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Rauschenberg

ART Forum
MARCH 1972



Fig. 1. Rembrandt, *Woman Reading*, pen and bister, 2⅝" x 3⅛", ca. 1639-40. (Metropolitan Museum of Art.)

REFLECTIONS ON THE STATE OF CRITICISM

This article is an excerpt from the author's forthcoming book, *Other Criteria*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1972.

LEO STEINBERG

I don't mind the positive work done by formalist critics, but I dislike their interdictory stance — the attitude that tells an artist what he ought not to do, and the spectator what he ought not to see. Preventive esthetics, I call it.

When was it that formalist art criticism first conceived of itself as a prohibitive function? At a certain point we begin to be told that there is only one thing, one alone, to be looked for in art. Thus Baudelaire in his 1863 essay on Delacroix:

> A well-drawn figure fills you with a pleasure that is quite alien to the theme. Voluptuous or terrible, this figure owes its charm solely to the arabesque it describes in space. The limbs of a flayed martyr, the body of a swooning nymph, if they are skillfully drawn, connote a type of pleasure in which the theme plays no part, and if you believe otherwise, I shall be forced to think that you are an executioner or a rake.

No one will want to argue the opposite — that you savor a Delacroix for the tang of massacre only. But earlier critics, and I suspect the painter himself, might have allowed one to see a coincidence, a magic identity of pathos and arabesque. Now, at the risk of Baudelaire's disapproval, this will no longer do: short of confessing that you look to art to gratify prurient or sadistic appetites, you had better see those nude limbs *solely* as arabesques described in space.

Or compare this from Roger Fry's *Last Lectures:*

> The sensuality of Indian artists is exceedingly erotic — the *leitmotif* of much of their sculpture is taken from the more relaxed and abandoned poses of the female figure. A great deal of their art, even their religious art, is definitely pornographic, and although I have no moral prejudices against that form of expression, it generally interferes with esthetic considerations by interposing a strong irrelevant interest which tends to distract both the artist and spectator from the essential purpose of a work of art.[1]

The provincialism of this passage is characteristic. Indifferent to the intent of the art he condemned, Fry could not see that erotic sculptures on Indian temples are "pornographic" only to the extent that Western images of Crucifixion and martyrdom are "sadistic." If Fry found the love of Shiva and Parvati more distracting than the agony of Christ, this tells us something of his personal background, but very little about "the essential purpose of art."

Similar warnings against distracting interference with esthetic form come from most formalist writers. They deplore the tendency artists have of trying to make pictures move you in illegitimate ways — as when Albert C. Barnes says of Michelangelo's *Fall of Man* on the Sistine Ceiling that "the effect of movement is vigorous and powerful but tends to be overdramatic."[2]

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An artist who "overdramatizes" his work with expression has wrongheaded values and must pay the price. *Serves him right,* is the implicit moral of Clement Greenberg's discovery that Picasso began at one definable moment to lose his certainty as an artist:

> A painting done in 1925, the striking *Three Dancers,* where the will to illustrative expressiveness appears ambitiously for the first time since the Blue Period, is the first evidence of a lessening of this certainty . . . . The *Three Dancers* goes wrong, not just because it is literary . . . , but because the theatrical placing and rendering of the head and arms of the center figure cause the upper third of the picture to wobble.[3]

My purpose is not to argue whether the *Three Dancers* goes wrong. What matters is that an alleged fault of unstable design is blamed upon interference from a "theatrical," *i.e.,* alien intention — "the will to expressiveness." This is pure prejudice. Another critic, assuming he found the same fault, might feel that this upper portion had failed through overconcern with formal arrangement. If the artist "went wrong," who decides which lobe of his Manichaean brain was responsible, the bright half whence pure design is distilled, or that darker side where the will to expressiveness lurks?

