible and the invisible, or as Cezanne's quote to Gasquet (which prefaces Eye and Mind) says, "What I am trying to translate to you is more mysterious; it is entwined in the very roots of being, in the impalpable source of sensations"(1993,p.45).

Johnson says that to parallel Cezanne's desire, Merleau-Ponty's answer was to address the problem of his own written interpretation by adopting a poetic, allusive, Proust-like style in 'Eye and Mind' as an attempt to bridge the gap between the written and the painted; *Eye and Mind* "is an indirect ontology, filled with allusions, themes that appear and disappear winding in and out"(1993,p.45). To characterize the dilemma of interpretation, or indirect ontology, Merleau-Ponty introduced the method of *hyperreflection* - a critical distancing by the subject who is writing or surveying in retrospect to vision. Johnson says that *hyperreflection* allowed Merleau-Ponty the luxury of reflecting in thought that which cannot coincide directly with the object, because *reflection* is a

temporal beat behind the genesis of its object, therefore a temporal beat behind the genesis of itself. The source of the world and the source of the self slip away from reflective view... ontology is possible only indirectly, in an interrogative mood that remains sensitive to the silence of what cannot be said (1993,p.46).

Johnson's contemporary interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's *hyperreflection* is as important as Merleau-Ponty's text itself because it also allows for the subject to engage with the visual world of the contemporary digital/simulacral without recourse to the signification of language only. Furthermore, *hyperreflection* is contrary to Greenberg's subject who views an abstract painting as a *pure* experience that is moulded into a "unity and integrity of pictorial space"(1949,p.173).

Merleau-Ponty himself is also in disagreement to Greenberg, claiming that *Being* is in tandem with that which is in the world as a non-unity, or rather as an *indirect, reflexive ontology of hyperreflection* which allows the seeing seer to also be self-consciously aware of being seen. For Johnson, Merleau-Ponty is "now a philosopher close to the poet seeking to listen to the painter's evocation of the 'silent logos of the world', indicating indirectly a 'conceptless presentation of universal Being"(1993,p.46). As a consequence, Johnson argues, 'Eye and Mind' "sought to explore and articulate a depth or laterality of the self that is at a distance from itself, from things in the world, and from the significances given things in language"(1993,p.46).

Johnson continues to describe Merleau-Ponty's *hyperreflection* as a decentering away from the authority of the subject by claiming that *hyperreflection* has affinities with postmodernism. Johnson says that 'Eye and Mind' "makes an address to postmodernism and the praise and criticisms the essay has absorbed in the decades since it appeared"(1993,p.46). Unfortunately, with the exception of Jean Francois Lyotard's criticism of Merleau-Ponty in 'Discours, figure'(1971), Johnson offers no substantiating postmodern evidence other than the essays contained within his *Aesthetics Reader* which were written within a very short time frame around the early 1990's.

However, as I stated at the beginning of the Chapter, we can begin to see that Merleau-Ponty shares certain ontological premises with postmodern philosophies of the *self* such as Lyotard's. If this is the case, then Johnson's brief revelation of Merleau-Ponty's relation to the postmodern can be bolstered through Merleau-Ponty's notion of the inversions between the visible and the invisible. These *inversions* are made apparent by the painter, Johnson says, as a system of obverse exchanges between the senses and the sensual, the body and the world, the eye and the hand, which Merleau-Ponty describes as the inside of an outside, an *overlapping* or *envelopment*. "The seer and the seen are capable of reversing their roles as subject and object, and the maturation of vision in the life of a painter is this opening up of self to the world as 'the other side' of its power of looking"(1993,p.47). For the painter, whose seeing body sees, also becomes the body looked at, a self-consciousness by extension which is also transferred to the sense of touch, meaning that the body that touches becomes the body touched; "When my right hand touches my left, the right hand is touched in reply, and in the next instant the relation may be reversed"(1993,p.48). Things in the world are thus understood as the prolongation, or emigration of the painter's body which is encrusted in *Flesh*, and these things *become* as if made of the same stuff of the body, seduced and captivated by it - "this doubling

with difference between self and world is the meaning of flesh”(1993,p.49). Johnson adds that this translation of *Flesh as reversibility* is meant to express both envelopment and distance but he also warns of a misreading; “It does not mean the absurdity that the trees and things we see also see us in return,... rather it means that the seer is caught up in the midst of the visible, that in order to see, the seer must in turn be capable of being seen”(1993,p.48). Johnson argues that, “we can now see that the ontology Merleau-Ponty finds implicit in the work of painting is very far removed from a metaphysics of substance and sameness, a monism of the One”(1993,p.49).

As an additional quality to *flesh as reversibility* Johnson also suggests the study of colour as an *opening onto the world*. Colour will be explored through Arthur C. Danto’s description of the paintings of David Reed by intertwining this discussion with Alphonse de Waelhens’, ‘Merleau-Ponty; Philosopher of Painting’, which argues for the construction of the painter’s personal style as a *becoming*; a manipulation of the *at a distance*, visual (colour) language of painting.

### Alphonse de Waelhens: Merleau-Ponty; Philosopher of Painting

Waelhens text, which was originally presented in *Revue de Metaphysique et de Morale* in 1962, sets out to prove Merleau-Ponty’s ontology to painters themselves whom, Waelhens claims, stand to benefit from the mechanics of a text that attempts to discover the *metaphysical* secrets of “the fundamental elements of all philosophy, namely perception, the body, language, the world and meaning”(1993,p.174). But, Waelhens argues, painters are generally not interested in Merleau-Ponty’s insights because

Just as physics is not in itself a *theory* of science, just as the physicist is not in a position to generate such a theory independently, so painting is not a *view* of the act of painting, nor is the painter the philosopher of the thinking that he causes to exist through painting (1993,p.174).

Waelhens claims that painters are unable to see or understand the fruits of their exploits that they possess a *blind spot* which is caused by their attempting to depict *reality* as they see it, that somehow they will both express and gain insight from the manifestation of their labours. This occurs he says, because of the painters *misplaced* conviction that the “equivocation of naturalism and of ‘likeness’ resides precisely in their (vain) attempt to bolster their dubious ontology with this imperative mission of return”(1993,p.175). In a practice such as my own this is apparent in the desire to choose colours, marks and signs that have an autobiographical meaning albeit vague and imprecise - the final results being interpreted through formal and aesthetic decisions that I had not intended or foreseen.

Waelhens forcefully states that painting is a language that only acts as an *expression* of ontology - a creative process, and he paraphrases Merleau-Ponty’s argument that “Words do

not *look like* the things they designate; and a picture is not a *trompe-l'oeil*'(1993,p.175). Waelhens goes on to argue that like words, "painting *presents and unfolds in universality* that which prior to and without it lay unformed, unknown, within the private experience of the lone and largely inattentive consciousness"(1993,p.175). What was only nascent thought becomes through painting "the vibration of appearances which is the cradle of all things"(1993,p.175), and like language, this *appearance* embodies within the concrete world of objects a universality or *translation* of thought - it transposes into a visible object that which was once only *mine*.

So for a painter, the visible object or *thing* is "therefore less important than the *qualities of things*, in that they are at the origin of all appearances, composing them"(1993,p.176). But, Waelhens argues, the *feeling* or the 'real' that the painter thinks he gives himself over to is in fact an invention, a need to construct emblematic systems of expression much in the same way as verbal and written language,

all of which see themselves as 'realist', since they all aspire to present being in the modality of visibility, and none of which *is* realist, since they never tend to 'duplicate' a scene already complete in itself - no more than sentences simply duplicate that of which they speak. But we must take care to note that the relation between the signifier and the signified, which is essential to all language, is not, as we shall see, the same in painting and in words (1993,p.176).

Waelhens' warning that painting and words hold different ontological values leads him to explore Merleau-Ponty's notion of *style*. *Style*, as interpreted by Waelhens, represents a mode of approach rather than a means of representation. For him it is not the case that *style* for the painter is a means for substituting references to the *real* as a simulacra of things, as a *deceit* of the *natural*, but rather, that style "has no existence outside this commerce (or approach) with the world seen by the painter, and its mission is to present it by expressing it"(1993,p.177). Style becomes the painter's *becoming* onto the world in much the same way as one's habit of walking is remarkable to an individual, "a variant of the norm of walking, looking, touching and speaking that I possess in my self-awareness because I am body" (Merleau-Ponty, cited Waelhens,1993,p.177). Waelhens understands this self aware experience as a bringing to task for the painter those instances of, for example, the clothing, gesture or agility of the seen body as visual emblems. This is because the painter has a reflected relation to the *fleshiness* of what he/she sees, an awareness of his/her own body; visual emblems have a certain or particular relationship with being that the painter wants to express, "style is what orients and shapes in view of a revelation"(1993,p.178).

Waelhens adds that from the position of revelation the painter forms the initial outline of the work in hand in his/her own perception.

It is the deployment of a language, as is the case with all perception, but in this case of painterly language... It is this perception and the language included within it that the

painter attempts to make manifest - it is out of this still 'diffuse' meaning which the painter suggests to himself that he will produce an established meaning offered to all (1993,p.178).

Waelhens argues that the *language* of the painterly can only be realized and communicated by the use of line, form and colour. He then says that the deployment of these painterly elements make-up the components of the work that demonstrates the *originality* of the painter. I would argue that Waelhens intentions here must not be confused as a return to avant-garde ideals of original authorship, nor to confuse vision with a *mode of thought* or *presence to oneself* as Descartes had done, but rather, to ally himself more fully with the (ontological) notion that we have seen expressed by Lyotard; that the *self* is not an island as had previously been believed in the grand narratives of the enlightenment. Merleau-Ponty's *Style* or *language* of the painterly, for Waelhens, places the painter in the condition of seeing in the world:

I see, if I am not myself what I see, if I pass over into what is to be seen, installing myself in it to become myself visible, but in such a way that this seeing seenness is also that which organizes into a spectacle and world everything that is to be seen. To be a visible see-er is a way of 'being present from within at the fissure of Being'(1993,p.179).

For Waelhens this *unified visibility*, which is not the same as the closure or final satisfaction of being, is able to turn itself upon itself as a task of completion, or rather the task of making a painting. It is a simultaneity which is both external and yet joined with experience; and for Waelhens, only painting offers a reciprocal, ontological hyperreflectivity for both the painter and the viewer and can conjure this "meaning of vision which is thus more than vision"(1993,p.179).

Waelhens then goes onto describe Merleau-Ponty's antagonism to Descartes exclusive support of the line and drawing that remained the "prisoner of a general conception of words that reduces them to the role of *translating* thought"(1993,p.180). Descartes, Waelhens argues, conceived of no internal relations between the thing painted and the real thing - a dualistic blind spot which was caused by his support of line and drawing because it "is better suited to providing a sign based on a real analogy"(1993,p.180). Drawing in this sense, denies the "opening onto the world of things"(1993,p.180), or more specifically the qualities we get from colour in painting.

Waelhens states that for Descartes, drawings are seen only as tracings of the *real* which Waelhens disputes as ignoring the imaginary, "the relationship between the imaginary and the real is therefore quite unrelated to that of an alleged tracing of the real. In a sense, the imaginary is even closer to the real than a duplicate, since it is the 'carnal obverse' of the life led by the real in my own body" (Merleau-Ponty cited Waelhens,1993,p.181). Waelhens argues for a relationship between the sign and the imaginary that does not rely on Descartes understanding

of pictorial representation as a simulacra of the real, because “the pictorial image is more distant from the real than an exact copy would be, since it is only an expression of it and an analogue ‘according to the body’ and is not intended to set us back before pragmatic reality so that we may reconsider it more easily”(1993,p.181). The pictorial image is an *imaginary texture* of the real. And for me, Merleau-Ponty’s *imaginary texture of the real* is a pivotal point when considering contemporary painting in relation to the simulacral and the digital, as it offers a *hyperreflection* of the relation between the simulated sign and the fleshy body of the painter who manifests *hyperreflectivity* through the material means of painting.

## David Reed: The Surface as Illusion and Paint as Object; Painting as Sign

Here it is important that we consider the phenomenological concerns of Waelhens with the actuality of contemporary painting and in particular David Reed. By conjoining an examination of Reed’s paintings as described by Arthur C. Danto, into Waelhens proposal that ‘the pictorial image is an imaginative texture of the real’, I will begin to explore the relationship between the form of making a painting and its representation as a relational aesthetic phenomenology in the digital.

Arthur C. Danto in his *Artforum* article, ‘Bedside Manner’, offers an example of contemporary painting, I think, that *hyperreflects* Merleau-Ponty’s (and Waelhens) *imaginary texture of the real*, when he describes David Reed’s abstract paintings as having an illusionistic surface which confuses the viewer into believing they are looking at flat, almost photographic renditions of gestural abstract painting (illustrations 34,35).

Danto also attempts to present an example of Reed’s painting as an overlap with the digital. Danto describes one of Reed’s parallel projects whereby Reed digitally inserts his paintings into clips of Alfred Hitchcock films. These clips are screened alongside an installation of the modified scenes and include the actual paintings. Whereas this could easily be argued as a re-mediatization of Reed’s paintings as a *becoming* (in Andrew Benjamin’s sense) into the age of the digital, I think this overlooks the *unique* particularity of Reed’s paintings themselves as carriers of *hyperreflection* between the body and the virtual. As a consequence, in Danto’s article, I will concentrate in the main on Reed’s paintings to argue that they represent the ‘carnal obverse of the *imaginary* and the *real*’. Later, I will critique Danto’s desire to place the paintings into film and installational props by claiming that this mode of transference is a media specific or literal transcription of the relations between painting and the digital.

David Reed’s paintings Danto says, “are illusionistic in the traditional sense, shaded and highlighted in such a way that some details seem further away from us than others”(1999,p.122). However, the smooth, apparently substanceless surface, on closer inspection, reveals that forms are raised very slightly above the surface, and that what is unique to Reed is that another

illusion co-exists simultaneously with the forms themselves; as an object made of paint. Danto says that every “painted form has a materiality in its own right, and sometimes we see the same form both as paint and as representation”(1999,p.122), for example, when looking at a painting by Velazquez we see both the yellow impasto and the glove depicted by it. With Reeds paintings “where the forms are simultaneously brushstrokes and, in effect, representations of brushstrokes, we are left uncertain as to their materiality”(1999,p.12), and for Danto, the consequence for the viewer is that they are drawn to wanting to touch the paintings, to explore the edges of the forms with their fingers as a caress, “this is the basis of their fascination, analogous to the fascination of the flesh”(1999,p.122). Danto argues that Reed’s painting’s induce a synesthesia between sight and touch and that this is integral to the material making of the painting itself, that whatever forms he uses become part of the *craft dimension* and is central to our reading of them by relating “to the how rather than to the what of his marks”(1999,p122).

In comparison, Waelhens extends his argument against a simulacrum failing to be an exact copy of the *real*, by linking the drawn line to the mechanics of Renaissance perspective. Waelhens refers to Merleau-Ponty’s controversial conception of depth which “is not simply the third dimension... if depth were to be considered as a dimension, it would be the first”(1993,p.182). Merleau-Ponty’s *depth as one-dimension* is pitted against Renaissance perspective, because the forms and definite planes that are measured or stipulated in relation to the body which I call *mine* is but one *poetic* slice of constructed information amongst others; “There are forms and definite planes only if it is stipulated how far from me their different parts are”(1993,p.182). Equally, Waelhens adds, Merleau-Ponty’s first dimension isn’t a dimension that contains all the others, nor is it simply the first or the third.

In a sense it is no longer a dimension at all, that is, a simple relation of measurement. It is, rather, the expression of a ‘reversibility’ of all the dimensions, the expression of a global locality in which everything is in the same place at the same time, a locality from which height, width, and distance are abstracted, of a voluminosity we express in a word when we say that a thing is *there*’ (1993,p.183).

This description of the non-dimension of depth sees Waelhens take up the issue of colour, not as the deformation of contour or line that will rescue us from the illusions of *natural* colour, but as a colour/dimension, as a texture or something from itself to itself. Waelhens suggests that further consideration is needed for this colour dimension. Colour becomes one way in which the non-dimension of depth can be manifest, it breaks up the form of drawing, it leaks out of the deformations of contour that supposedly rescue us from the illusions of so-called natural colour, and allows for rhythmic meaning on its own terms.

Waelhens continues by adding that through colour painters want through their own way, for themselves, to constitute painting for all - a coming-to-itself of the visible in which colour, depth

and space plays a part in animating an inner radiation of the visible. Painting is not a return to subjectivity or a refusal of obvious forms in the world, instead it becomes for the painter a question of how to understand and re-present the incomprehensible so that everyone will be able to see it, "how to express, by the use of signs (new ones, to be sure, but old ones as well), that which heretofore, while included in the world, has never intentionally appeared"(1993,p.188).

Waelhens then argues, with a nod toward Greenberg's rather tired argument of abstract painting versus figurative painting, that it is "not a question of wondering *where* the painting is in the empirical world, nor yet whether or not it is *figurative*... it is auto-figurative... it is a spectacle of something only by being a spectacle of nothing"(1993,p.184). Auto-figuration is meant to break the skin of things by showing "how things become things and the world, world"(1993,p.184).