Reducing the range of reference has always been the appointed task of formalist thought, but there has been much hard, serious thinking in it. Given the complexity and infinite resonance of works of art, the stripping down of artistic value to the single determinant of formal organization was once — in the 19th century — a remarkable cultural achievement. The attempt was to discipline art criticism in the manner of scientific experiment, through the isolation of a single variable. Art's "essential purpose" — call it abstract unity of design or whatever prevents buckling and wobbling — was presumed to be abstractable from all works of art. And the whole range of meaning was ruled to be disposable "subject matter," which at best did no harm but which more commonly burdened the form. In the formalist ethic, the ideal critic remains unmoved by the artist's expressive intention, uninfluenced by his culture, deaf to his irony or iconography, and proceeds undistracted, programmed like an Orpheus making his way out of hell.

It does not seem to me that the esthetic quality of works of art was ever more than a notional fiction, that it can be experienced as an independent variable, or that it is really isolated by critical judgment. Our experience indicates rather that quality rides the crest of a style, and that when a movement or style as such is resisted, the qualitative differences within that style become unavailable. Ten years ago, all American formalist critics spurned Pop art *in toto,* and their wholesale rejection admitted no consideration of individual quality or distinction. Whatever merit a Claes Oldenburg may have had remained imperceptible, while the names "Lichtenstein, Rosenquist, Warhol" were run off like the firm name Carson, Pirie, Scott & Co. What interests me here is not to what extent those early denunciations of Pop might need readjustment. The point is that formalist critics could not even confront the question of quality; or were loath to do so lest the exercise of esthetic judgment bestow undue dignity on an aberration. There was to be no voting across party lines.

Contemporary American formalism owes its strength and enormous influence to the professionalism of its approach. It analyzes specific stylistic advances within a linear conception of historic development. Its theoretical justification was furnished by Clement Greenberg whose essay, "Modernist Painting" (1965) reduces the art of a hundred years to an elegant one-dimensional sweep. Following is a brief summary, given as far as possible in the author's own words.[4]

"The essence of Modernism lies . . . in the use of the . . . methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself — not in order to subvert it, but to entrench it more firmly in its areas of competence." As Kant used logic to establish the limits of logic, so, argues Greenberg, "modernism criticizes from the inside, through the procedures themselves of that which is being criticized." How then does this self-criticism proceed? "The task of self-criticism became to eliminate from the effects of each art any . . . effect that might conceivably be borrowed from . . . any other art. Thereby each art would be rendered 'pure' . . . ." This purity, Greenberg continues, "meant self-definition, and the enterprise of self-criticism in the arts became one of self-definition with a vengeance." How did this process of self-definition find expression in painting? Pictorial art, Greenberg explains, "criticized and defined itself under Modernism" by "stressing the ineluctable flatness of the support. . . . Flatness alone was unique and exclusive to that art . . . and so, Modernist painting oriented itself to flatness as it did to nothing else."

We may take it for granted that in this system all narrative and symbolic content had to drain out of painting because that kind of content was held in common with literature. The depiction of solid forms was abandoned because "three-dimensionality is the province of sculpture, and for the sake of its own autonomy painting has had above all to divest itself of everything it might share with sculpture." Recognizable entities had to go because they "exist in three-dimensional space and the barest suggestion of a recognizable entity suffices to call up associations of that kind of space . . . and by doing so, alienates pictorial space from the two-dimensionality which is the guarantee of painting's independence as an art."

Whatever else one may think of Greenberg's construction, its overwhelming effect is to put all painting in series. The progressive flattening of the pictorial stage since Manet "until its backdrop had become the same as its curtain"[5] — the approximation of the depicted field to the plane of its material support — this was the great Kantian process of self-definition in which all serious Modernist painting was willy-nilly engaged. The one thing which painting can call its own is color coincident with the flat ground, and its drive towards independence demands withdrawal from anything outside itself and single-minded insistence on its unique property. Even now, 200 years after Kant, any striving for other goals becomes deviationist. Despite the continual emergence in our culture of cross-border disciplines (ecology, cybernetics, psycho-linguistics, biochemical engineering, etc.) the self-definition of advanced painting is still said to require retreat. It is surely cause for suspicion when the drift of third-quarter 20th-century American painting is made to depend on 18th-century German epistemology. Are there no contractionist impulses nearer at hand? Was it Kantian self-definition which led the American woman into what Betty Friedan calls the "Feminine Mystique," wherein "the only commitment for women is the fulfillment of their own femininity?"[6]

A graver objection concerns Greenberg's management of pre-modern art, and this needs discussion because Greenberg's Modernism defines itself in opposition to the Old Masters. If that opposition becomes unstable, Modernism may have to be redefined by other criteria.

The problem, it seems, hinges on the illusionism of Old Master paintings — the supposed intent of their art to deceive and dissemble. Now, there can be no doubt that there are, and that there have always been, people who look at realistic images as though they were real — but what kind of people? On August 13, 1971, the cover of *Life* Magazine featured a nude *Eve* by Albrecht Dürer side by side with the photograph of a modern young woman in dungarees. In the weeks following, close to 3,000 Middle American readers canceled their subscriptions to *Life,* protesting the shamelessness of the nude. Many took her for real and thought she had stripped for the photographer. But these people, whatever their moral standards, are not the definers of art.

Yet Greenberg's contrasting definition of Old Master art relies on just this sort of reading. "Realistic, illusionist art had dissembled the medium, using art to conceal art"; whereas "Modernism uses art to call attention to art."[7] It is as though we were told that modern poetry for the first time draws attention to its own process, whereas Dante, Shakespeare, and Keats had merely used meter and rhyme to tell stories. Has Greenberg been taken in by the illusionism of the Old Masters? Obviously not, for he has a remarkably good eye for painting. And in fact his actual observations constantly overturn the polarity he seeks to establish. Thus: "The Old Masters always took into account the tension between surface and illusion, between the physical facts of the medium and its figurative content —

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but in their need to conceal art with art, the last thing they had wanted was to make an explicit point of this tension."[8] The defining contrast then is not a matter of essence, but only of emphasis; the Old Masters do acknowledge the physical facts of the medium — but not "explicitly." On closer inspection the difference between their goals and those of Modernist painting becomes even more elusive:

> The Old Masters had sensed that it was necessary to preserve what is called the integrity of the picture plane: that is, to signify the enduring presence of flatness under the most vivid illusion of three-dimensional space. The apparent contradiction involved — the dialectical tension, to use a fashionable but apt phrase — was essential to the success of their art, as it is indeed to the success of all pictorial art. The Modernists have neither avoided nor resolved this contradiction; rather, they have reversed its terms. One is made aware of the flatness of their pictures before, instead of after, being made aware of what the flatness contains. Whereas one tends to see what is *in* an Old Master painting before seeing it as a picture, one sees a Modernist painting as a picture first. This is, of course, the best way of seeing any kind of picture, Old Master or Modernist, but Modernism imposes it as the only and necessary way, and Modernism's success in doing so is a success of self-criticism.[9]

Are we still on firm factual ground? The "objective" difference between Old Master and Modernist reduces itself to subjective tendencies in the viewer. It is he who in looking at Old Master paintings *tends* to see the illusion "before seeing it as a picture." But what if he doesn't? What if he sees a Giotto, a Poussin, or a Fragonard as a picture first, habitually screening out the deep space indications until he has seen the surface disposition of its formal elements? Does an Old Master painting forego its Old Master status if it is seen in primary flatness and only secondly as a vivid illusion? Consider that typical Old Master expression, the rapid sketch (Fig. 1). Does Rembrandt's drawing become Modernist if its pen strokes and bister washes emerge for us before, or along with, the old lady's image? It seems to me that the last thing this draftsman wants is to dissemble his medium, or conceal his art; what he wants, and gets, is precisely a tension, made fully explicit, between the figure evoked and the physicality of paper, penstroke, and ink. And yet, in terms of style, such a sketch as this is integral to Old Master art. It merely dramatizes the quality that enables Baudelaire to see a Delacroix as nothing but arabesques.



Fig. 2. Niccolo di Pietro Gerini (?), *Crucifixion*. (Santa Croce, Florence, Italy.)