In this sense, I would argue that Arthur C. Danto's description of colour in Reed's paintings is *auto-figurative*, which is also *hyperreflected* in Reed's process because both colour and craft are inextricably bound up with his sensibility as an artist. With colour, Danto likens Reed to Baroque painters who knew two ways of using colour to create the illusion of space, firstly, in "chiaroscuro, the painter moves from highlight to shadow by changing the values of a single hue, as in, say a single-coloured angelic garment"(1999,p.122), and secondly, in "*colori cangianti*, Baroque painters juxtaposed bright hues of a similar value, achieving the maximal degree of colouration that would remain consistent with the demands of creating illusionistic space"(1999,p.122). Danto says that Reed mainly uses *colori cangianti* which allows for his dark colours to be as intense as his light ones, that because of his sometimes lurid hues, "I think of his paintings as Manhattan baroque - or, as with the cheeky red and mustard of (painting) no.439, Las Vegas baroque"(1999,p.122).

However, as a preamble to the *auto-figurative* in Danto's description of Reed's colour (through craft), we need to consider Waelhens thesis around the idea of the pre-pictorial moment for the painter, or pre-ontological moment of understanding, not as a metaphysical transcendence, but rather, as a transcendence of the painter. "If a painting copies nothing preexistent in nature, neither does it copy a private, preexistent view of the painter, which the latter would draw forth from himself or herself fully armed"(1993,p.185). Waelhens claims that a successful painting, far from copying a private preexistent view of the painter, must contain the ingredient of the birth of the visible and not just the *this* that I see. The painting should be expressive of what it presents through its bodily making which "ultimately, would like to include everything - but never succeeds, and is thus also, in advance its own failure"(1993,p.186). Each new work then, has to address both the painter and the birth of all that is possible in vision. This impossible resolution also has the knock-on-effect (if a work is successful) of being self-teaching, it "is the infinity of discourse, the perennial nature of the vocation of painting... The completion of the work is the call to another work, which takes up the challenge anew"(1993,p.186).



This perception of *what never is*, through painting, breaks with natural realism or the *presentation* of reality, or the “prose of the senses or of the concept”(Merleau-Ponty cited Waelhens,1993,p.188). And for Waelhens, painting is essentially poetic “since it ‘awakens’, ‘recalls’ and takes up our pure power of expression, beyond an exercise the world has given us and the pragmatic sights of daily life”(1993,p.188).

But this struggle for the painter of the *what never is* can only be visible to others - and this brings us back to the painter’s *style*, or rather, *style* as visible to the viewer. Like Merleau-Ponty, Waelhens discusses the role of the viewer, or other, by claiming that the painter will not fully succeed unless he invests into the work not the sensitivity of the ‘I’ but a ‘style’; “This style must be wrested from the world, the work of others, and his own ‘attempts’. And he cannot know his style for himself. Others will make it become fully significant”(1993,p.188). Waelhens’ return here to style sees him argue that the painter’s body is a carrier of his style, “he cannot possess it reflectively, and can but perceive in its texture a vague allusion to himself or herself”(1993,p.188) - style is what is to be painted. And again like Merleau-Ponty, Waelhens warns of the dangers of the painter being seduced or seeing this style for itself, trying to repeat a gesture in order to please by copying himself because style then ceases to become what it is; “the means of finding emblems capable of bringing forth a latent meaning that was germinating within his entire experience”(1993,p.188). Neither is style a “nervous tic nor a technique, but a manner of formulation that is just as recognizable for others, and as little visible to him as his silhouette or his everyday gestures”(Merleau-Ponty cited Waelhens,1993,p.189).

Waelhens’ notion that the painter is in danger of repeating his style as gesture, is I would argue, exactly what Reed unfortunately does when he abandons painting *per se* to take up an interest in collaging his paintings, by means of digital manipulation, as installations in well known Hollywood films. For me there is enough interest in Reed’s paintings alone as style, colour, and a reversed gesture of both abstract expressionism and the Baroque which *hyperreflect*, as a simulacra, an *imaginary texture* of photography or film. However, Danto argues otherwise. For him, it is the installational prop which reverses painting’s relation with the viewer. Danto says that Reed staged an exhibition called ‘Two Bedrooms in San Francisco’ in 1994, in which “he modified clips from Alfred Hitchcock’s 1958 *Vertigo* by inserting images of his own paintings into the bedrooms of the films two main characters, Judy and Scottie”(1999,p.121). Reed included two life-size replicas of the beds as they appear in the film and “on the wall above the beds, he hung the very paintings that had been inserted in the film clip, which ran continuously on a television monitor next to the beds”(1999,p.121). Danto claims that the work as a whole “directs the viewer to establish with the (real) painting the relationship implied between Judy and Scottie - and the relationship the two have with the paintings visible in the doctored film”(1999,p.121). For Danto this also implies a reversibility of the conventions of viewing paintings in both the gallery space - that as viewers we need to imagine Reed’s work as something to live with

intimately, but also as a transformation of the painting as object into a film/video image - which the viewer encounters when physically entering the installation, thereby raising questions of our relationship to paintings as objects. Danto finishes 'Bedside Manner', by saying that for Reed, "it would perhaps be impossible to raise these questions with a painting by itself, where our relationship should be instead personal and erotic"(1999,p.125).

Danto has to some extent a point about the *hyperreflected* re-placement or re-contextualization of Reed's paintings into both the installational and the filmic as a re-mediatization of painting as a *becoming* in the age of the digital. But for me, his argument denies, or rather, makes excuses for painting *itself* as a *re-staging* of painting's ontological project in the contemporary and overlooks the *unique* particularity of Reed's paintings themselves as carriers of *hyperreflection* between the body and the virtual. By ignoring the particulars of painting as a *unique* access between the body and the virtual, Reed's installation only becomes a literal transcription of Merleau-Ponty's *hyperreflected, imaginary texture of the real*. Therefore, for me, rather than require additional installational and simulationist props as a stand in for *hyperreflection*, the challenge is to find out whether a painting itself can *suggest* reversibility and also *induce* it. Reed's paintings, as paintings, can be said to *hyperreflect* the *reality* of signs as an overlapping of the conventions of abstract painting, by *becoming* "the relationship between the imaginary and the real... the 'carnal obverse' of the life led by the real in my own body"(Waelhens,1993,p.181); and this, I would argue, is Reed's own *imaginary texture of the real*. Reed's paintings, in this context then, through style, colour and depth can say more than the literal or givens that it finds in the same way that words or discourse say more than the literalness of the sentences in which they are re-presented; painting, as Waelhens says, means that "the essential becomes *presentation as expression of itself*"(1993,p.189).

## The Sign as Code

Now that we have established how the painter *hyperreflects* an *imaginary texture of the real* through style (in his/her paintings) and presents this activity as an (unintentional) expression of the visible manifestation of signs, exactly how do we begin to explore painting as a *hyperreflectivity* of the virtual and digital? So that we can begin to understand the interdependence of painting as *presentation as expression of itself* in relation to the signs in the digital, this section will examine the connections (if any) between Merleau-Ponty's ontology of Being in vision as an *overlapping* with *Hyperreflection* - whose themes include flesh, depth, colour and style - and Jean Baudrillard's claim that the subjective being has been superseded by the transferal of desire into the commodifiable object. For Baudrillard (unlike Merleau-Ponty), this transferal remains tied to the sign as a result of the complex relations of communications through the (digital) media in advanced industrial society. I will then make further comparisons with David Pagel's notion around the embodied *effects of aesthetics* in contemporary painting that claims an *opposition* toward *appearance* through the intertwining of

popular culture, art history and the simulacral. These relational comparisons will aim to re-stake Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological ontology of *reversibility* with Baudrillard's *appearance as sign* - and by extension, David Pagel's *apposition*. However, it may be that there is no comparison possible between these seemingly conflicting philosophies. But by comparing, I hope to broaden the existing debate around contemporary painting that so far has only been aired in museum and gallery group show catalogues such as those I discussed in Chapters One and Two. This will lead onto a re-assessment of Clement Greenberg's flatness in abstraction (in Chapter Four) to determine his value for contemporary painting as a re-rendering of *hyperreflection* as surface in the digital.

Firstly, I will examine some of Baudrillard's texts from *Selected Writings*, and in particular, his essay 'On Seduction'. I will link this in with Baudrillard's notion of the 'code' so that for the sake of brevity we get to the central themes of his claim that culture is now dominated by simulations. I will do this by intertwining Mark Poster's introductory analysis from *Selected Writings* with several direct quotes from Baudrillard. I am choosing to privilege Poster's introduction alongside Baudrillard's texts because Poster not only gives a comprehensive overview of Baudrillard's philosophy, but also because of Baudrillard's often elliptic and unrigorous writing style which can sometimes seem closed, bleak, and circular in their arguments - blaming the media for the collapse of the Kantian subject.

Poster claims on Baudrillard's behalf, that because of the proliferation of communications through the media, the practice of its operations "differs from both face-to-face symbolic exchange and print. The new media, especially advertising, employ the montage principle of film (unlike print) and time-space distancing (unlike face-to-face conversation) to structure a unique linguistic reality"(1988,p.1). This *unique* linguistic reality, Baudrillard claims, has become "pure signifier, without a signified, signifying itself"(1968,p.10), and that the new media, and in particular advertising, changes the communicational forms of mass culture; "advertising... is mass society, which, with the aid of an arbitrary and systematic sign, induces receptivity, mobilizes consciousness, and reconstitutes itself in the very process as the collective. Through advertising mass society and consumer society continuously ratify themselves"(1968,p.10).

For Baudrillard, the emergence of advertising and media culture, which *signifies itself*, means that the sign relocates in desire and re-routes consciousness. Poster says that in Baudrillard's terms, this is a 'hyperreality' which renders "impotent theories that still rely on materialist reductionism or rationalist referentiality"(1988,p.1-2). This signifying re-organization through desire is termed the *code* by Baudrillard and Poster adds that the *code* operates by extracting signifieds from the social by redeploying them in the media (especially television) as "floating signifiers"(1988,p.4). Poster also argues that for Baudrillard this world of 'floating signifiers', or rather, a world with no fixed determinations, is populated by a "world where anything can be

anything else, where everything is both equivalent to and indifferent to everything else”(1988,p.4).

The ‘indifference’ of the ‘hyperreality’ of the *code* is taken to an extreme in Baudrillard’s ‘On Seduction’ as a strategy - via post-structuralism’s deconstructive tendencies - to undermine dominant discourses; arguing for the *surface effect* of the simulacral as an attack on “theories that deny the surface appearance of things in favour of a hidden structure or essence, theories like Marxism, psychoanalysis and structuralism”(1988,p.5). Because Baudrillard reasons that these interpretive strategies all privilege forms of rationality, for Poster, Baudrillard “celebrates the Nietzschean critique of the ‘truth’ and favours a model based on what he calls ‘seduction’. Seduction plays on the surface thereby challenging theories that ‘go beyond’ the manifest to the latent”(1988,p.5).

For Baudrillard, seduction is implicit in the appearance of surface signs in the social. He proposes that a new model of seduction might replace classical *truth* by advocating a perpetually *enchanted*, gliding with *knowing intent* across its surface - a kind of ironic double-bluff for the subject who is *without* politics or, indeed, any other means of giving value to the forms of rationality:

...seduction becomes *the informal form of the political*, the demultiplied framework of elusive politics, which is devoted to the endless reproduction of a form without content...Is this the destiny of seduction? Or can we, against this involitional destiny, take on the challenge of *seduction as destiny*? ...Is this the destiny of appearances as opposed to the truths of deep structure? In any case we live in non-sense, and if simulation is its disenchanting form, seduction is its enchanted form (1979,p.164).

## Jean Baudrillard: The Model as a Reversal of the Logic of Meaning; From Subject to Object

Because of Baudrillard’s claim that the representational subject is over due to the collapse between the subject and the sign, Poster adds that Baudrillard is longer interested in the subject as providing a vantage point on reality, but rather, that the “privileged position has shifted to the object, specifically to the hyperreal object, the simulated object”(1988,p.6). Or as Baudrillard says, it is the model which replaces the *real*:

simulation is characterized by a *precession of the model*, of all models around the merest fact - the models come first, and their orbital (like the bomb) circulation constitutes the genuine magnetic field of events. Facts no longer have any trajectory of their own, they arise at the intersection of the models; a single fact may even be engendered by all the models at once (1981,p.175).

Therefore, in place of a Kantian logic of the subject, Baudrillard proposes a logic from within the object which makes the subject become displaced; the subject no longer has a historically informed grasp on the present - a kind of alienation. The hyperreal shift to the logic of the object sees Baudrillard adopt this model as an example of his overall theory. Poster says that for Baudrillard, "the concurrent spread of the hyperreal through the media and the collapse of (all) master narratives, deprives the rational subject of its privileged access to truth"(1988,p.7). Simulated reality has no referent and is immune to rationalist critiques therefore operating "outside the logic of representation"(1988,p.7); *Individuals* are now consumers which fall prey to objects as defined by the code of capitalist logic. In this sense "only the 'fatal strategy' of the point of view of the object provides any understanding of the present situation"(1988,p.7). Poster adds, that living a *subjective* life through the logic of consumer objects that are immune to any rationalist or political critique becomes an implosion that is manifest in the media's excess or proliferation of information - precluding any response by the recipient. And this is how I come to understand Baudrillard's fatalism; the subject lacks motivation and a sense of the *real* in which to operate.

For me, because of Baudrillard's fatalism, there still seems to be an underlying need in Baudrillard to form some kind of Kantian critique or yearning against the drift into simulation because, as he balefully adds at the end of his essay 'Symbolic Exchange and Death'; "the cool universe of digitality absorbs the worlds of metaphor and of metonymy that the principle of simulation thus triumphs over both the reality principle and the pleasure principle"(1976,p.147). Baudrillard's hesitation over the death of *deep Kantian truth* seems strange given that the *pleasure principle* would suggest some kind of *surface criticality*; "Appearances, which are not at all frivolous, are the site of play and chance taking the site of a passion for diversion - to seduce signs is here far more important than the emergence of any truth" (1979,p.149). Poster argues that in Baudrillard's, 'The Masses; the Implosion of the Social in the Media', Baudrillard redeploys the notion of *resistance* in the face of (or lack of) the implosion of traditional Marxist or liberal critiques of the commodity. Similar to the argument in 'On Seduction', the 'Masses' aims to double-bluff the media by absorbing its simulations as a failure to respond - a kind of so-what that will undermine its codes. Poster points out that "instead of complaining about the alienation of the media or the terrorism of the code, Baudrillard proposes a way out: silence"(1988,p.7). But, Poster adds, this critique does not allow for *consumers* to re-signify meanings that are presented through consumer objects and the media because the object is predetermined in its simulacral commodification.

Therefore, for me, rather than accept Baudrillard's fatalism, we could begin to re-think the re-signification of meanings within the simulacral as *re-determinations*, presenting an opportunity to *re-configure* Baudrillard with Merleau-Ponty's ontology of *reversibility*. For example, we could we ask whether Baudrillard's reversal of the logic of meaning, from subject to object, is in some ways a reversal of Merleau-Ponty's own reversal of object into subject and, with that, into

meaning? Are Baudrillard and Merleau-Ponty making antithetical arguments or are they in complete contradiction to each other? And indeed, are there similarities of discourse that link the two? These questions will become crucial in the coming Chapter because we need to ask how the displaced subject who transfers desire onto the object/commodity approaches subjectivity in relation to the actual (objective) making of painting in the simulacral. Indeed, can the idea of the detached *pure* signifier act or stand in as a component of bodily identity in the virtual?

## Painting: Re-Determining Merleau-Ponty's 'Fleshy Overlapping' in Vision with Baudrillard's 'Appearance as Sign'; From Object to Subject and Back Again

So where are we now toward the end of this Chapter? - Because Merleau-Ponty states that the painter "anticipates, within things, the labour of vision ...*between* the seeing and the visible body" whose internalized diagram of the world projects "things into spectacle, spectacle into things, myself into another, and another into myself"(1960,p.129), a number of issues are raised concerning the kind of re-determination that I am proposing.

For example, can we legitimate or re-configure the phenomenological *fleshiness* of *Eye and Mind* toward Baudrillard's *unfleshy* simulations? Can Baudrillard's self-referential sign be equated with (but not pasted onto as a replacement) Merleau-Ponty's ontology of *overlapping*? Can we compare Baudrillard's self-referentiality of signs with Merleau-Ponty's *imaginary overlapping* of the subject? And is there a space to re-determine Baudrillard's *surface effect* with Merleau-Ponty's *imaginary texture of the real* through vision?

These issues (as questions) are arising because we still need to comprehend the relations between phenomenological embodiment, the sign as code (or appearance), and digital embodiment as an interdependent kind of relational aesthetics for painting. This leads me to ask further, whether we can offer a phenomenological *imaginary* reading of Baudrillard's fatalism that would supersede the involuntarily *subject* which is caught up in the *free-floating signification* of the simulacral? Or, by contrast, can it be the case that free-floating signification is the phenomenological ontology that Merleau-Ponty would have predicted or wished for by placing Baudrillard's theories back into the *fleshy* body? Therefore, and finally, can we begin to graft Baudrillard's unwitting Cartesian simulacral philosophy with a post-Cartesian philosophy of ontology such as Merleau-Ponty's?