And, contrariwise, what if the viewer tends to see Modernist paintings as spatial abstractions of landscape? The sculptor Don Judd complains that New York School paintings of the 1950s keep him intensely aware of what their flatness contains — "airiness" and "illusionistic space." He said recently:

> Rothko's whole way of working depended on a good deal of illusionism. It's very aerial. The whole thing is about areas floating in space. Compared to Newman there is distinctly a certain depth. But I finally thought that all painting was spatially illusionistic.[10]

Where does this leave us? The difference between Old Master and Modernist is not, after all, between illusion and flatness; it turns out that both are present in each. But if the difference is in the *order* in which these two presences are perceived, then do the subjective approaches of Baudelaire and Judd reverse the distinction between historic and Modern art?

Greenberg is fully conscious of the airy illusionism observed by Judd in Modernist painting. But though open atmospheric effects, such as are found in Rothko or Jules Olitski, clearly deny and dissemble the picture's material surface, he nevertheless finds them congruent with painting's self-definition because the illusion conveyed is "visual," rather than tactile or kinesthetic. And visual art should, to conform with Kantian self-criticism and scientific consistency, "confine itself exclusively to what is given in visual experience."

> Where the Old Masters created an illusion of space into which one could imagine oneself walking, the illusion created by a Modernist is one into which one can look, can travel through, only with the eye.[11]

The difference, then, reduces itself to distinct

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Fig. 3. Claude Mellan, *Portrait of Jean de Saint-Bonnet, Seigneur de Toiras.*



Fig. 4. Michelangelo, *Doni Madonna.* (Uffizi Gallery, Florence.)

kinds of spatial illusion, but this last saving distinction is one which defines "Modernism" by pre-industrial standards of locomotion. How, in what kind of painted space, do you let yourself roam? Greenberg apparently can imagine himself trudging through a Rembrandtesque gloom, but he cannot conceive journeying through an Olitski. Do we need to be reminded that in an age of space travel a pictorial semblance of open void is just as inviting to imaginary penetration as the pictorial semblance of a receding landscape was formerly to a man on foot? Are we now to define Modernist painting against a Kantian concept of transportation? Greenberg's theoretical schema keeps breaking down because it insists on defining modern art without acknowledgment of its content, and historical art without recognizing its formal self-consciousness.

All major painting, at least of the last 600 years, has assiduously "called attention to art." Except for *tour de force* demonstrations and special effects, and before their tradition collapsed in 19th-century academicism, the Old Masters always took pains to neutralize the effect of reality, presenting their make-believe worlds, as it were, between quotation marks. The means they chose were, of course, those of their day, not of ours; and often their careful controls are annulled by our habit of lifting a partial work from its setting — transposing a detached fresco or predella panel into the category of easel painting. But a dramatic narrative painted by Giotto resembles neither a late 19th-century easel painting nor a movie screen. When it is not wrenched from its context (as in most art history books), it works within a wall system, each wall supporting multiple scenes set between elaborate framing bands, within which, in turn, other scenes on different scales are descried. You are never allowed to see one illusion, one sky, or one fictive horizon alone. You are shown simultaneous and incompatible systems whose juxtaposition cancels or checks the illusion. Similarly, the Sistine Ceiling when seen in its entirety: the work is a battleground for local illusion, counterillusion, and emphasized architectural surface — art turning constantly back on itself.

This is a functional multiplicity, and it occurs even in apparently single works. Look at those cornered, diminutive prophets in our Fig. 2, leaning out of the picture plane: their eager demonstrative gestures towards the Christ turn the illusionist scene of the Crucifixion back into a picture of it — complete with its own patterned frame. Or take an engraved baroque portrait (Fig. 3). The depicted man is a paper paste-up on a dog-eared sheet on a flat wall, and the whole stratigraphy of it is exhibited in the changing density of horizontal striations. The artists here do exactly what Greenberg admires as a significant find in a crucial Cubist picture by Braque: "[Braque] discovered that *trompe-l'oeil* could be used to undeceive as well as to deceive the eye. It could be used, that is, to declare as well as to deny the actual surface."[12]