The relation of appearance, vision, the imaginary, and the body is dealt with in opposing ways by Merleau-Ponty and Jean Baudrillard, and their differences and similarities will be calculated in this section in relation to painting. Merleau-Ponty argues for an embodied, reversible dynamic of perception, or self-conscious recognition of the *body I call mine* which is caught up in the fabric of the world of objects as "the undividedness of the sensing and the

sensed”(1960,p.125). But Baudrillard describes appearance/perception as *beginning* from the point of disembodiment, that the simulacrum privileges appearance which is at the mercy of the code of the sign. As we have seen, in ‘On Seduction’, Baudrillard attempts a critical analysis of *appearance* as a site of combatative reappraisal in the simulacral. He argues that disembodied appearance for its own sake could be utilized as a simultaneous, ironic double-bluff against the total absorption of the contemporary subject, and also, against a Kantian critique which favours *deep subjective truth*;

Appearances, which are not at all frivolous, are the site of play and chance taking the site of a passion for diversion - to seduce signs is here far more important than the emergence of any truth. Interpretation overlooks and obliterates this aspect of appearances in its search for hidden meaning. This is why interpretation is so characteristically opposed to seduction, and why every interpretive discourse is so unappealing. The havoc interpretation wreaks on the domain of appearances is incalculable, and its privileged quest for hidden meanings may be profoundly mistaken (1979,p.149).

And Baudrillard continues,

For we needn't search in some beyond, in a *hinterwelt*, or in an unconscious, to find what diverts discourse. What actually displaces it, 'seduces' it in the literal sense, and makes it seductive, is its very appearance; the aleatory, meaningless, or ritualistic and meticulous, circulation of signs on the surface; its inflections, and its nuances. All of this effaces the content value of meaning, and this is seductive (1979,p.149-150).

But does the *body that I call mine* then disappear entirely? Or is it conceivable that the contemporary painter *hyperreflects* Merleau-Ponty's *reversibility*, giving *the act of making painting* an ontological relation to Baudrillard's notions of the simulacral that previously Merleau-Ponty had claimed for the world of objects through the embodied eye? It seems obvious that a physical carrier or vehicle is necessary for the visual relations of the simulacrum to be given a presence (a photograph is printed on paper, film is developed onto celluloid or video tape) - the digitally generated image needs a keyboard to produce it and a screen with which to view it. Is there then a philosophical alignment that could be accorded between Baudrillard's *seduction of appearance* to Merleau-Ponty's claim for vision that “to see is *to have at a distance*”; painting extends this strange possession to all aspects of Being, which must somehow become visible in order to enter into the work of art”(1960,p.127)?

Merleau-Ponty could well have understood Baudrillard's hyperreal as an issue of depth; that the Cartesian third dimension is no longer tied to the subject seeing in exteriority, but as a first or *only* dimension “that contains all the others (which) is no longer a dimension, at least in the ordinary sense of a *certain relationship* according to which we make measurements”(1960,p.140). Merleau-Ponty's depth is “the experience of the reversibility of

dimensions, of a global 'locality' in which everything is in the same place at the same time, a locality from which height, width, and depth are abstracted, a voluminosity we express in a word when we say that a thing is there"(1960,p.140). Equally, a relational argument can be found (but not necessarily endorsed) in Greenberg's statement that "the modernist picture has now become an object of literally the same spatial order as our bodies, and no longer the vehicle of an imagined equivalent of that order. It has lost its 'inside' and become almost all 'outside' all plane surface"(1954,p.191).

Bearing these differing, relational models in mind, I will head towards arguing for a phenomenological aesthetics/aesthetic phenomenology. Instead of simply affirming Hal Foster's dualistic postmodernism, or more recently Pagel's historicist, *post-dualistic* understanding of *aposition* as a re-interpretation of High Modernism with Pop, a broader argument will be sought. For me, the historical condition that painting finds itself in is not binary, or post-binary (which the fashion shifts in the artworld would have us believe), but a continuing ontological decentering away from the subject that is reflected through the re-configuration of aesthetics and its reception - a *hyperreflection* between the physical/material act of making and its philosophical implications for picturing in the simulacral. In this sense, painting can be read as taking place in the *hyperreflection* of its worldly circumstances.

Nicolas Bourriaud argues in *Relational Aesthetics* that

the role of (contemporary) artworks is no longer to form imaginary or utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real... The artist dwells in the circumstances the present offers him (her), so as to turn the setting of his (her) life (his (her) links with the physical and conceptual world) into a lasting world (2002,p.13,14).

For Bourriaud, the contemporary artist's practice and "his (her) behaviour as producer, determines the relationship that will be struck up with his (her) work. In other words, what he (she) produces, first and foremost, is relations between people and the world, by way of aesthetic objects"(2002, p.42) - and for me, this kind of reasoning can be applied to the particularities of painting.

Given Bourriaud's claim for an art of circumstantial interactivity (which would also include a relation with the digital) I will construct a re-examination of painting's ontological *nature* through the hyperreal that will draw *simultaneous* relations between aesthetic reception, simulation, ontology, and Greenberg's material flatness. I will propose that a Merleau-Pontyan *overlapping* of the *reversibility* of depth be grafted with David Pagel's *aposition* in contemporary painting as result of painting's necessary surface relations to the simulacrum, and latterly, the digital.



My intention then is to construct an argument around Baudrillard's *seduction of appearance* that does not remain dualistic, paradoxical, or a gliding with self-conscious intent into a "devotion to the endless reproduction of a form without content"(1979,p.164). On the contrary, I will argue, Baudrillard's *seduction* can become the *raison d'être* of Merleau-Ponty's *overlapping* in the contemporary - a seductive interactivity.

Depth as reversibility in *hyperreflection*, in Merleau-Ponty's terms, means something very different to the aestheticised methodologies of Renaissance perspective and Modernist material flatness. Therefore, my task will be to determine whether firstly, Merleau-Ponty's ontology is an appropriate methodology with which to re-configure classicist perspective with material flatness in relation to the simulacral and the digital, and secondly, to examine the philosophical/ontological possibilities that would take place if these relations were possible. This will be accessed through Andrew Benjamin's *What is Abstraction?* which attempts an ontological interpretation of the reinterpretation and renewal of the tradition of abstract painting as a *staged becoming* in repetition. As a consequence of this melding of philosophies, it is hoped that I will better understand a re-configured *value* of the ontological, or sense of *being* as *style*, in mine and others paintings

In the meantime, and as a preamble to a re-configuration of painting, we need to understand the ontological through the digital. In order to achieve this I will now turn to Stephen Perrella's Hypersurface theories (via Ian Burkitt's; *Bodies of Thought: Embodiment, Identity & Modernity*, and M.W. Smith's; *Reading Simulacra*), to flesh out the relations between the body in architectural space and the body's interface with the augmented computer screen.

## Chapter 4 The Ontology of Digital Embodiment as Hypersurface

In order to incorporate the augmented space of the digital as a re-configured, ontological exploration of painting, this chapter will examine four texts that will help interrogate how and why the digital inflects/reflects painting and painterly activity today. This examination of texts, prior to the Conclusion, will be done so that we come to understand that the contemporary painter's *style* becomes a complex *overlapping* of subjective aesthetic interactivity, the external world of objects, signs, *and* the enhanced space of the computer. So, before we talk specifically about *style* and painting we need to understand how the process of the enhanced space of digital transference changes and re-determines the identity of the subject. The first two texts that I will explore will map the topological terrain of the computer and the digital; Ian Burkitt's *Bodies of Thought: Embodiment, Identity & Modernity*, and M.W. Smith's *Reading Simulacra*. The next two texts will then attempt to make an ontological link between the topological terrain of the digital with contemporary abstract painting by way of Marcus Novak's 'Transarchitectures and Hypersurfaces', and then, as a key text, Stephen Perrella's 'Hypersurface Theory; Architecture><Culture', which argues for a relational architectural practice of the usually opposed realms of language and matter into irresolvable complexities. I will then go onto an examination of recent reviews of installational decoration in contemporary art practice (as a *critique*) in relation to painting to argue for the co-presence of embodied experience superposed upon aesthetic subjectivity. This will lead to a combining, as a *becoming*, of Merleau-Ponty's *imaginary texture of the real*, Stephen Perrella's digital Hypersurface, and Greenberg's material flatness transposed into ornamentation.

In many ways this combining of texts resembles the cut and paste technique on a personal computer, the interstitial relations of which I have become increasingly fascinated with as a relation to the hand-made. Finally, in the Conclusion, I will grapple with the problem of identifying abstraction as a projection of the painter's *style* as a *becoming* which presents the painter with an embodied form of criticality in relation to the disembodied digital.

### Modernity, Self, Embodiment, Technology and Motion

So that we may come to deal with the painter in the hyperreflected digital, we first need to examine how human identity is constructed through an increasing relation (reliance) on the computer. Ian Burkitt for example, argues that humans now inhabit the symbolic world of the computer as both a cultural product and producer but as a *thinking embodiment*. The body he claims builds a theoretical or imaginary world in relation to the screen by extrapolation that is not identical to immediate bodily experience.

For me (as will be evidenced over the next few pages), Burkitt offers a way of understanding

the digital through embodiment without the need of a fatalist (Baudrillard) reading of the simulacral and virtual. As a result, he will help sketch out our understanding of the ontological implications for the bodily activity of painting as a relation between symbolic simulated embodiment and physical (painterly) material. Burkitt argues that instead of a Baudrillardian vision of the simulacrum we need to think of *reality* as a place in which embodied physical beings gain their meaning from *ideas and signs* in the world instead of being wholly encapsulated within the technology of reproduction and its hyperreality. Humans he argues, are embodied beings living in more than just a symbolic world, they can also re-use the symbolic self-reflexively as a purposive guiding of activity.

Burkitt's introduction sees him complaining that today it is often thought that the human person regards the self as separate from the body, that "when we think of the self we tend to feel as though we are made of a non-fleshy essence which is somehow distinct from our bodily casing"(1999,p.1). Burkitt attributes this widely held premise to Descartes who claimed "that he was what he was despite his body and could still exist without it"(1999,p.1). Burkitt also sees this as a problem of the social and psychological sciences which separates and privileges the mind over the body showing that they "have preferred on the whole to concentrate upon the realm of rational action and the mind rather than on the body"(1999,p.1). Burkitt's argument is that in the face of the conceptual shifts engendered by contemporary digital culture, human beings should think and become *embodied bodies of thought* rather than dividing the mind from the body (like Descartes).

For me, Burkitt's sense of a relational *body of thought* resembles Merleau-Ponty's *imaginary texture of the real*, in which the imaginary is much farther away from the actual because the painting is an analogue or

likeness only according to the body; because it does not offer the mind an occasion to rethink the constitutive relations of things, but rather it offers the *gaze* traces of vision, from the inside, in order that it may espouse them; it gives vision that which clothes it within, the imaginary texture of the real (1960,p.126).

Whereas Merleau-Ponty is talking about the painter's body (through vision) as having a hyperreflected relation to the world of objects which is imaginary, I would argue that Burkitt attempts to augment the body as a *hyperreflection* via the *imagined* space of the disembodied digital which is symbolic. Burkitt claims that the body becomes an embodied body of thought; a *bodily-imaginative production* which not only acts in the digital, but also extends the body's activities through physical transformation; the body is both flesh and also symbolic/imaginary. For example, he suggests that it is common for individuals who have undergone surgery (for example plastic surgery) to not only radically change physical features but also attempt to feel that their self-image has changed as well, that "the body itself can create a symbolic image and

understanding of itself, yet changes in the body can also radically alter its symbolization”(1999,p.20).

Because these *transformations* are possible, Burkitt suggests that the way in which we sense our body in the world “seems to be just as important in creating meaning as cultural meaning is itself in shaping the image of the body”(1999,p.2). But, so Burkitt argues, this does not necessarily reflect embodiment as a *body of thought*, because bodily transformation relies partly on a symbolic construction which never corresponds exactly to the physical body. Instead, bodily transformation becomes one avenue of a multi-dimensional approach to the body and the person who “conceives of human beings as complexes composed of both the material and the symbolic... rather than as divided between the material and the representational”(1999,p.2). Burkitt continues by suggesting that human beings are not just located in the world symbolically, nor is experience entirely formed through a Cartesian linguistic or discursive text. Instead we transform the world through both the social and natural worlds as networks of interdependence. The body image as a sense of self, in this context, suggests a complex multiplicity of simultaneous differences - and this point will be important later in the thesis because it offers a relational term between painting’s material and the painter as subject in the digital; the material and the digital *overlap* to create a performative role *between* these differences and not as distinct separations.

For Burkitt, this means “that embodied persons are not simply constructs, but are *productive bodies*”(1999,p.2), that they are not conditioned by prevailing power discourses but have choices and pro-active opportunities in the contemporary world, and that they achieve this as “*communicative bodies* with the power to symbolize through gestures, metaphors and speech”(1999,p.2). Equally, embodied persons are *powerful bodies* with the capacity to alter the conditions of life as *thinking bodies* whose agency and communication “does not simply occur ‘inside’ the body for it is inseparable from social activity and speech”(1999,p.3). But, Burkitt warns, all of this is not to recreate a notion of a pre-social, irrational and emotional body, or conversely to argue for rationalism, but rather, that “the body and the emotions are seen as having pattern and form”(1999,p.3) which give meaning and value to social relations.

To prefigure his argument, Burkitt’s First Chapter lays down a challenge to the Cartesian view of mind, body, knowledge and objects, by developing a critique that locates the *thinking* body in time and space to create a multi-dimensional view which *also inhabits* the symbolic. In his Chapter Four Burkitt goes onto pursue multi-dimensionality by arguing that “knowledge is located primarily in the experiences of the *active* body”(1999,p.5), which, as part of time and space extend and elaborate our experiences in the symbolic dimension. By charting this course, Burkitt then suggests that the relations between the symbolic and the extended bodily realm (of prosthetics and virtual prosthetics for example), and the bodily/material domain, are always interwoven as dimensions of experience. This *interweaving* constantly informs each

dimension “in a two-way process that cannot be flattened out on to a single plane”(1999,p.5). In this sense, we can say that the embodied body of thought simultaneously *becomes* a *bodily-imaginative production* because the body continually negotiates the (imagined) space between the embodied and the symbolic.

In Chapter Seven of *Bodies of Thought: Embodiment, Identity & Modernity*, titled ‘Modernity, Self and Embodiment’, Burkitt finally explores embodiment in the new information and media technologies, by suggesting a relational comparison between the traditional western philosophical binaries of classical reason and romantic emotion. Burkitt explains that the body has traditionally been perceived as disembodied in the classical perspective. Embodiment, he argues, should not “turn its back on rationalism and all the elements of the classical canon, associated as they are with reason and the intellect”(1999,p.129). Rather, with the social sciences beginning to focus on the romanticist notion of emotions as “the place of experience and the very nature of personhood and self”(1999,p.129), classicism conjoined with romanticism could be integrated simultaneously as “thought with sensuous embodiment and activity, and rationality with the emotions”(1999,p.129). This reformulation of the classical and the romantic as “the thinking body in the nexus of its relations and activities”(1999,p.129), means that an inclusive relation occurs between the body and the symbolic as a *thinking embodiment*. Burkitt suggests that this *thinking embodiment* inhabits the symbolic world as both a cultural product and producer allowing the body to build a theoretical or imaginary world by extrapolation that is not identical to immediate bodily experience. However, Burkitt says that although there is a potential for a schism of embodiment, the symbolic or “theoretical must always be in some way related to the sensuous and practical and can never be separated from it”(1999,p.129).

As a consequence, a second question arises in the body’s relation between the symbolic and the sensuous in the virtual or digital because, as Burkitt notes, our experience of space and time is being dramatically reconstituted. He suggests, as an overview of this reconstitution, that the shift in twentieth century capitalism toward flexible accumulation and the development of technologies that allow relations to be disembodied from face to face communication, “means that our embodied experience of space and time is fundamentally restructured”(1999,p.129).

Burkitt contextualizes this thesis via sociologists such as David Harvey, who argues for a “shift in capitalism towards greater forms of flexibility”(1999,p.129), and also Kenneth Gergen and Anthony Giddens who argue for “the development of technologies which allow relations to be disembedded from their traditional everyday anchoring”(1999,p.129). Burkitt adds that Gergen and Giddens in particular, “refer to these changes as ushering in a new era or a new attitude, that of the postmodern, while others stress their roots in modernity and suggest that we are living in a period of high modernity”(1999,p.129).

However, Burkitt mounts a critique of sorts on the distinctions between a postmodernist or

revisionist modernist moment. He argues that they become inadequate terms to understand the relational complexity of both the physical world of objects and the symbolic world of contemporary digital embodiment; "I think we should take heed of Foucault's sobering words when he asks 'What are we calling post-modernity?... because I've never clearly understood what was meant... by the word 'modernity' "(1999,p.130). For Burkitt, 'modernity' as a term is not sufficient to understand the notion of *thinking embodiment* in the contemporary because the denominations 'modernism and postmodernism' simply reflect earlier forms of modernist binary classicism.

From this, it would appear that Burkitt asks questions of binary interpretations in order to more fully understand the complex 'crossing over' for the *embodied body of thought* - a 'crossing over' that for me resembles Merleau-Ponty's *hyperreflection* but this time takes into account the impact of the digital. And we must remember that it is the digital in relation to painting and the *style* of the painter (via Merleau-Ponty's 'Eye and Mind') which is at stake in this thesis.

To demonstrate this apparent 'crossing-over' of the *embodied body of thought*, in a later part of the Chapter titled 'Bodies, Selves, Technology and Motion', Burkitt attempts a re-reading of the body to explain the complex condition in which it now finds itself. Once again Burkitt returns to his central thesis of simultaneously reconstituting and integrating the classical and romantic models of western philosophy, "the rational and the sensuous"(1999,p.130), but this time as an *embodied* social theory. Burkitt suggests that in modernity the "body becomes closed and more tightly controlled, but at the cost of fragmentation, of losing the experience of a whole body open to its world, replaced with feelings of a mental or personal essence divided from the automaton it must inhabit"(1999,p.131). Burkitt claims this is similar, if not the same as, the postmodern idea that "in an age saturated by new communications and information technology, social relations are mediated to such an extent that they become fleeting and (non-specific) to either time or place"(1999,p.132).