Where the Old Masters seem to dissolve the picture plane to gain an unambiguous illusion of depth, they usually have a special objective in mind, an objective understood and shared by the viewer. Michelangelo's *Last Judgment,* unlike the *Ceiling,* obliterates the supporting wallplane so that the vision of a Christ "come to judge the quick and the dead" gives immediate urgency to the words of the Creed. Caravaggio's pictures, whether erotic or religious in their address, were similarly intended to induce a penetrating experience. But their relentless, surface-dissolving illusionism was largely repudiated by the Old Masters. Until the 19th century, the kind of painting which utterly broke the consistency of the surface remained a special, even exceptional resource of

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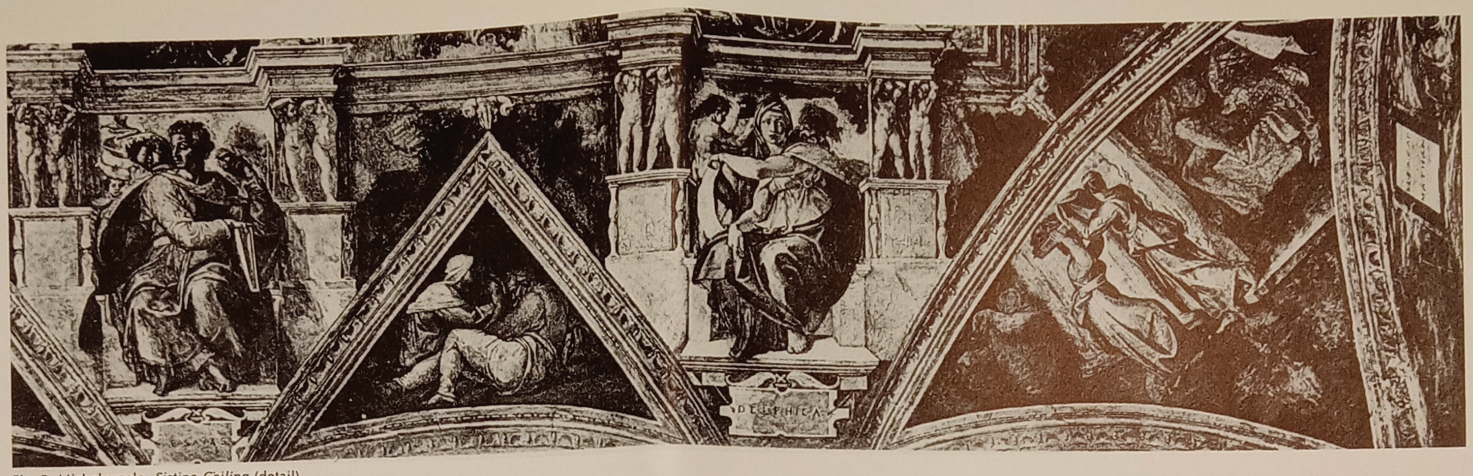


Fig. 5. Michelangelo, *Sistine Ceiling* (detail).



Fig. 6. Bartolommeo Passarotti, drawing after Michelangelo's *Isaiah*, 14½" x 10¼", n.d.



Fig. 7. Pierre Biard the Younger, etching after Michelangelo's *The Delphic Sibyl*.

Old Master art.

The more realistic the art of the Old Masters became, the more they raised internal safeguards against illusion, ensuring at every point that attention would remain focused upon the art.

They did it by radical color economies, or by eerie proportional attenuation; by multiplication of detail, or by preternatural beauty. They did it — as modern films do with spliced footage taken from older movies — by quotations and references to other art; quotation being a surefire means of shunting the ostensible realism of a depicted scene back into art.

They did it by abrupt internal changes of scale, or by shifting reality levels — as when Raphael's *Expulsion of Heliodorus* inserts a group of contemporaries in modern dress as observers of the Biblical scene; or by overlapping reality levels, as when a frescoed battle scene on a Vatican wall curls up at the edges to become a fake tapestry — two self-confounding illusions which call both into question and recall both to art.