Burkitt then argues that the body can claim possession through an interactive social positioning. He suggests that the postmodern move away from the romantic notion of a deep interior and the modernist idea of essences is replaced by a model of the surface or screen because "here the self is the product of images that are created in the nexus of relations"(1999,p.132). Borrowing from Gergen once again, Burkitt suggests that with the surface/screen model the self/body is replaced by "the *reality* of relatedness, in which notions of 'I' and 'you' are transformed into a conception of us"(1999,p.132). In turn, this re-vamping of the self overcomes the Cartesian dualism between public and private, the false and the true by producing a publicly constituted, socially constructed person who, although "lack(ing) a stable and unitary inner core"(1999,p.132), which may result in fragmentation, re-uses the conditions of the screen/surface to reconfigure this fragmentation to their advantage in the social.

Although Burkitt is unspecific as to which postmodern models he is referencing, he is also doubtful as to whether the screen/surface model fully overcomes Cartesian dualism because the issue of embodiment within Cartesianism is often ignored. Burkitt makes a concession by critiquing Jean Baudrillard who, he says, advocates that the *epoch* of (contemporary) simulation supplants that of production. Baudrillard's simulationist theories, he suggests,

could be said to be the height of a (post)modern form of Cartesian radical doubt where, unlike Descartes, who came to doubt the existence of anything but his own process of thought, Baudrillard nevertheless doubts the existence of anything except the process of simulation (1999,p.134).

Burkitt distrusts Baudrillard's certainty of the sign over the mind, saying that the "idea of a multi-dimensional reality, in which humans are embodied physical beings whose ideas and signs are put to use in reality and gain their meaning from that use is as alien to Baudrillard as it was to Descartes"(1999,p.134). Instead, Burkitt argues for a *reality* in which embodied physical beings gain their meaning from *ideas and signs* in the world instead of being encapsulated within the technology of reproduction and its hyper-reality. Humans, Burkitt adds, are embodied beings living in more than just a symbolic world - they can also re-use the symbolic. So for Burkitt, human action now involves self-reflexivity as a conscious and purposive guiding of activity within social contexts even when it is represented through the digital/symbolic.

Burkitt's *self-reflexivity of activity within social contexts*, for me, provides a specific link with painting as it begins to assert a relationship between the physicality of painting as an idea that coincides with the symbolic world of the sign. Burkitt's critique of the split subject in modernity, "of losing the experience of a whole body open to its world, replaced with feelings of a mental or personal essence divided from the automaton it must inhabit"(1999,p.131) is changed, he argues, via the virtual symbolic into a need for the subject to re-adjust to a simultaneity of "the rational and the sensuous"(1999,p.130). It is the rational and sensuous as changed through the digital symbolic that becomes important for the bodily approach to contemporary painting and we need to hang onto this idea throughout the rest of the Chapter.

## Technology and the (Dis)appearing Subject: Schizophrenia or Seduction?

Burkitt's symbolic/virtual transference of identity which conjoins the intellect and the body as a simultaneity of the rational sensuous leads me to examine M.W. Smith's *Reading Simulacra; Fatal Theories for Postmodernity*. Like Burkitt, Smith also argues that the virtual subject no longer accepts the divisions between the subject and object. But Smith provides further evidence of the lack of divisions by insisting that the virtual subject *becomes* a deterritorialized subject whose identity is on the verge of the schizophrenic. The virtual (deterritorialized) subject, Smith argues, develops a schizophrenic relation to the world of objects whose identity is determined by a fusion of the spaces between the virtual and the world. However, Smith's

understanding of the relations between the bodily and the digital is meant not as a fracture of the subject, but rather, as a reaffirmation of the body through the virtual; a *crossing-over* of materiality and the simulated sign. This *crossing-over* of materiality and the sign through the subject means that there is no subject/object relationship; instead there is the principle of *a-signifying* rupture which is caused by an ontological shift through the digital.

If we begin to think of Burkitt's changed bodily/virtual relation between the rational and the sensuous as a self-reflexive drive of activity within social contexts, then Smith's text can be explored to provide the additional notion of the bodily/virtual as a deterritorialized subject that re-affirms the *crossing over* of the material and the sign through desire. (Smith deliberately models his text on Deleuze and Guattari's multiple subject as a desiring *machine*, but more about this later). In the meantime, we need to get to grips with Smith's preliminary argument for a re-contextualisation the subject so that later in this Chapter and the Conclusion we become further able to flesh out how paintings material relations operate *within* the digital as a process of the painter's *style*.

Like Burkitt, Smith begins to explore self-reflexivity as a positive experience in the digital symbolic but as a *becoming* subject, an *a-signified* subject who negotiates a nomadic line of flight through "the hyperaesthetic and hyperhistorical (hysterical?) overcoding"(2001,p.70) of the simulacral. For Smith, the contemporary subject "finds itself as the hyperaestheticized (image-saturated) object - where living means simulation"(2001,p.66). The body becomes, or begins to recognize itself as, an external aestheticized, screen ornamentation; it *becomes* the product of the sign. Smith surmises that techno-culture is no longer the world of representation "in which the vestiges of perspectival space remain distinct, but a simulated world coming at us: a 'semio-aesthetics' in which the objects of technology are 'projected' towards the eye as its own internal vanishing point"(2001,p.66).

Much of Smith's text is based on understanding the contemporary subject through Baudrillard's simulationist theories where the difference between what is *real* and what is *simulated* has disappeared into a seamless experience through the television or computer screen. In Chapter Five of *Reading Simulacra*, 'Technology and the (Dis)appearing Subject: Schizophrenia or Seduction?', Smith argues against Baudrillard's seamless fatalist reading of simulacra by suggesting that the conditions between the subject the object and electronic space confuse notions of *being* or *becoming*, therefore creating a schizophrenic juncture whereby "being and surroundings fuse into one, and bodies fragment and disappear"(2001,p.70). Instead of seeing the 'self' as a technology possessed by the mediascape as Baudrillard does, Smith asks us to consider that although "identity merges into the electronic image, the schizoanalysis of Deleuze and Guattari may offer a less pessimistic way of understanding the condition of the postmodern subject"(2001,p.70).



In order to introduce Deleuze and Guattari, Smith argues that at the “crossroads of Baudrillard and Deleuze and Guattari everything returns to Nietzsche”(2001,p.72). First there is Nietzsche’s philosophy of ‘becoming’ as against ‘being’ which “calls for active forgetting (deterritorializing) and creating new territories over remembering or tracing old ones, nomadic dances across plateaus - all matters of metamorphosis and becomings”(2001,p.74). And then there is Baudrillard’s fatalistic, virtual mediascape, which argues for a strategy of willful seduction - a merging or ironic double-bluff against the total absorption of the subject who *acts* out a mock retrieval of the body as an antidote to the *flatness* of the simulacrum.

Smith borrows from Nietzsche’s notion of forgetting in order to explore Deleuze and Guattari’s *becoming* which is driven by desire. Deleuze and Guattari, Smith argues, favour the mechanism of desire which is produced in the entire machinery of the *body without organs* as a “connection of desires, conjunction of flows, continuum of intensities”(Del.&Gua., citedSmith,2001,p.71). The *body without organs* can be thought of as a gathering or constellation of part-objects which govern the body’s tendencies in its pursuit of *becoming* or its desires. This *schizoid* subject deterritorializes and reterritorializes meanings across the *body without organs* as an expression of individual desire. Smith also heavily paraphrases Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus* by suggesting that in a technological culture this schizophrenic condition becomes more complex, the result being that the subject is diffused and “spreads itself out along the entire circumference of the circle, the center of which has been abandoned by the ego”(Del.&Gua.,citedSmith,2001,p.71).

Like Burkitt’s historical critique of the splitting of the subject in modernity, but more importantly, as an affirmation of Burkitt’s *embodied body of thought* which becomes a *bodily-imaginative production* who acts in the digital through physical transformation, Smith argues against the binary system of subject/object, man/nature, institution/humanity. Smith claims that these Hegelian binary systems have led to an existential alienation and isolation of the individual modern subject who colludes “in creating an artificial division between the domains of representation, subject, concept, and being that Deleuze and Guattari wish to replace with a conductivity that knows no bounds”(2001,p.72). In effect, Smith asks us to not to wearily invite a Baudrillardian future in which meaning and ‘difference’ flatten in technological proliferation, but rather, that we assume Deleuze and Guattari’s shift of emphasis in the face of the technological “to form new forms of signification through multiple associations at different semiotic levels, strata, and plateaus”(2001,p.72). This multiple association, Smith says, is a rhizome or an effect of rhizomatic production through *becoming*. The rhizome “is made up like lines on a map, not points - just expansion, connection, heterogeneity, and multiplicity. Any point on a rhizome can and must be connected to others”(2001,p.73). Smith argues that there is no subject/object relationship. There is instead the principle of a-signifying rupture, “oversignifying may rupture across the structure, but a rhizome will submerge and reemerge to proceed again on new lines”(2001,p.73). Or as Deleuze and Guattari say themselves in *A Thousand Plateaus*, like

trees, rhizomes take leave of their stems,

the masses and flows are constantly escaping, inventing connections that jump from tree to tree and uproot them: a whole smoothing of space, which in turn reacts back upon striated space... rhizome lines oscillate between tree lines that segment and even stratify them, and lines of flight or rupture that can carry them away (1987,p.506).

## The Computer Screen as Augmented Space

So far, both Burkitt and Smith have referenced the digital/virtual but only very abstractly - as a general condition of the *subject* in culture as a whole - as a nomadic figure whose affirmation in the simulacral operates through desire-as-production in the flow of uncoded desires. Neither Burkitt nor Smith have particularized in detail any singular aspect or actual form of simulacral communication and the impact this has had on the objective visual world. Therefore, instead of Burkitt and Smith's generalized exploration of the digital/virtual subject, I will explore Marcus Novak's 'Transarchitectures and Hypersurfaces; Operations of Transmodernity', in which Novak gives a definition of the implications of the computer screen in relation to architecture, claiming that it is a bodily extension of internal consciousness. I will provide a detailed reading of Novak's text of how the digital extends or augments spatial embodiment because I want to place a particular emphasis on the role of the computer screen as an interdependence with the disembodied subject.

Novak's focus on the disembodied computer screen (via embodied architecture), between the screens implosive interface and the externalized world of the objective, will offer us a contemporary architectural understanding of the virtual as a simultaneous interface/surface which introduces Deleuze and Guttari's bodily notion of *desire-as-production* as a relation. But in order to achieve this, the complexity of the computer's symbolic interface needs to be examined as an augmentation of subjectivity; as a *bodily-imaginative production*. Later in this Chapter, this interdependence will suggest ways in which we can think of painting as a relational, material activity as a result of the influence of the computer; the symbolic as presented by, or through, the physical/tactile objecthood of painting (as disembodied text or picture making).

Like both Burkitt and Smith, Novak acknowledges the technological as the constituting force of the contemporary world (which includes the architectural). Novak claims that "all reality, including self-knowledge, is available to us only through the mediations of screens... the conceivable and the presentable is already a question of incommensurable screens"(1998,p.86). Novak examines the idea of the computer screen as a site of *spacelike Hypersurface* which 'contains' the subjective present. For Novak, this *spacelike Hypersurface* "is perpendicular to the axis of time and holds all of our familiar three-dimensional space in a conceptual but completely inaccessible universal simultaneity"(1998,p.86), meaning that although we can

conceive of a plane of pure simultaneity in the present, no such relationship can exist unless a paradoxical sense of both a tautological subjective past *and* a subjective future is also imagined. By extension, this means that “the Hypersurface screens that chart the extent of all that is in any way accessible, also act as screens of exclusion of all that is elsewhere”(1998,p.86). As a consequence, I would conjecture that like Baudrillard, Novak concedes that transmodernity “in tracking the transformative effect of the moving interval between presentable and conceivable, is concerned also with how screens conceal even as they reveal”(1998,p.86).

But unlike Baudrillard, and in keeping with M.W. Smith’s call for Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizome in the study of the digital in embodiment, Novak goes on to describe how digital technology operates as a bodily extension of consciousness; how it can be theoretically thought through as a non-implosive interface - an augmented spacetime.

Novak says that the computer screen can be seen as a two-dimensional prototype of space. This space is both fixed and extendable, it has “already escaped the monitor and has entered the three-dimensional world at large. The language of windows, menus, icons, tools and sundry controls to which we are already habituated is being extended to the third dimension”(1998,p.86). On the two-dimensional computer screen “we are embodied only as cursors and icons in augmented space we participate with our entire bodies”(1998,p.86), that just as the monitor can take an infinite number of forms according to the software that commands it, so to can physical space be transformed as virtual architectures “within the confines of a single physical space”(1998,p.87).

Contained within the example of the two-dimensional computer screen as augmented space, a new, or rather different relationship occurs between space and surface - it becomes a Hypersurface. Novak says that in the first instance the screen has two spatial dimensions, a “temporal dimension and a variety of space-related attributes such as colour, resolution and refresh rate”(1998,p.87). But its main interest however “comes from the complex behaviours and relations it enables by being connected to the hyperspaces created by the computer that drives it and the network within which it is located”(1998,p.87). Novak distinguishes a retinal difference between a two-dimensional graphical user interface and the physical screen on the basis of its mutability,

since both physical screen and virtual interface have the same number of dimensions, while a representation of a three-dimensional real-time walkthrough will begin to depict virtual dimensions over the matrix of physical pixels, initiating the process of casting the screen into hyperspace (1998,p.87).

This retinal process also continues non-retinally because the commands given to the screen are indexed into the invisible spaces of information as hyperlinks. Novak claims that if the

computer screen be imagined as a plan-view and the cursor as the visible manifestation of our presence to the invisible hyperlinks, then we see a “premonition of the nature of our interactions, via hypersurface interfaces, with the transarchitectures of augmented spacetime”(1998,p.87) - relations occur between the disembodied screen and our physical embodiment.

Novak elaborates this relation between the screen and embodiment as a shift from ontology to a different order of epistemology. He does this by comparing the screen to photography, using as an example Roland Barthes term the ‘stigmatum’ of photography from *Camera Lucida*. Novak (after Barthes) states that photography records that which has been, it “is evidence that something has existed, that some event has transpired”(1998,p.87). The photograph “articulates a double catastrophe; that something is to happen (the future implied in the photograph) that has already happened (the photograph as record of a future now past”(1998,p.87) - its stigmatum. For Novak, digital photography and special effects give a different reading, one in which to see an image is not to know that some event has taken place, but that

the constitutive elements of that event are known well enough to have been involved in an explicit computation. Where ‘camera lucida’ gives testimony to existence, the digital visual asserts a ‘camera cognita’ in which to see is to know... Within the ‘camera lucida’ was a screen - or Hypersurface - of recording. Within the ‘camera cognita’ is a screen - or Hypersurface - of knowing (1998,p.87).

Novak characterizes the *knowing* of the camera cognita as a fifth dimensional eversion - a continual turning of the camera’s *recording* inside outwards and outside inwards as *projection* of and into the world of (known) objects. Computation he argues, changes Euclidean knowledge which is three and sometimes four dimensional, because computation extends embodied *knowing* into both the world of objects and the digital symbolic. The five dimensions of Hypersurface he says are distinguished through kinds and degrees of virtuality which are related to screens - the five dimensions being;

*Light and shadow*: projections of absence and presence: mirrors, shadow theatres, Plato’s cave; *sampling and statistics*: constructions of continuity from discontinuity, connotation from denotation: zoetropes, cinema, television, digital sound, transitions from discrete to continuous space and back by processes of digital-to-analogue and analogue-to-digital conversions; *inversion*: computation and epistemology, seeing through knowing, scientific visualization, simulations, computer graphics, special effects; *immersion*: alteration, cyberspace, virtual reality, casting the world into the virtual; *eversion*: casting the virtual unto the world by multi-threading virtual/real and actual/possible (1998,p.86).

What interests me the most about the fifth degree of Novak’s virtuality *eversion* is its re-configuration of embodiment because it may offer us a way into understanding painting practice

as a philosophical activity embedded within the embodied digital. Novak says that *eversion* “is the turning inside-out of virtuality, so that it is no longer contained in the technologies that support it”(1998,p.86) - it is cast into the midst and projected into the architectronics of the city. Everted screens, Novak adds, “become instruments by which to glimpse and enact that which is barely within perceptual or conceptual reach”(1998,p86). By applying Novak’s *eversion*, or fifth virtuality to the “third virtuality, epistemology through computation implies turning the ‘camera cognita’ inside-out”(1998,p.87). For Novak, *eversion*, as a turning inside-out of the camera cognita, outwardly refers to the “Hypersurface of knowing onto the world at large”(1998,p.87), a kind of fivefold enfolding. Novak then equates the relational aspects of Hypersurface as a transarchitecture, which he says, are complementary. Transarchitectures become the product of the virtual, they are permeated Hypersurfaces in both the literal and metaphoric senses creating a forum for a physical construction of the world in relation/and/or/to the digital.

To extend my interest in Marcus Novak’s formulation that the “hyperscreen is a shift from ontology to radical epistemology”(1998,p.87) in terms of a phenomenological re-interpretation of knowledge - an ontology of the simulacral, virtual, and the digital as an *aesthetic hyperreflection* will be sought in the next section. To do this, the ontological relations between the computer screen and the architectural (as an eversion of the two) will be examined through the externalized sign which, I will argue, is reliant upon architectures internalized physicality. This will provide the final preamble to the examination of the interdependence between the painter’s style (or re-identity) which is evidenced through material activity in relation to the augmented digital.

## Hypersurface Theory: Architecture><Culture

So far in this Chapter we have developed three distinct ways in which the body is changed by the digital/virtual; firstly, Burkitt’s assumption that the rational and sensuous is transformed through the digital symbolic, secondly, Smith’s virtual deterritorialized subject as a re-affirmation of the body in the virtual, and thirdly, Novak’s eversion theory that turns virtuality inside-out into the midst of the architectronics of the city. In order to examine the (Hyper)relations of the body and the digital/virtual, but in the world of (aesthetically constructed) objects, we now need to consider how architecture and the sign combine so that the connections between the screen and painting specifically become more clear. To do this, I will examine Stephen Perrella’s architectural *Hypersurface* theory as a possible re-configuration of Greenberg’s unification of material flatness along with Andrew Benjamin’s premise that contemporary abstract painting operates as a staged becoming of historical repetition. This re-configuration will be key in my exploration of Benjamin’s ontological argument for the yet-to-be-resolved presence of depiction because it will allow for the painter to be represented through the object/surface of the painting in relation to the digital/image surface. This will offer us an opportunity to revisit Merleau-

Ponty's assertion that the effort of modern painting "has been towards multiplying the systems of equivalences, towards severing the adherence to the envelope of things"(1960,p.142); that future painterly expression may be achieved by the re-examination and re-use of materials at hand as a co-presence of embodied experience superposed upon aesthetic subjectivity.

So that we can re-configure the ontology of Greenberg, Andrew Benjamin and Merleau-Ponty with Perrella's Hypersurface, I will intermittently juxtapose both quotes and examples of these writers during my reviewing of Perrella's argument as a way of more fully developing a notion of painting practice in the digital, or rather, how painters construct a methodology with the tools of painting as a personal style.

Stephen Perrella's Hypersurface is a relational theory, operating between the practice of architecture and its role in the culture by the intertwining of often opposed realms of language and matter into irresolvable complexities. Perrella explains that Hypersurface works against logocentric architectural practices that claim to be of a higher order from everyday consumerism. Like M.W. Smith, who asks us to consider that although "identity merges into the electronic image, the schizoanalysis of Deleuze and Guattari may offer a less pessimistic way of understanding the condition of the postmodern subject"(2001,p.70), Hypersurface theory owes much to a re-examination of Deleuzian thought which, according to Perrella, appeared in intellectual architectural circles after the limitations of Derridian deconstruction had become apparent.

The problem for Perrella is that deconstruction's privileging of material presence was only accommodated by Derrida's language/textuality theories because it could be utilized as an attack on an Enlightenment/modernist tendency. Equally, it kept alive the idea (in theory anyway) of the separation of *rigorous* high architecture from the concerns of *messy* and *vulgar* consumerism. Perrella argues that Derridean deconstruction has been used by architectural theoreticians to subsume its critique of logocentrism into a textual, separated reality to maintain the hierarchy of the materiality of architecture which is itself an enlightenment/modernist ideal. To break with this tendency and to introduce the *outside* of the world of the building, Perrella advocates a reading of Deleuze into architectural theory in order to embrace the world of advertising and sign-culture that had previously been reduced to semiotic readings only, "inasmuch as Deleuzian thought is concerned with opening boundaries and unfolding surfaces into conditions of pure exteriority"(1998,p.7). Borrowing from Deleuze, Perrella develops both a semiotic and experiential dimension to architectural theory and practice that questions the privileging of unadorned topologies often favoured by high (modernist and postmodernist) thinkers and practitioners.

Perrella explains that Hypersurface Theory is a productive "otherness that resists classical definitions but... is simultaneously produced by the tenets of traditional culture"(1998,p.7).

Hypersurface considers ways in which the “realm of representation (read images) and the realm of instrumentality (read forms) are respectively becoming deconstructed and deterritorialised into new image-forms of intensity. Hypersurfaces are an interweaving and subsequent unlocking of culturally-instituted dualities”(1998,p.7).

For Perrella, Hypersurface is a reconsideration of existing binary relationships which exist in the built environment, and which have been historically implemented in architecture since the renaissance. Dichotomies such as “image/form, inside/outside, structure/ornament, ground/edifice”(1998,p.8) are not seen as separate and therefore static entities but as “transversally-constituted fabrics or planes of immanence”(1998,p.7). Far from representing the schizophrenic dichotomisation that classical binaries of separate identities can produce, *planes of immanence* are generated in the “problematic relationships that occur when binary categories conjugate because such divisions can no longer be sustained in isolation through either linguistic or material divisions”(1998,p.7). Hypersurface is motivated by cultural forces that have the effect of superimposing existential sensibilities onto conceptual and material conditions, it has the ability to transform prior conditions of assumed stability into altered meanings - architecture in this sense does not have a binary relation to the surface but a deterritorialised relation (illustrations 36,37).

Perrella then goes on to describe the cultural forces that lead up to the conditions of Hypersurface, namely, the division between architecture as a formal practice sustained by its own internal discourse, and the “meaning structures constituted in the everyday world of commerce and material practices”(1998,p.8). Perrella says that although attempts to overcome the division between a (capitalist) programme on the one hand, and (elite) form making on the other, have been tackled, strategies such as the ‘form follows function’ dictum as favoured by Mies van der Rohe, whilst affirming everyday activities, “remain complicit with the assumptions of capitalist progressivism prior to any interpretation of function and programme (one merely accepts the capitalist programme and expresses it)”(1998,p.8). Perrella argues that the general modernist tactic of ‘form following function’ privileges one oppositional term over another, that this binary is beholden to the forms of the transcendental - “in typical dialectics the synthesis of binary oppositions aspires to ascend to an ideal, one attended to by an ideality, like God”(1998,p.8). This is usual, Perrella says, of much western thought. It is at the core of its value structures, and any process that assumes ideality as an ultimate is doomed to failure as ideality is unattainable.

The privileging of one oppositional term over another develops as a schism or schizophrenic condition that is at the heart of, and sustained by, capitalism’s onward march toward *progress*; schizophrenia “is continually forwarded by any attempt to synthesise a resolution with which to heal the fundamental split between form and programme”(1998,p.8). For Perrella, because of the tradition of privileging one oppositional term over another, a perpetual dichotomisation

occurs in the built environment as it accepts the logic of the schizophrenic condition. In particular, architectural cladding has historically symbolized a form/surface relation with a prioritization of structure over skin. This equation of structure as prime support for skin has been “at the service of the institutional power or metaphysical belief”(1998,p.9) that drives the architectural institutions. Equally, architectural surfaces of either a religious, public or private institution “are thoroughly coordinated representations whether they are structurally expressive as in the case of Gothic architecture, or metaphorical as in the case of recent postmodern styles”(1998,p.9). Likewise, Modernism is a system of instrumentality because if ‘form follows function’ its structure signification becomes subsumed within form - signs are interpreted for the sake of their *own* form - as external ornament.

I would argue that it becomes obvious that Modernism’s understanding of the sign as external form or ornament, which splits the form/function dichotomisation, reinforces Greenberg’s high art/low culture exclusion of ornament as superfluous ‘kitsch’, because *kitsch* is viewed as the enemy of the production and nature of ‘flat’ painting. To remind ourselves, Greenberg says that the task for painting should “be rendered ‘pure’, and in its ‘purity’ find the guarantee of its standards and independence”(1960,p.86). The split between form and function is also apparent in Greenberg’s *purist* task of the uniqueness of the nature of the medium (of paint) because it would exclude the Old Master *effect* of pictorial illusionism and no longer permit “sculptural illusion, or *trompe-l’oeil*, but it does and must permit optical illusion”(1960,p.90). Greenberg argues that the first mark made on the form of the canvas is an external application which “destroys its literal and utter flatness, and the result of the marks made on it by an artist such as 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”(1960,p.90). For Greenberg, only the eye can traverse the strictly optical third dimension of modernist painting, and not the illusionism of implied bodily sculptural space, because the painting as an object (with its opticality) exists in the same spatial arena as our bodies. The abstract painting has an equivalence familiar to our bodily relation to actual (not implied) classicist sculpture; “it has lost it’s ‘inside’ and become almost all ‘outside’, all plane surface”(1954,p.191). For Greenberg, the viewer can no longer metaphorically *escape into* pictorial representation because there is no conceit by which to travel, as the viewing itself is bodily returned to the space in which the picture is being viewed. This in turn concentrates the viewer toward the optical, or the relation of colour, shape, and line that are divorced from descriptive connotations because they are abstract. The eye is therefore returned to the self-awareness of its position *outside* the painting as it traverses and interchanges such elements as the foreground and background, and, as it does so, the various components of the abstract picture cannot be distinguished individually but as a whole - as one single, continuous centre of interest both visually and bodily “which in turn compels us to feel and judge it in terms of its over-all unity to the exclusion of everything else”(1954,p.191)

I would also argue that Greenberg’s insistence on the painting in its *purity* existing in the same



spatial arena as our bodies meant that the disembodied eye, which can *only* acknowledge actual sculptural space to create the conditions for a painting to *support* opticality on its sculptural surface, would endorse the prioritization of structure in architecture as form which supports flatness. If this is the case then Greenberg could only allow opticality a role if it could be present on an architectural structure as a third dimensional ornament or skin. For Greenberg, ornament is *superficial* and whose application to architectural structure maintains a separation from the *purity* of the form - opticality has to abide by the rule of structure supporting surface.

So, Perrella's Hypersurface appears to me to offer a space for a decorative/sensual approach to contemporary painting as a space which critiques Greenberg's modernist assumptions by replacing the duality of Greenberg's version of 'opticality' with an opening out of "boundaries and unfolding surfaces into conditions of pure exteriority"(1998,p.7). This is not the same as an ornamental sign being interpreted for the sake of its own form, superfluous to function, as modernism demands though the dictum of 'form follows function', but rather, a reversal of that dictum whereby function could follow form - from form there is an external ornamentation or cladding of the sign which exists in its own right. In this context, signs are not subordinate to structure but become a co-presence or overlapping between both retinal pleasure and embodied physicality. An example of this co-presence would be intrinsic to the paintings of Monique Prieto (illustration 14) who initially sketches or makes plans for the forms and colours of her work through the externalized mouse of a computer - the resulting image of which is printed out and used as a model for the final physical application of paint onto the canvas. Equally, Kevin Appel (illustration 18) applies paint flatly onto canvas having first 'arranged' his schemata of domestic interiors with the aid of a computer, throwing into question the relationship between the hand-crafted and digital representation.

For me, Prieto's and Appel's use of signs through the computer gives the option to detach signs from structure, as structures of signification in and of themselves; the signs represent the 'ornament' of cladding as an operation of the imagined gaze. These two artists utilize 'ornament' as an imagined gaze by overlapping material making with its disembodied representation - a kind of to-ing and fro-ing between signs that determines the results (to a greater or lesser degree) of their paintings. It is this replacement of Greenberg's purity toward the medium as an *impurity* which becomes converted to a *purity* of the sign. The difference being that signification allows for its own function as an electronic inter-subjective overlapping played out through the gaze which receives its information as an *imaginary texture of the real*, rather than a Greenbergian programmatic assertion of its own embodied identity. This re-configuration of the *purity* of the sign will offer us away to examine painting as both material and digital flatness in more detail later in this Chapter, and in particular the Conclusion.

## Electronic Signs as Planes of Ornamental Immanence

Because of Perrella's assertion of the co-presence or overlapping of the sign as a framing for the imagination he argues that within Hypersurface signs have "another meaning and another context, one that is normally superposed over construction"(1998,p.9), offering a doubled systemic of structure and sign to co-mingle "leaving us to construct identities within schizophrenic contingency"(1998,p.9). Perrella surmises that in the contemporary there is a spreading decentralization of commercial representational systems in the "guise of interactive information-play within the material surfaces of architecture"(1998,p.9) such as the electronic displays of New York's Times Square, which necessarily argues for planes of immanence - the relation between form and programme becoming a play on intensities or becomings of the displayed image. Perrella claims that these planes of immanence counteract older forms of institutional representations by reforming the intersubjective self-image of embodiment through a hyperconsumptive semiotics "in an endless process of reconfiguration - indeed disfiguration"(1998,p.10) of signs.

To flesh out how planes of immanence construct a non-dichotomous relation between form and programme (or function), Perrella translates Hypersurface as "an effect that occurs within the interface between two hitherto disparate trajectories of culture; in this case, the division between the aesthetic culture and academic discourse as distinct from the operations and machinations of everyday consumer culture"(1998,p.10). According to Perrella, the academic sees itself as coming from the avant-garde, whilst consumer culture identifies with *ordinary culture*, and although the two disciplines operate within very different sets of values they unwittingly intertwine on the surface of built architecture. Equally, the term Hypersurface is an amalgam; "*Hyper* implies human agency reconfigured by digital culture, and *surface* is the enfolding of substances into different topologies. The term Hypersurface is not a concept that contains meaning, but is an event; one with a material dimension"(1998,p.10).

We have seen how Ian Burkitt argues that in the face of the conceptual shifts engendered by contemporary digital culture, rather than dividing the mind from the body (in a Cartesian sense), human beings should think and become *embodied bodies of thought* because our embodied experience of space and time is fundamentally restructured; The self has become "the product of images that are created in the nexus of (screen) relations"(1999,p.132). Perrella appears to agree by quoting the contemporary Japanese architect Toto Ito who suggests a relationship between the media and the architectural as a fluid, cinematic intertwining between the physical and the digital:

On the one hand our material bodies are a primitive mechanism, taking in air and water and circulating them. On the other hand there is another kind of body which consists of circulating electronic information – the body that is connected to the rest of the world through various forms of media including microchips. Today we are being forced to

think about how to architecturally combine these two different bodies and find an appropriate space for the emerging third body (1998,p.10).

This third body is what is meant by Hypersurface, however, the body does not have to remain an “operative metaphor going beyond what Deleuze and Guattari have called a ‘body without organs’ “(1998,p.10), but rather, the body can remain on the side of materiality where “form has been pushed out of relation to function, programme has been dissuaded from context, and structure is disjoint from signification in any architectural nexus”(1998,p.10). For Perrella, physical architecture can be explored as a “condition of variant (human) agencies playing through, about and within one another; singular yet connected and in a state of flux”(1998,p.10). Perrella argues that the term Hypersurface acts by absorbing *and* resonating meaning as an infrastructural term, or rather a gesture toward a middle ground between the traditionally conceived body/object duality - “ ‘Hyper’ suggests an existential eventualisation of the consumer-subject and ‘surface’ entails the new conditions of an object-in-relation”(1998,p.10).

It has been seen that Perrella suggests that the sign or image in twentieth century architectural history has been relegated and derided as playing a secondary, less functional *ornamental* role, especially to the forms of geometry in modernism. However, pixel or media architecture (Perrella’s term) challenges or neutralizes form and geometry in relation to surface with the introduction of the electronic sign; it maintains signification in the role of ornament. Perrella adds that “media architecture helps to establish an infrastructure for Hypersurfaces only without its material aspect”(1998,p.10) - Hypersurface becomes fully intense when it is both surface/substance *and* signification, a play through each other in a temporal flux, a relational exchange between the signs of Times Square and the form which support them.

At this point it becomes clear that electronic signs (or imagery) exist as surfaces (to structured architecture) which disperse data quickly to the re-assembled mechanisms of the body. This dispersal resembles Deleuze’s ‘body without organs’. Information culture is spilling out into the (deterritorialised) built environment through surfaces in which data traverses, effecting that environment and those that inhabit it.

Recent trends in architecture that accommodate the flux between both surface/substance *and* signification as a topology, or the mutation of form, structure, context and programme into interwoven patterns and complex dynamics mean that this topology, which is also the theoretical result of the shift away from an “interest in language theories (Derrida) to matter and substance (Deleuze)”(1998,p.11), allows for an interconnectivity and continuity between previously systemized and separated categories. This interconnectivity is “influenced by the inherent temporalities of animation software, augmented reality, computer-aided manufacture and informatics in general, topological ‘space’ differs from Cartesian space in that it imbricates temporal events-within form”(1998,p.11). Space can then no longer be understood as a vacuum

in which subjects and objects are contained. Rather, it is transformed into an interconnected “web of particularities and singularities better understood as substance or filled space”(1998,p.11), a nexus of information is created and more specifically “the pervasive deployment of technology within praxis, leads to an usurping of the real (material) and an unintentional dependency on simulation”(1998,p.11).