The "recall to art" may be engineered by the subject matter itself. In a Dutch interior, the backview of a personage who draws a curtain aside to look at a painting on the far wall acts as my *alter ego*, doing what I am doing and reminding me (in case I missed the point of the picture's immense ebony frame) that I too am looking at a flat object. Better still, such 17th-century interiors as Velázquez' *Ladies in Waiting* often juxtapose a doorway or window view with a framed painting, and, next to that, a mirror filled with a reflection. These three kinds of image serve as an inventory of the three possible roles assignable to a picture plane. The windowpane or proscenium effect refers to what lies behind it, the looking glass refers to what lies before, while the pigmented surface asserts itself; and all three are paraded in sequence. Such pictures soliloquize about the capacities of the surface and the nature of illusion itself.

Again and again, in so-called illusionist art, it is illusionism that is under discussion, the art "calling attention to art" in perfect self-critical consciousness. And this is why the Old Masters are forever inventing interferences with spatial recession. They do not merely "take account" of the tension between surface and depth, as if for the sake of decorative coherence, while reserving their thrust for the depiction of depth. Rather they maintain an explicit, controlled, ever-visible dualism. 15th-century perspective was not a surface-denying illusion of space, but the symbolic form of space as an intelligible coordinate surface pattern. Good illusionist painting not only anchors depth to the plane; it is almost never without built-in devices designed to suspend the illusion, and the potency of these devices

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depends — like the appreciation of counterpoint or of puns — on the spectator's ability to register two things in concert, to receive both the illusion and the means of illusion at once.

Some of the Old Masters overruled the apparent perspective by dispersing identical color patches as an allover carpet spread (Pieter Bruegel, for instance). Some worked with chromatic dissonances to weave a continuous surface shimmer like mother-of-pearl. Many — from Titian onward — insured their art against realism by the obtrusive calligraphy of the brush — laying a welter of brushstrokes upon the surface to call attention to process. Some contrived implausible contradictions within the field, as when the swelling bulk of a foreshortened form is collapsed and denied the spatial ambience to house it. All of them counted on elaborate framing as an integral part of the work ("advertising the literal nature of the support," as Greenberg says of collage) — so that the picture, no matter how deep its illusionism, turned back into a thing mounted there like a gem. It was Michelangelo himself who designed the frame of the *Doni Madonna*, an element essential to the precious-mirror effect of its surface (Fig. 4).

Greenberg wants all Old Master and Modernist painters to reduce their differences to a single criterion, and that criterion as mechanistic as possible — either illusionistic or flat. But what significant art is that simple? Have you ever asked how deep the thrones of the Sistine Prophets and Sibyls are? Perfectly shallow if you glance across the whole sequence; but, as all the early copies reveal, they run more than ten feet deep as soon as you focus on one alone (Figs. 5, 6, 7). Perspective illusionism and anatomic foreshortening sustain a ceaseless optical oscillation.

"The abiding effect is a constant shuttling between surface and depth, in which the depicted flatness is 'infected' by the undepicted. Rather than being deceived, the eye is puzzled; instead of seeing objects in space, it sees nothing more than — a picture."[13] These words, in which Greenberg describes Cubist collage, apply equally well to Michelangelo's Ceiling and to thousands of Old Master works. They describe the effect of a not untypical 14th-century manuscript page (Fig. 8): *Missus est Gabriel angelus*. Three reality levels oscillate in, and compete for, that capital "M": an arcade opening on a bed chamber; a trellis for ivy ornament; and a letter at the head of a word. All three at once. The eye is puzzled; instead of seeing objects in space it sees a picture.[14]

The notion that Old Master paintings in contrast to modern dissemble the medium, conceal the art, deny the surface, deceive the eye, etc., is only true for a viewer who looks at the art like those ex-subscribers to *Life* Magazine. The distinction a critic makes between Modernist self-analytical and Old Master-representational refers less to the works compared than to his own chosen stance — to be analytic about the one and polemically naive about the other.

It is poor practice, when modern art is under discussion, to present the Old Masters as naively concerned with eyefooling trickery, while reserving for modern art both the superior honesty of dealing with the flat plane of painting and the maturer intellectual discipline of self-analysis. All important art, at least since the Trecento, is preoccupied with self-criticism. Whatever else it may be about, all art is about art. All original art searches its limits, and the difference between the old and the modernist is not in the fact of self-definition but in the direction which this self-definition takes. This direction being part of the content.

At this point Greenberg might answer that self-definition does not deserve its name unless it aims at purity, and that this in turn requires stripping painting down to its irreducible essence, *i.e.*, the coincidence of flattened color with its material support. I reply that this mistakes a special case for a necessity. The process of painting's self-realization can go either way. For Jan van Eyck, for example, the self-realization of painting is not reductive but expansive. He turns to the sculptor and says, "Anything you can do I can do better"; then to the goldsmith — "Anything *you* can do I can do better"; and so to the architect. He redesigns everything in the flat and even banishes metallic gold to create the effect of it — like Manet — in pure color and light. Anything anybody can do, painting does better — and that's where, for van Eyck, painting realizes itself — discovering its autonomy literally in its ability to do without external aid.

Art's perpetual need to redefine the area of its competence by testing its limits takes many forms. Not always does it probe in the same direction. Jacques Louis David's ambition to make art a force of national moral leadership is as surely a challenge to the limits of art as is Matisse's elimination of tonal values. At one historical moment painters get interested in finding out just how much their art can annex, into how much nonart it can venture and still remain art. At other times they explore the opposite end to discover how much they can renounce and still stay in business. What is constant is art's concern with itself, the interest painters have in questioning their operation. It is a provincialism to make the self-critical turn of mind the sufficient distinction of Modernism; and once it is understood as not its peculiar distinction, then the specific look of contemporary
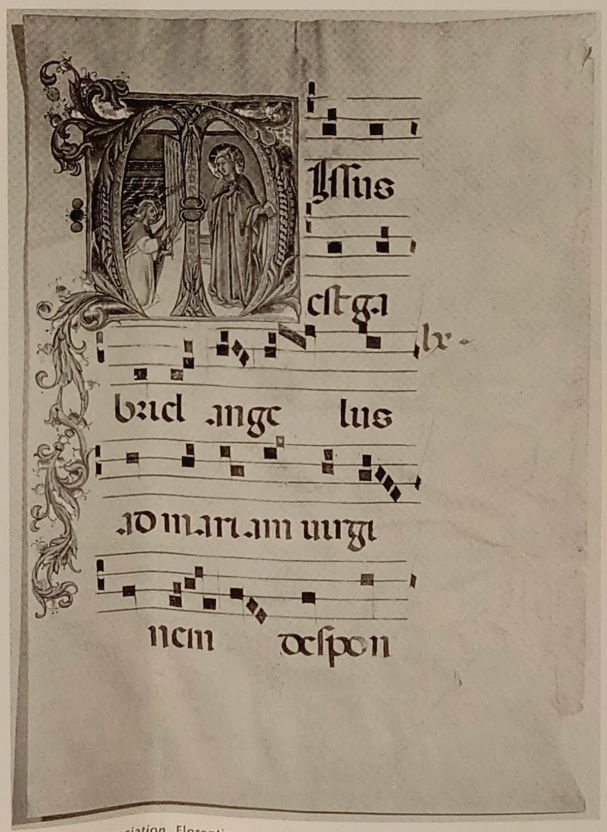


Fig. 8. *The Annunciation*, Florentine manuscript, 19" x 15", 14th century. (J.B. Speed Art Museum, Louisville, Kentucky.)

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abstract art — its object quality, its blankness and secrecy, its impersonal or industrial look, its simplicity and tendency to project a stark minimum of decisions, its radiance and power and scale — these become recognizable as a kind of content — expressive, communicative, and eloquent in their own way.

The Corporate Model of Developing Art.

It is astonishing how often recent abstract American painting is defined and described almost exclusively in terms of internal problem solving. As though the strength of a particular artist expressed itself only in his choice to conform with a set of existent professional needs and his inventiveness in producing the answers. The dominant formalist critics today tend to treat modern painting as an evolving technology wherein at any one moment specific tasks require solution — tasks set for the artist as problems are set for researchers in the big corporations. The artist as engineer and research technician becomes important insofar as he comes up with solutions to the right problem. How the choice of that problem coincides with personal impulse, psychological predisposition, or social ideal is immaterial; the solution matters because it answers a problem set forth by a governing technocracy.