As I've gone to great lengths to demonstrate, I believe Merleau-Ponty's *imaginary texture of the real* to be an equivalent (in thinking if not in context) of Perrella's Hypersurface theories, because, in the context of this thesis, this equivalent suggests a way in which we could think about contemporary painting as a re-interpretation through Hypersurface. After all, Merleau-Ponty refers to the *imaginary texture of the real* as a painterly issue in his essay *Eye and Mind*, and Perrella specifically locates the seeing, thinking, moving body, as an object in the same world as material architecture, or rather, “a Hypersurface in architecture (which) is elicited by incommensurate relations between form and image”(1998,p.12). Perrella also claims that the effects of Hypersurface are “also Other than that of either form or image”(1998,p.12). But firstly, this is not the classical application of image or ornament that Francesco Pellizzi argues for Philip Taffe's ‘decorative’ paintings, in which “*true* ornament can in itself negate the very primacy of form; a screen of added appearance in some way disguises all direct relation to that substance around which our classical idea of form has revolved”(1990,p.98). And secondly, neither is it a reversal of the power of form which Pellizzi describes when critiquing the postmodern tendency “on finding an ornamentation that is perfectly ‘transparent’ and rigorously anti-Platonic”(1990,p.101). Instead, Perrella's Hypersurface as *other than that of either form or image*, operates as “a superposed image, thereby creating a semi-autonomous form (through decontextualization), and in turn, incompleteness or lack. Both image (programme) and form become part of each other and part of larger and other logics”(1998,p.12), and not separations.

Unlike Pellizzi's definition of *ornament as a screen of added appearance*, Perrella develops a more complex argument for ornament which steers away from a straightforward description of ornament ‘clothing’ structure. For Perrella, that which is *other than form or image* welcomes movement between ornament and structure. As a consequence, Perrella says that “when an image of an advert is screened over the form of a bus, the ad-graphic both accepts and denies the bus form”(1998,p.12). The advert parasitically appropriates the generally readable surface over the side of the bus, but the bus itself offers mobility to the advert - both the advert and the bus remain fully functional, but the bus is unimpeded by the presence of the advert which will be seen by more people. So for Perrella, “human agency is evermore defined through technological interfaces. Subjectivity co-figures architecture in a complex way”(1990p.12).

In Part Two of ‘Hypersurface Theory: Architecture><Culture’, Perrella makes more explicit its central tenet; that Hypersurface aims at a productive schizophrenia, the generative effects of which are “not reducible to language because they are merely effects that are shifting back and

forth between the material and the immaterial”(1998,p.12). For Perrella, a material/immaterial flux of actual discourse cannot result in a consensual collectivity, Hypersurface theory involves the “simultaneous holding of a Heideggerian effect with a Deleuzean effect”(1998,p.12) in which both conditions become relevant because of the cultural enfolding of technology. However, Perrella says, the two trajectories are out of proportion to one another, one is traditionally phenomenological, and the other sensitive to changes in bodily position, “this is why Hypersurface is not a fusion of the two, but a theory that allows for both simultaneously. This is the basis for a productive schizophrenia”(1998,p.12), and by extension a co-presence of embodied experience superposed upon aesthetic subjectivity.

Therefore, if we as subjects are part-media constructs then this will inevitably be aesthetically manifested in the built environment as an inflection where we encounter ourselves, but as technology. Hypersurfaces appear in architecture where the co-presence of both material and image act upon an “architectural surface/membrane/substrate such that neither the materiality nor the image dominates”(1998,p.13). Consequently, such a construct destabilizes meaning and apprehension, offering, or rather swerving perception into a resonating series of flows and trajectories - this Perrella calls the ‘middle-out’ of architecture.

But, I would ask, does this mean that after deconstruction, which critiqued the binary oppositions that operate to create frameworks for all that is meaningful, Hypersurface represents a meaningless architecture? Perrella thinks not, “Hypersurface is the simultaneous and incommensurate action of human agency over a material topology”(1998,p.13). He also adds that this forms a co-presence of human agency as taking effect in a form-substance of “force, or linguistic signifier as it occurs in a plane of immanence relative to another plane of immanence whose form-substance is that of matter”(1998,p.12). Where these planes of immanence meet other planes of immanence, intensities occur unlike any of the absolute or transcendental logics, and Perrella ends by saying that the inside must reconnect to the outside “through imagination, but one that is configured by a highly problematic subjectivity... the interstitial relations between bodies (distended as language) and substance-matter”(1998,p.14).

### The Imaginary Texture of the Real as a Deluezean ‘Becoming’

This is where I want to re-introduce Merleau-Ponty because, as I’ve stressed throughout, I want to determine whether I can stretch his *imaginary texture of the real* to include the realm of the digital and pixelation that Perrella is calling ‘Hypersurface’, or rather, to establish the question: why not include the digital within Merleau-Ponty’s *imaginary texture of the real* as a topological space of co-presence? In this context, I would argue, painting can begin to be re-configured as a phenomenology of digital Hypersurface - a figure or practice that rides difference in Hypersurface’s continual distortion of the entwining of form and image. Painting as an activity of physical making could now be thought of as a combining of personal experience through and

within the digital. Painting could *become* a relational exchange between surface/substance and signification which is manifest through singular (existential) depiction of this fact, but only as a continual series of information flows that are exteriorized.

To put this another way, the key could be to explain the *imaginary texture of the real* as a Deleuzian *becoming*, or the *body without organs* which *becomes* (as) a connection of desires, conjunction of flows, continuum of intensities. The body without organs can be thought of as a gathering or constellation of part-objects which govern the body's tendencies in its pursuit of *becoming* through its desires. For example, the subject in technology now *becomes* concerned with opening boundaries and unfolding surfaces into conditions of pure (ornamental) exteriority.

The *becoming* subject in technological space experiences the flow of uncoded desires which serve as a point of departure as well as a point of destination, desire moves freely between an existential eventualisation of subjectivity, and an external surfacing transposed by digital space as an object-in-relation. But, this existential/external surfacing is subject of course to desire operating and intertwining vision and imagination. Deleuze and Guattari's *becoming*, I would argue, *overlaps* and ties in directly with Ian Burkitt's notion of the *embodied body of thought* which acts in both the physical world and within the digital as a productive body.

Similarly we can begin to see Merleau-Ponty's *imaginary texture of the real*, which "offers the gaze traces of vision" (1960,p.126), as a comparable overlapping of vision which is filtered through the body I call mine and re-translated as imaginary relations. Merleau-Ponty proposes that the traces of vision offered to the gaze are conjured from inside the body as an imaginary, overlapping relation of things. He relates this condition to the mirror image in which the see-er recognizes himself in the mirror as others do whilst at the same time projecting his internalized diagram of the world onto both himself and others, converting "things into spectacle, spectacle into things, myself into another, and another into myself"(1960,p.130).

But, by going back to Burkitt's *embodied body of thought*, this allows us to further re-translate Merleau-Ponty's *imaginary texture of the real* as subject to deterritorialization; as an overlapping within the movement of the painter's body which is intertwined with vision and thought as digital transference. And, I would contend, this adds up to a complex parallel of Deleuzian *becoming* that Perrella favours in the virtual contemporary; "the pervasive deployment of technology within praxis, leads to an usurping of the real (material) and an unintentional dependency on simulation"(1998,p.11). Perrella argues that while the two impulses - pixel and topological architecture - have been traditionally separated as distinct categories, overlaps are now emerging as a result of deterritorializations that Hypersurface may be able to capitalize upon; "the activation of latent or virtual potential within forming substrates, membranes, surfaces, as an interstitial relation between bodies and objects; each distended as language/substance-matter"(1998,p.12).

## Decoration as Critique

But how does the painters approach to contemporary painting operate as a relational practice? Does painting have a particular role to play as a material signifier of the sign which accommodates the flux between both surface/substance *and* signification as a topology? Can Perrella's "mutation of form, structure, context and programme into interwoven patterns and complex dynamics"(1998,p.11) be re-integrated with Greenberg's economy of completion for the reductive picture plane - whose seeing subject assumes that there is "a unified singular entity which in a single moment confronts a work that is given in its absolute simplicity"(Greenberg,cited,Benjamin,1996,p.27)? More specifically to our concerns, can an ontological materiality of Perrella's theory of Hypersurface be contextualised as a valid project for contemporary painting? Or rather, is it the case that we can accommodate Andrew Benjamin's affirmative re-interpretation of abstract painting as a repetition which would constitute an "interplay between a holding - the retention of a genre - and an opening out"(1996,p.42) of the modernist tradition of abstraction? Can Benjamin provide a criticality toward both Cartesian space and the architectural dictum of 'form following function' by seeing the sign as a complex overlapping with form? Is Benjamin's claim that painting should be read *through* the "work of the surface as the site of activity"(1996,p.42) a key to a link with Hypersurface as an ontological positioning? Can the positioning of the subject (according to Benjamin) be traversed by a number of "irreducible determinations such that the subject comes to be at any one moment an effect of these determinations"(1996,p.28), both in the act of making (on a surface) and viewing?

My question(s) above are born of a desire to ask about the status of painting in its objecthood as a multiplicitous relation. But I have more questions. How for example, does it become possible to make a painting that works out of the tradition of process/material/figure/ground relations? How can we couple the process of construction with, or through signs/figuration/opticality/depth? How can painting become an imagined space of becoming or a hyperreflection in the digital? Does painting need to rely on the contextual ornamentation of Perrella's Hypersurface in architectural space as a movable sign? Is it the case that actual digital props are required to reference paintings relation to Hypersurface? Does painting have to dispense with material making and become *purely* digital? And lastly, is the *purely* digital not simply a medium specific Greenbergian literality?

Certain artists are currently being touted as purveyors of the cross-over between the digital and the ontological, such as Daniel Buren's and Liam Gillick's recent work, the 'digital paintings' of Jeremy Blake, and less recently, David Reed's 'Bedroom' paintings/films that I described in Chapter Three. Julie Pellegrin's *Art Press* article called 'Daniel Buren: Decoration as Critique', begins to examine these *cross-overs* through the long term critical practice of Buren (illustration 38), and his influence on a younger generation such as Liam Gillick (illustration 38), Tobias

Rehberger (illustration 38) and Jorge Pardo. Although these three artists are not 'strictly' painters, Pellegrin's article is important here because she puts into context Buren's (and the younger artists') project as operating within a complex interrelation between what art is, and the physical, site-specific space that this art adorns. This correlation of artworks in context will help us to not only think about artworks as critical re-contextualisations of how art is presented as decoration, but also, to determine more specifically how painting engages with digital embodiment as an interstitial relation with the body, objects and space.

Pellegrin argues that as a result of Buren's practice of re-contextualising the placement and practice of artworks as a critique of the purist aesthetics of modernism, and in particular minimalism, a younger generation appropriate design to commercially recycle minimalist art despite minimalist art's aspiration to the status of *purity*. Pellegrin, like Buren, claims that "even the most 'avant-garde' sculpture cannot escape its decorative destiny"(2002,p.23). Gillick for example, uses colour plexi-glass held in aluminium frames in which multi-coloured light reflects, Pardo places 1970's style furniture into his installations as does Rehberger who allows layers of glistening light to bathe the smooth plywood or metal finishes. Pellegrin reasons that this contemporary work

draws on a repertory dominated by pure forms and industrial materials, one which inevitably evokes the minimalist tradition, but updated and recast by the fragmentation and dispersal of these shapes into space, by the saturated colours and a subtle treatment of light that helps create an overall ambience (2002,p.21).

Pellegrin says that the work of these artists is deceptively docile - it is not meant to be just visually/spatially appealing (as decoration is supposed to) but also holds an underlying criticality. For Pellegrin decoration challenges the modernist tendency of relegating decoration to an inferior status (i.e. non-art). Like my investigation of Perella's complaint that modernism dismisses ornament as *superficial* to structure, Pellegrin argues that the categorization of the decorative in art is the result of a pejorative connotation that has served to denigrate art which does not fit the historical modernist canon: "The categorization is based on normative tastes and the implication is that the decorative is inherently vacuous because by definition it cannot be conceptual"(2002,p19). As an example of 'vacuous decoration', Pellegrin quotes Donald Judd's criticism of Daniel Buren as "nothing but a 'Parisian wallpaper hanger' "(2001,p.19). But, she adds, in response,

Buren is quick to point out that this quality - decorativeness in the highest sense - is an overarching feature of a whole trend in modernism from Matisse to Pollock, and that it's time to recognize the limitations of the aspersions cast on that term. In fact, all painting, in his view, is destined to serve a decorative function, since sooner or later it will adorn a wall (2001,p.19).



Pellegrin argues that Buren's practice as an *artwork*, once it is in someone else's hands, is not simply wallpaper because "that end has to be taken as a starting point"(2001,p.19). Buren investigates the value of the status of the art object with the question: what is an art object? And he also includes a further question: for whom and what purpose does the art object come to represent itself? For Pellegrin, Buren's project operates within a complex interrelation of artwork (in its traditional/critical modernist sense) *and* the physical, site-specific space as decoration. It is Daniel Buren, she also argues, who is solely instrumental in the changes toward the status of (modernist) art when in 1968 he pioneered the idea that "painting ceased to become an end in itself and instead became a 'visual tool'. The form is placed in a given space, and from that point on the piece is not meant to be seen but to allow us to see"(2002,p.21), meaning that decoration is not a mode of expression but a means to analyze a context.

But for Buren, context was never neutral, the artwork is bound to its dictates: it is subordinated to the space; "the more the artwork submits to its space (or seems to do so), the more it shows that it is different and reworks the space in its own image"(2002,p.21). Pellegrin says that young artists have grasped this fundamental contribution from Buren by recontextualizing "the reversal of the relationship of dependence on the site, thanks to the visual tool's power of indexation, and consequently of transformation"(2002,p.21); decorative work operates by changing the space around it. As an example Pellegrin cites three phases of Buren's work which focused specifically on the re-configuration of the 'white cube' museological space; the first, a 1975 piece made from parallel piped structures that have parts cut out of them and are then physically projected outwards onto the surrounding walls "these pieces show the original cube being literally blown to pieces"(2002,p.21). The second, Buren's increasingly frequent use of mirrors which "further accelerates the dissolution of the boundaries of closed space"(2002,p.21). And the third, "contaminating the space with colour"(2001,p.21), which, when shown in a conceptual art exhibition at the Paul Maenz Gallery in 1973 she says, "was considered a deviation from the pure ideal"(2001,p.21) of the 'white cube' showing space.

Tobias Rehberger continued this exploration of space as context when he made a piece called 'Missing Colours' constructing a video installation by 'painting' the walls of a small white room with coloured video projections "that made them shift imperceptibly from green to yellow and from pink to purple when the lights went out"(2002,p.21). Equally, Gillick is making pieces as a series of polychromatic variations, and Pardo by reworking a certain kind of modern interior in vivid colours.

Pellegrin argues however, that the younger artist's critical practices go "beyond questions strictly related to modernism. They also use the decorative to interrogate the display of art"(2001,p.21). In this context, Gillick and Rehberger in particular could be said to both reflect upon *and* re-configure Buren's statement that "whenever any artwork is exhibited, it is also

staged”(2002,p.21). Buren intended making this conception of the exhibition into a décor which allows for two vital consequences; “First, the functionalization of the decorative elements makes it possible to avoid the reification of the artwork. Second, it helps expose the role of the museum which usually presides over this staging”(2002,p.21). In this context, the decorative serves to mirror the decor and make apparent the apparatus of the dominant discourse, it is a constant corruption of space - “the impurity in the décor”(J.Soullilou,cited Pellegrin,2002,p.21).

Pellegrin also argues on behalf of the viewer claiming that the environments that are constructed by Gillick, Rehberger and Pardo are an invitation to *step into* the artwork. The viewer is not excluded from the pictorial or sculptural space, instead they are positioned at, or in the core, they are “led to question the receptive context in which they find themselves”(2002,p.23); they have to manifest a renewed level of attention. In particular, in Pardo’s ‘Artwork-Home’, the viewer becomes a participant allowing them “to see and be seen, to look outside and in”(2002,p.23). The multiple points of view and the deliberately ambiguous status of these artworks create a space in which visitors enjoy a non-exhaustive relation between exhibition value and use value, or rather, that’s how Pellegrin sees it.

I would argue that Perrella’s Hypersurface extends (but does not deny) Buren’s reworking of the space as an *impurity in the décor* by augmenting or prolonging the space with the viewer through a superposed image which becomes *other than that of either form or image*; “Both image (programme) and form become part of each other and part of larger and other logics”(1998,p.12). As an example, we need to remember Perrella’s claim that “when an image of an advert is screened over the form of a bus, the ad-graphic both accepts and denies the bus form”(1998,p.12) because the advert parasitically appropriates the surface over the side of the bus - but the bus itself offers mobility to the advert - both the advert and the bus remain fully functional simultaneously.

But can Pellegrin’s *decorative critique* be applied to painting - the object on the wall containing a fictional/actual surface? Indeed is there a confluence with the architectural as a critique? Is painting simply a ‘sign’ to be coerced as a digital production? Sarah Valdez seems to think so when in her article ‘Attack of the Abstract’, she attempts to argue for Jeremy Blake’s *digitized paintings* (illustration 39). Valdez describes Blake as an ironist who is obsessed with modernist abstract, colour-field painters such as Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland, and also, the new media of DVD projections. Blake projects large, horizontal format, digitally designed animations onto a long wall that resemble colour-field abstractions. However the image continually flows “like the fluid in lava lamps, one luminous form kaleidoscopically morphing into the next”(2002,p.102) - glowing, flat, intricately balanced compositions of stripes (Noland) and blobs (Louis) continuously absorb into each other on contrasting backgrounds. Valdez claims that the constantly changing patterns of colour and shape have unmistakable resemblances to canvases that the late Clement Greenberg would have approved of. There is also a

simultaneous soundtrack which aurally permeates the space in which the projections are shown. Blake designs his works on computers, “he *draws* his images, rather than photographing or filming them”(2002,p.104) very occasionally interdispersing them with bits of almost representational film footage. All the images put together emulate what Valdez describes as *modernisms greatest hits* through their re-introduction as projections held through the time-based medium of the digital projection.

Although Blake, Gillick, Rehberger and Pardo certainly ask questions of institutional modernism, and the more contemporary issue of the display of art, I would argue that there are two sub-textual problems here. One is that Pellegrin’s description of Gillick, Rehberger and Pardo’s critique is too generalized, and the other is that Valdez’s description of Blake is based on a medium-specific (Greenbergian style) reading. In the first case, any artist with a *decorative* penchant could be included in a philosophy borrowed from Deleuze (and later Stephen Perrella) to encompass the issues of a critique of modernism’s exclusion of ornament (maybe this is the liberation that Perrella asks for?). And in the second case, for Valdez to claim that Jeremy Blake is re-configuring Greenbergian theory through the adoption of a non-painterly or non-pure medium such as a DVD projection, relies on the need to grant Greenberg his historic, overbearing status of the *purity* of the medium; DVD can be fetishized as ‘new’ because of the contemporaneity of the equipment used to project an ephemera which is not a *real/object* painting.

However, I would argue along with Pellegrin that the difference between the contexts in which decoration is applied as a *critique* becomes all important when it is not solely dependant on the context(s) of (high) art history. In this sense Buren’s work, although reliant on an antagonism to modernism (as an institutional practice), provides a means for re-contextualising newer artist’s work as a hyperbole that *appear or operate* as an aesthetic ornamentation of *overlapping*. Consequently, Pellegrin’s “reversal of the relationship of dependence on the site, thanks to the visual tool’s power of indexation, and consequently of transformation”(2002,p.21), means that Buren, Blake, Gillick and Rehberger could be understood as maintaining signification in the role of ornament. Except now, their application of work to, or within, physical architecture can be explored not only as a reversal of indexation in modernism, but also as a re-configuration with Perrella’s pixel or media architecture in Hypersurface. In this context, Hypersurface allows the artist to produce *ornamental* work that operates in correlation with physical architecture as a critical extension/interpretation of the “condition of variant (human) agencies playing through, about and within one another; singular yet connected and in a state of flux”(1998,p.10).

The artists that Pellegrin discusses at the end of this Chapter show us that there is a wider concern for the re-configuration of digitalized embodiment in contemporary art as aesthetic ornamentation. Ornamentation, which modernism defines as *merely* decorative, is now no longer a derided term, it is not reduced to Greenberg’s disgust of the mechanically reproducible

(popular art) which he calls 'kitsch' whose precondition or validity he says is based on "the availability close at hand of a fully matured cultural tradition, whose discoveries, acquisitions, and perfected self-consciousness kitsch can take advantage of for its own ends"(1939,p.10). Instead, as David Pagel argues, the distinctions between high and low culture in painting become irrelevant claiming that "perhaps the most exciting aspect of painting today is that it is equally indebted to Pop Art's exploitation of mechanical reproduction and High modernism's focus on the embodied effects of aesthetics"(1998,p.27). I read Pagel's conjoining of these two seemingly opposed art movements and ideologies as firstly, High Modernism, which can be said to represent abstract expressionist painting in America (its chief advocate being the critic Clement Greenberg) - a project of formal exploration *embodied* by the personal through the *effects* of the medium, represented simultaneously as an *expression* of the artists' inner will. And secondly, Pop Art, which can be interpreted as appropriating imagery ironically from popular culture as a reaction to High Modernism's self-enveloped project of individual expression by borrowing from *mechanically reproduced* imagery.

But this conjoining is only a part of my hypothesis. We also needed to reconsider (i) Greenberg's definition of *flatness* as a form of ornamental *becoming* in order to construct an argument about painting that crosses-over and merges recognized historical genres and methodologies of Art History, such as Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art. And, by comparison, (ii) to also re-consider the role that Perrella's Hypersurface theories offer (by way of Merleau-Ponty) as a re-configuration of the embodied, externalized, digital subject as a (conscious) image maker. For example, as regards the overlapping between painting and the digital, we needed to ask how the act of making a painting becomes a re-defining of the phenomenological as an independent activity of aesthetic contemplation. These two questions mean that I am leading up to an investigation of painting as a crossing-over, or overlapping of *contemporary* pluralistic postmodernism versus *traditional* progressive modernism, and simultaneously, painting's philosophical understanding of itself as an embodied activity within a generalized notion of Hypersurface. This is what I take up in my Conclusion.

## Conclusion The Ontology of Digital Embodiment as a 'Becoming' in Contemporary Abstract Painting

So far, I have mentioned a number of painters that we need to bear in mind with regard to a re-configuration of (painted) embodiment within the digital - such as Monique Prieto, Kevin Appel, Fiona Rae, Albert Oehlen and in particular, David Reed. Through these painter's individual *styles* I have demonstrated that although they all build into their practice self-conscious strategies of the problematics of dealing with paint in relation to the simulacral/digital, their (physical) application of the medium of paint may not necessarily adhere to the surface 'look' of the disembodied digital. For example, unlike Prieto, Appel, and Reed, Fiona Rae and Albert Oehlen apply paint very thickly revealing a trace of their hand as gesture. As a consequence of these differing styles of presentation for painters - between flat renditioning that disguises the trace of the hand, and gestural traces that assert the hand through over-loaded brush marks - two of these painters in particular will be referred to in this final section; David Reed representing the former and Albert Oehlen the latter. David Reed, as we have seen, produces flat renditions of painterly abstraction, and Albert Oehlen's later work 'replicates' the clichés of Abstract Expressionism but are based on computer drawings. Although these two painters appear as diametrically opposed in *styles*, I will argue that both of their practices *operate* through an overlapping relationship with the world of the digitalized sign. In order that we come to understand how individual methodological applications of 'painterly' materials are applied (whether it be flat, gestural or overlaid etc.) we need to ask how an ontology of embodiment in the digital occurs in contemporary abstract painting. How does the painter's sense of being *become* represented on the flat painted surface? And more importantly, how does Hypersurface allow us to articulate the digital in and through painting as an extension of the painter's *style*?

To answer these three questions I will firstly talk about my experience as a painter by returning to Alphonse Waelhens claim that painters are unable to see or understand the fruits of their exploits, that they possess a *blind spot* which is caused by painters attempting to depict *reality* as they see it, that somehow they will both express and gain insight from the manifestation of their labours. This occurs Waelhens says, because of the painters *misplaced* conviction that "the equivocation of naturalism and of 'likeness' resides precisely in their (vain) attempt to bolster their dubious ontology with this imperative mission of return"(1993,p.175).

We need to remember that I'm trying to find a way of dealing *and* representing the embodied ontological act of making *abstract* painting in the contemporary/digital for both myself and the viewer. As a result, the making of a painting demands that I do not know in advance that which will be depicted or represented. After all, the final results should be kind of embarrassing because the elemental decisions that I make in the construction of a painting means that when I

consider it finished I risk exposing myself through my *blind spot*. Let me explain. Because of the painter's *blind spot* they do not recognize the fruits of their labours which also means that they run the risk of not recognizing that which they reveal through colour, form, line, gesture, iconography etc. The (finished) painting takes on a life and meaning of its own beyond the painters attempt to give it a personal identity that the painter believes will be recognizable to all who view it.

This is not the same as the Greenbergian painterly idea of *quality* that resides in the attempts at a resolution of an aesthetic wholeness manifested as the painters *originality* and *uniqueness*, but rather, as Merleau-Ponty's repetition of the painter's *visible body in the world* having an internal equivalent - a carnal formula of its presence: "since things and my body are made of the same stuff, vision must somehow come about in them; or yet again, their manifest visibility must be repeated in the body by a secret visibility"(1960,p.125).

I would also add that Merleau-Ponty's carnal formula means that Greenberg's criteria for *originality* and *uniqueness* is changed through Andrew Benjamin's notion of the ontological yet-to-be-resolved presence in painting as a staged repetition. The desire to shape meaning through colour, marks, and signs, becomes changed as a staged repetition of painting's history which in turn inflects upon the autobiographical, though now we need to understand the autobiographical in painting in terms of the relation between Merleau-Ponty, Clement Greenberg and Andrew Benjamin; that is, as the ontological act and *style* of actual making as a *staged becoming* in the digital.

For me, because Benjamin's historically repeated *staged becoming* is a variation on Merleau-Ponty's *internal equivalent* through a reflection of those histories, we can now think of (the making of) painting as "provided by the recognition of the potential power of words and of painting; by retaining a presence of the way ahead (as a continuity) and by holding to the necessity of chance"(1996,p.37).

With my supposition of Benjamin's productive repetition of painting's known languages, coupled with Merleau-Ponty's *internal equivalent* as a *productive co-presence*, we can now think about the actual constituents of the act of painting as the "staging of the centrality of art's work"(1996,p.41), as both *art*, and as an act of production which is bound to the continuity of experimentation. I would argue that the experimentation of chance presents itself as both a continual questioning of the status and genre of the work's work, and also, that chance through repetition, *constructed* through Merleau-Ponty's *imaginary texture of the real*, becomes *the* critical possibility in contemporary painting as a series of questions. Perhaps this is what Jean-Francois Lyotard was after in his conclusion to *The Post Modern Condition* when he demanded that postmodern art presents itself (as a re-presentation) of the unrepresentable; a re-working of the consensus of taste, good form, and nostalgia for the unattainable. Lyotard argues that the

(postmodern) artist is in the position of a philosopher whose work cannot “be judged according to a determining judgment. Those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for”(1979,p.81). For Lyotard, contemporary artists are constructing the future by working away from it in art’s (painting’s) past languages by:

Working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what *will have been done*. Hence the fact that work and text have the characters of an *event*; hence also, they always come too late for their author, or, what amounts to the same thing, their being put into work, their realization (*mise en oeuvre*) always being too soon. *Post modern* would have to be understood according to the paradox of the future (*post*) anterior (*modo*) (1979,p.81).

### Surface Flatness as a Site for Re-Configured Activity

But what evidence do we have to relate Merleau-Ponty’s *internal equivalent* of the *imaginary texture of the real*, with Benjamin’s (or Lyotard’s) notion of historical repetition of the painted surface as the site of activity in the future anterior? Exactly how is *being* represented on the flat painted surface? Benjamin, by constructing a thesis of chance as an ontological becoming of the existential and the external, does this by historically locating a schism in Greenberg’s concern for flatness which, Benjamin says, is no longer relevant because Greenberg does not take into account the full relation between the subject and the object. We need to remember that Greenberg’s viewing subject whose *at-onceness* presumes that there is “a unified singular entity which in a single moment confronts a work that is given in its absolute simplicity”(1996,p.27), assumes that opticality is defined or limited by an economy of completion and exhaustion that becomes an immediate experience. Instead, Benjamin argues, opticality is a relationship between a subject and an object; the subject comes to be at any one moment an effect of these subjective/objective determinations. For Benjamin, these determinations are *irreducible* and eliminate Greenberg’s limited notion of the undifferentiated subject as the foundation of subjectivity. Therefore, the art object is transfigured to include an ontological experience with both the eye and the mind because the object resists the possibility of finality or completion and this also relates to experience.

So for Benjamin, the relations between Greenberg’s conception of ‘modernist painting’ as flat surface, and the *surface* as re-configured in the contemporary are changed because its reintroduction is now an “open space without a single and unified texture”(1996,p.42). For Benjamin this Greenbergian/contemporary contradiction means that the interplay between flatness and immediacy, initially brought about by the modernist painter as an instant and physical application of paint, is maintained as abstraction, but only as “a painted recognition of the impossibility of that immediacy”(1996,p.42). I would argue that Perrella’s Hypersurface also describes the *impossibility of that immediacy* as a contemporary digital condition in relation but through architectural materiality, because, as Perrella claims, “form has been pushed out of

relation to function, programme has been dissuaded from context, and structure is disjoint from signification”(1998,p.10). Perrella recognizes that physical immediacy is changed by architectures contemporary role as multiple surface(s) in the era of the sign.

Once again, it becomes clear that Andrew Benjamin and Perrella do not mean that producing a *painted recognition of the impossibility of immediacy* is a lament or mourning for the historical passing of abstract art’s self-critical tendencies. Instead, Benjamin advocates an “interplay between a holding - the retention of the genre - and an opening out”(1996,p.42) as an affirmative possibility for painting which demonstrates a criticality that maintains a *complexity* through its surface. Consequently, we can re-think Perrella’s understanding of physical architecture (in the digital) as a chance to explore Benjamin’s *work of the surface as the site of activity*, as an *open space without a single and unified texture*. Because Perrella argues that Hypersurface offers a variant of (human) agencies which are singular yet connected but in a state of flux, Hypersurface acts by absorbing *and* resonating meaning as an infrastructural term; as a middle ground between the traditionally conceived body/object duality. In turn, this infrastructurality extends the relations between the material and the imagined allowing for a re-staging of abstract painting as a critical, creative process to include the notion of digital imaging in non-digital media.

## Style as Hypersurface in Contemporary Painting

Having established the theoretical criteria for Hypersurface as a generalized infrastructural term which frames the re-configuration of painting, we now have the tools with which to discuss (at the end of this thesis) how individual painting practices are informed by the relation of Hypersurface with the digital as an extension or *becoming* of what a painter’s *style* may be. In these two final sections I will bring together Benjamin’s staged repetition, Perrella’s Hypersurface, and Merleau-Ponty’s reversible overlapping, to argue for the *style* of the painter in Hypersurface. Firstly, Andrew Benjamin’s staged, historical becoming for abstract painting as a yet-to-be-resolved object gives an opportunity to argue for the *becoming* of abstraction in *conjunction* with a painter’s *style*. Secondly, Benjamin’s re-staging of abstract painting as a *critical act* leads us to ask how contemporary painting’s *work of the surface as a site of activity* overlaps with the desire of the painter to paint. Thirdly, Merleau-Ponty’s inter-related process of vision, thought and body creates an ontology of *internal equivalence* for the painter showing us how the painter’s *unique* mode of approach, alongside other modes of approach co-exist in the field of abstract painting; and fourthly, how these three modes have been transformed by the irresolvable complexities of identity through Perrella’s Hypersurface. I will demonstrate here how all these aspects together represent an intertwining that gives the painter a sense of a non-dualistic critical project which operates as a co-presence of embodied experience superposed upon aesthetic subjectivity.



In order to demonstrate the intertwining of these four models as *style*, once again we need to return to Alphonse de Waelhens *blind spot* in painters. He suggests that the actual act of painting is related to the processes which drive it - an internalized reasoning and desire converted into the *being* of the painting (via vision) through thought and decision making. The painter's thought (which is transposed onto the concrete world) *represents* the painter's style and allows for the painter's *becoming* onto the world as a mode of approach rather than a means of (*real or simulated*) representation. *Approach as style* for the painter has a reflected relation to the fleshiness of what he/she sees because of the awareness of his/her own body. From this position the painter forms the initial outline of the work in hand in his/her own perception through the deployment of painterly language. It is through the painter's perception and the language included within it that the painter attempts to make manifest 'diffuse' meaning so as to produce an established meaning offered to the viewer.

Merleau-Ponty is more specific about the painter's perception, which he says is *auto-figurative*;

The painter's vision is not a view upon the *outside*, a merely 'physical-optical' relation with the world. The world no longer stands before him through representation; rather, it is the painter to whom the things of the world give birth by a sort of concentration or coming-to-itself of the visible. Ultimately the painting relates to nothing at all among experienced things unless it is first of all 'autofigurative' (1960,p.141).

So style becomes an auto-figurative *overlapping* that occurs between the subjective and objective worlds. But now that we have determined that style is auto-figurative - style starts with the painter's nascent thought - how can we re-interpret interest/value in painting through Benjamin's *surface as a site of activity* (which of course he argues as a *staged becoming* of historical repetition)? Indeed what makes up the criteria for staged painting through the *becoming* of style? What in painting constitutes *content* that is carried by the medium and manifest through line, colour, form, depth - where is its relation to the concrete world that we can now interpret as a Hypersurface?

It is through Merleau-Ponty's notion of the *style* of the painter that we can re-think the value placed *on*, or rather, to give a value *to* the painter's work in the contemporary - *value as style* becomes 'content' through context. *Style as context* re-configures the 'painter painting' but only when it is seen through Perrella's recent digital/architectural claim that the inside must reconnect to the outside through imagination. In effect, the contemporary painter painting becomes an *overlapping* of autobiographical investments in painterly language, but, along with Merleau-Ponty's *auto-figurative*, this overlapping is also transformed through the world of the sign and Hypersurface.

As an example of *style as context* as an *overlapping* of painterly language, we can once again turn to David Reed's paintings. Danto, when describing the act or build-up of Reed's painting

says that “Reed always studies what he has produced in order to see which particular passages stand out. The reasons for selecting a passage are bound up with Reed’s entire sensibility as an artist, and they are not easy to articulate”(1999,p.125). From this selection of passages Reed then makes further choices for the construction of the painting which finally appear as flat, almost photographic renditions of gestural abstract painting. Because Reed’s work both borrows from the tradition of Abstract Expressionist and Baroque painting as mimicked simulations, and because the forms are simultaneously physical brushstrokes *and* flat representations of brushstrokes, Reed’s paintings confuse the senses of sight and touch - what we expect to see as a physically manifest gesture, of the painted form as a materiality in its own right - means that instead we see the same form both as paint and as a representation. The materiality of Reed’s painting projects the *auto-figurative* as a tangible relation between the materiality of the traditions of painting and paintings representation as flat reproductions in the world of the sign; a cross-over between simulacral surface representation and the objective world.

It is clear that here we can think of Danto’s description of Reed’s *sensibility* as ontological. And to further demonstrate my claim that Reed’s paintings are an ontological *overlapping* with the world both in terms of Reed’s personal style, and its manifestation as a cross-over between materiality and representation, we need to think of Reed’s colour schemes. Danto describes the colour in Reed’s paintings as adopting “sometimes lurid hues, I think of his painting as Manhattan baroque - or, as with the cheeky red and mustard of #439, Las Vegas baroque”(1999,p.122). Reed’s paintings reposition the ontological nature of the sign of abstract and baroque painting therefore *hyperreflecting* those signs through colour as *a reality* of the overlapping of those conventions. This occurs not only because of the comparisons with what Waelhens calls the relationship between the imaginary and the real - “the ‘carnal obverse’ of the life led by the real in my own body”(1993,p.181), but also, with Merleau-Ponty’s concern for colour, which he says, is unstable when determining space from an internal law of construction. These colour comparisons I would argue, determine the *style* of Reed’s painting’s but this time as *imaginary textures of the real*. Reed’s voluminosity of colour rejects the binding of the drawn outline in order to include depth and space in his paintings as a reversible overlapping of the inter-relations of vision, thought, and the body of the painter.

Reed’s approach of overlapping suggests that the notion of Greenbergian materiality as standing in for itself - the carrier of its meaning as a medium which includes personalized colour - could be re-configured as the carrier or operation of ‘the carnal obverse’, not as an expression of inner subjectivity, but as an *overlapping* of the conventions of art historical tropes replaced as up-to-date city-scape external colour schemes. This seems to me to offer an experiential embodied ontology for future painting that flows as a co-presence with *all* mediated signs in the world of objects as a *poetic* resonance. But what of Hypersurface’s ability to extend the overlap of experiential embodied ontology through the symbolic virtual? It is clear, as we have seen

that Hypersurface changes the body's sensuous relation to time and space. So what of the relations of the ontology of the digital in particular?

Because Perrella argues that "human agency is evermore defined through technological interfaces... subjectivity co-figures architecture in a complex way"(1998p.12), then we as subjects are part-media constructs. Like Reed's ontological projection of the colours of the cityscape, human agency will inevitably be aesthetically manifested through the computer screen where we are embodied as cursors, and also through the built environment in which we access both other bodies and technology as "an inflected place where we encounter ourselves, but as technology"(1998,p.13). For Perrella, "media architecture helps to establish an infrastructure for Hypersurfaces only without its material aspect"(1998,p.10). Hypersurface becomes fully intense when it is both surface/substance *and* signification, a play through each other in a temporal flux, a relational exchange between digital signs and the forms which support them. The signification of painting then, could be re-thought as an *overlapping* of the surface/substance over (digital) architecture, as augmented form/image; a virtual deterritorialization that is manifest through the relations between the disembodied screen and our physical embodiment.

This overlapping of the digital screen (where we are embodied as cursors) as an immaterial infrastructure for Hypersurface, now leads me to the question of aesthetic evaluation for painting within this play of temporal flux as a relational exchange. As we have seen, *value* as *style* becomes 'content' through context in the contemporary, rendering Greenberg's value judgments of *purity* and *quality*, irrelevant tools (indeed factors) when considering the differences between, say, a painter's solo output or a group show of paintings. For example, how do we define which of David Reed's paintings are more *interesting aesthetically* because or despite of embodied *overlapping* with the digital? It appears that the process of production in contemporary painting as an aesthetic activity becomes more complex if it is to be given a status beyond the art market and commercial tastes.

### The Criticality of Apposition as 'Pure Seduction'

Because a material/immaterial flux of actual/any discourse cannot result in a consensual collectivity, the cultural enfolding of technology as a series of generative effects are not reducible to language because they are effects that are shifting back and forth between the material and the immaterial. Instead of accepting Greenberg's notion of purity where painting was to engage "with all that was unique in the nature of its medium"(1960,p.86), now the process or construction of a painting through paint or any other medium is worked through as exteriorization - as ornament through mediated embodiment. In this sense, Greenberg's understanding of pure is replaced by an embodied complex. Greenberg's pure now *becomes* an embodied (digital) complex sign, offering a seductive ornamental (flat) aesthetics for painting

which acts as a co-presence of embodied experience superposed upon aesthetic subjectivity. It is, as David Pagel argues, a position to work out from. Unlike Baudrillard's postmodern understanding of the hyperreal as *superficial*, as an ironic dualism, contemporary painting does not rely for its impact on a one-dimensional negation or criticism of previous works recent styles or current social practices, but actively seeks to re-engage with painting and its history as an "*aposition* rather than an *opposition*" (1998,p.525).

This *aposition* still leaves us asking how to choose, or rather, make distinctions between paintings in a non-dichotomous way - how to talk of painting as a phenomenology of aesthetics in relation to what we are seeing with the proliferation of painting shows in museums and commercial galleries in the art world. How do we to distinguish between the various re-configuration of a painter's *style*? How are we to become interested in the differences between paintings which Greenberg would have called "second-hand or second rate painting"(1954,p.189), or just plain bad? Danto has pointed out that for contemporary art terms such as "goodness and badness are not matters of belonging to the right style"(1997,p.355), because as a concept these judgments are based on a hierarchical, historicist system of art such as Greenberg's prescription that modernism "finally takes its place in the intelligible continuity of taste and tradition"(1960.p93) whereby painting "find(s) the guarantee of its standards of quality as well as its independence"(1960,p.86).

I would suggest that reading contemporary painting through Merleau-Ponty's *imaginary texture of the real* as an *aposition* of the phenomenology of aesthetics (via style), means that contemporary painting is able to transform judgment (of its inherited painterly language) into a simultaneity of externalized, multiplicitous readings as a mirror of Hypersurface through vision. For example a contemporary painting can mix Old master illusionism (Greenberg's disparaging term) with high Modernism and Pop Art if that is what is required by the artist. Similarly, traditional (oil paint) and non-traditional materials or external elements may be introduced onto the painting, such as Chris Ofili's mixture of acrylic painted dots, glitter, resin, cut-out magazine images and elephant dung (illustration 40). Equally, an emotive response can be sought from the viewer by the inclusion of say, either a series of marks or signs, or a particular green that could be translated as representing the colour of a certain sort of remembered room or era in which that room was important - a colour/mark/sign that has a resonance for the artist. Painting, in this emotive/hybrid context, can be encouraged as experimental exploration through its chosen medium(s), histories and relations to simulacral/digital culture because aesthetic judgment is contextual - a contextuality seen through Hypersurface - and this determines the criteria on which decisions are made by both the painter and the audience (not to mention the collectors, the publicists and the gallery circuits).

But the contextuality of Hypersurfaces means more than just a re-contextualization of aesthetic judgement. The painter's phenomenological, aesthetic (experimental) practice as *style* is

extended through the augmented spacetimes of digital interfaces by transforming style into a rhizomatic operation; as an *overlapping* of the augmented *imaginary texture of the real* through material practice (think of Monique Prieto's and Kevin Appel's use of the computer as tool that informs their paintings). For me, style, re-configured through the digital sign, offers an augmented plenitude of (visual) information at extremely fast speeds which is filtered through the painter's gaze as a re-constitution of the material world. And painting, I would argue, is made aesthetically manifest (through style) by the speed of the digital as *reflected* 'real-time' - painting becomes a series of *relational* materialities - it is unique in enabling the cross-over between the internal and the external, between the gaze, the body, the world of objects, and the augmented digital as irresolvable timescale complexities which are manifested *in* painting's site of activity.

For me, painting's *criticality* is *uniquely* bound up as a constant negotiation between physical material manipulation and the symbolic imagined digital, because now painting as an advanced activity is rendered through '*staged*' *imaginary forms* of *overlapped* expression. The (modernist) clichés of the medium's uniqueness and/or purity of self-expression are transformed not only through the historical clichés of producing a subjective, singular, original which *become* linguistic signs, but also, as an expression of the digital symbolic sign into which overlapped irresolvable complexities act as a mirror. Painting as an activity of *expression* therefore becomes a dialogue, or rather, it is dialogical.

The painter Albert Oehlen (illustration 41) for example, in his paintings from the 1990's, neatly *overlaps* the *internal equivalent* through *bodily function* by making work which contains both familiar abstract painting tropes of gesture and mark, and complex, burlesque, visual juxtapositions of fragments of recognizable forms through digital signs. Oehlen's insistence on the merger of (traditional) combinations of abstraction with gestural renditions of figuration, means that he is important here as a bridge between Chris Ofili's hand-crafted incorporation of non-traditional materials, and my work which is constructed 'at a distance' by pouring layers of transparent varnishes with opaque paints onto removable vinyl signs.

Oehlen often constructs his recent paintings based on computer drawings, which already puts them at one remove from the hand-crafted. But the use of the computer, I would say, is simply a tool of construction for the painting (much in the same way as a pencil drawing) and is not a prerequisite for the demonstration of being 'at-a-distance' in contemporary painting as a relation to the digital. Oehlen re-renders gesture as an absurdist paradigm, deliberately forcing a kind of anti-formal formalism as a re-assessment of the expression of abstraction whilst simultaneously offering no clear direction of intention when the final painting is presented. Oehlen achieves this 'lack of intention' (which is itself an intention) by scattering and overlapping thought and ideas through the accumulation of hand painted form, colour, matter and proportion. As Fabrice Hergott says of the artist:

The canvases, covered in bold brushstrokes and colours, bear forms which are alternately distinct and blurred. Printed fabrics are juxtaposed with figures which seem to be either deleted attempts or preliminary sketches... (these works) are like a surface pile-up of motifs flung together like objects in an attic - not sorted according to specific characteristics, but simply crammed in wherever there was space (1995,p.39).

Through “warm colours, thick welts of paint, a lack of geometric perspective (there is no vanishing point)”(1995,p.39), all the marks and forms are cut off by the edges of the painting often with little feeling or sense of elegance or scenic satisfaction. Robert Orht, in the same book on Oehlen, describes this lack of formal elegance in Oehlen’s paintings as recalling a psychedelic delirium by ignoring the edge of the canvas as a (perspectival) boundary, so that what is contained on the painted surface is a surface of the image - forms drift away or collapse “creating the edges, frames and markings of the voids in a collision of different temporal spaces of action and thought”(1995,p.21). In turn these collisions of action and thought nudge the development of the paintings in different visual directions during their construction. Unlike Hergott however, Orht argues that intention does exist in this seeming lack of multiplicitous direction “which only becomes clear when perception is inherent in the act of painting and no longer segregates its contrasts or rejects inappropriate elements”(1995,p.21).

For me, Oelhen’s interest in the mixing of the temporal with ‘painterly’ elements contained within the framing discourses that we recognize as a painting (such as a formal/informal application of coloured pigments onto a support), means that we can understand how to apply the cliché of abstraction, as abstraction, to re-animate *an area where skills are reinvented* through the sign of its own medium - as an *invented staged imaginary form of overlapped* expression. In turn, could we not *poetically* imagine Oelhen’s delirious, informal/formal/non-formal use of paint as a relational style that is a cross-over with the digital? For example, could hand crafted painting (and painting such as mine that removes touch but leaves a physical after-presence) be understood as a bodily manifestation of the augmented space of the digital - as a replication or *imagined* reconstruction of a PC’s software such as the Windows programme which ‘overlays’ one set of information over another as a mimic of an actual desk top?

My recent paintings (illustrations 42,43) attempt to bridge the gap between the physicality of the world of objecthood and the simulated, virtual world of signs that are represented on the digital computer screen. Painting, in this context, becomes an imagined physicality of the corporeal. I present this imagined physicality as a phenomenology of aesthetics which is intended to complement the digital rather than work against it - to recognize the impact that reproducible (non Cartesian) digital space has on our understanding of our bodies as sole authors of unique objects. Equally, and at the same time, my paintings seek to cross-over and merge recognized historical genres and methodologies of Art History such as Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art by developing a relation between the bodily and the augmented virtual as an accumulation of

temporality, action, colour and form, through the build-up of fragmented signs. These signs then become buried within poured, flat layering which are both transparent and opaque. The construction of (flat) layering makes evident, firstly, a stratum of sensual decoration of simultaneous optical and physical depth as surface effect which mimics the palimpsests of virtual layering. And also as a personal, auto-figurative style through the use of colour, choice of imagery, and formal/non-formal arrangement. This surface effect as style I would interpret as a 'pure' seduction of opticality, materiality and colour in signification - it is both surface effect and a material methodology. In this context, surface effect as material style becomes 'complex' pleasure through a re-staged making activated through Hypersurface as a re-configured, dialogic criticality.

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## **Paintings: 1989-2003**

Visual Accompaniment to Thesis:

### **Digital Embodiment in Contemporary Abstract Painting**

**Michael Stubbs**

Goldsmiths College, University of London, PhD, 2003

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## Introduction

This visual document is designed to accompany the text based written element of my PhD. It displays examples of my work made both before and during my research project which took place from October 1999 through to September 2003 and is based on personal notes given at public slide demonstrations. The images are taken from original 35mm slides and are intended to show an edited development of my visual practice in relation to the concerns and evidence that were available for the written thesis.

To accompany the reproductions I have included detailed descriptions of the works titles, mediums, sizes and dates but I have not included methodologies of construction, contexts of exhibition placement or any other means of information relating to the how, why or where these works were made or were/are intend(ed) to be exhibited, as this would require a text beyond the means of this thesis. However, some further information regarding the constructions and contexts of these illustrations in relation to the thesis are documented here in this introduction, and also in two stages in the larger text; at the beginning on page 44 and at the end on pages 206-207.

There are Four Stages of development illustrated in this booklet. The First Stage describes the period 1989-1993 (illustrations 219-226) and demonstrates the use of applying oil paint on stacked and single canvases using cake icers, oil paint tubes, and a larger scale mastic gun. These works were intended as both parodies of the (Greenbergian) medium-specific separation of painting and sculpture by making them both painting and sculpture simultaneously, and also as parodies of hand gestured *expressive* brushmarks. The 'cake/stack' paintings/sculptures deliberately challenge the orthodoxy of Malevich's, and later Greenberg's assertion that the medium of paint be reduced back to the picture plane as a precondition of the specificity of the medium which becomes the carrier of its *content*. Instead the 'cake/stack' paintings attempt to *subvert* the medium of oil paint and its support *outwards* from the wall as a physical reversal of Greenberg's premise - initially as a monochrome and then with two complimentary colours. The other piped paintings explore physicality as resemblances of things in the world of objects such as cloth or weave whilst also considering the relations of colour (illustration 224). Colour is further explored in the illustrations 225-226 by way of parodies of the modernist (Mondrian) grid.

Around 1993-94, I began to think about making a painting without the need for parodic devices of paint application such as the cake icers. However, I still wanted to apply paint by means of a technical gesture rather than an *expressive* hand gesture because I felt that painting should still reveal its production as a *problematic* of direct expression. Therefore, illustrations 227-230 (1995-1999), although not documented directly in the thesis represent Stage Two, and are

shown here as precursors for the remaining paintings explorations of form, colour, line and material as a re-staging, or repetition of abstractions historical legacy. They demonstrate a process-based multi-layered pouring of household paints and/or transparent coloured varnishes in grid or circular patterns onto MDF boards. These works explore two colour relations whilst simultaneously disrupting the rigidity of the modernist grid by allowing the free-flowing movement of the materials to break down the controlled drawn colours - the results of which inform the titles rather like a Rorschach test. In particular, illustration 227 reverses the optical (but not the physical) figure ground relationship by using a white figure that visually *holes through* to the wall that supports the painting, allowing the ground colour to push forward.

Illustrations 224-227 (1999-2000), form Stage Three, and represent a cross-over between the *Rorschach* grid paintings and the works that are currently being made. These paintings were experiments with differing 'painterly' mediums and languages. Although they are necessary challenges to my two previous bodies of work as a way of re-configuring the orthodoxies I had built for myself, I consider these paintings as failures and were not intended for public display with the exception of illustrations 237-238, which in hindsight, were reluctantly shown in 2000. All these paintings included figural images borrowed from firstly street graffiti by dripping *figurative* imagery over the abstract pours, and secondly, spray painting the *figuration*. Some works incorporated either hand painted hard-edged graphic signs or re-introduced oil painted 'cake icing' techniques from my early work of the 1990's. The most successful painting of this non-public period for me was illustration 236 - a spray painted image over random pours and cake making stencils which anticipated the later combination of opaque and transparent opticality as a play of, or through, multiple visualities.

Illustrations 239-274 (2001-2003) represent Stage Four and develop the figurative or rather the found sign as a relation to the abstract by utilising removable decorative graphic vinyl signs at various (repeated) stages of the painting's production. These signs reveal their absences when removed and act as both interruptions of the poured physical layering, and as reversible optical palimpsests. The relationship between the intractability of the materials (poured paints and varnishes) and the willful deliberation (of graphically reproducible commercial signs) are intended to challenge the languages of painting and its representation as a re-staging of painterly craft. The processes of repeated pouring, with the peeling of signs, has in the more recent paintings erased the use value of the signs so converting their readings into the process of the making itself. The resulting mixtures of multiple optical languages in relation to the physical material asks the viewer to read these later paintings as (i) re-configurations of Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art, (ii) an archeological process of continued making which allows for variations of formal re-appraisal, (iii) personal statements of intent through the choice of imagery, colour and titles (early titles of 2001-2002 were descriptive of the images used), and (iv) flat layered mimics of the seductive surface effect of the flattened world of the digital screen.

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