In America this corporate model of artistic evolution appears full-blown by the mid-1920s. It inhabits the formalist doctrine that Painting aspires towards an ever-tightening synthesis of its design elements. The theory in its beginnings was fairly simple. Suppose a given painting represents a reclining nude; and suppose the figure outlined with a perceptible contour. Within that contour lies a distinct shape. That shape is of a certain color, and the color — modulated from light to dark or from warm to cool — reflects a specific quantity or kind of light. We have then four formal elements — line, shape, color, and light — which can be experienced and thought of as separate and distinct. Now, it is argued, the test of significantly advanced painting will be the progressive obliteration of these distinctions. The most successful picture will so synthesize the means of design that line will be no longer separable from shape, nor shape from color, nor color from light. A working criterion, easily memorized and applied. It tells you not necessarily which picture is best, but which is in line to promote the overall aspiration of Painting — this alignment being a *sine qua non* of historic importance. By this criterion, the painter of the Sistine Ceiling is, with due respect, relegated to one of the byways of Painting since his inventions, for all their immediate interest, do not ultimately promote the direction in which painting must go; Michelangelo's forms are "realized in a sculptural rather than a pictorial manner."[15] Indeed, the elements of Michelangelo's depictions are remarkable for separability — specific shapes sharply delineated by bounding lines, tinted by local color, modulated by chiaroscuro. Though Michelangelo will, I am convinced, be emerging within the next several years as one of the most original colorists of all time, by the criteria enunciated above he fails to contribute — as did Titian's coloristic diffusion — to the synthesis of the means of design. For the critic-collector Albert C. Barnes he remains a dead end, whereas the course initiated by Titian leads irresistibly to its culmination in Renoir and William Glackens.

This single criterion for important progressive art, moving as by predestination towards utter homogeneity of the elements of design is still with us, now considerably more analytical, more prestigious than ever, and celebrating its latest historical denouement in the triumph of color field painting.

In formalist criticism, the criterion for significant progress remains a kind of design technology subject to one compulsive direction: the treatment of "the whole surface as a single undifferentiated field of interest." The goal is to merge figure with ground, integrate shape and field, eliminate foreground-background discontinuities; to restrict pattern to those elements (horizontals or verticals) that suggest a symbiotic relationship of image and frame; to collapse painting and drawing in a single gesture, and equate design and process (as Pollock's drip paintings do, or Morris Louis' veils); in short, to achieve the synthesis of all separable elements of painting, preferably — but this is a secondary consideration — without that loss of incident or detail which diminishes visual interest.

There is, it seems to me, a more thoroughgoing kind of synthesis involved in this set of descriptions — the leveling of end and means. In the criticism of the relevant paintings there is rarely a hint of expressive purpose, nor recognition that pictures function in human experience. The painter's industry is a closed loop. The search for the holistic design is self-justified and self-perpetuating. Whether this search is still the exalted Kantian process of self-criticism seems questionable; the claim strikes me rather as a remote intellectual analogy. And other analogies suggest themselves, less intellectual, but closer to home. It is probably no chance coincidence that the descriptive terms which have dominated American formalist criticism these past 50 years, run parallel to the contemporaneous evolution of the Detroit automobile. Its ever-increasing symbiosis of parts — the ingestion of doors, running boards, wheels, fenders, spare tires, signals, etc., in a one-piece fuselage — suggests, with no need for Kant, a similar drift towards synthesizing its design elements. It is not that the cars look like the paintings. What I am saying here relates less to the pictures themselves than to the critical apparatus that deals with them. Pollock, Louis, and Noland are vastly different from each other; but the reductive terms of discussion that continually run them in series are remarkably close to the ideals that govern the packaging of the all-American engine. It is the critics' criterion far more than the painters' work which is ruled by a streamlined efficiency image.

But the reference to industrial ideals can serve to focus on certain distinctions within art itself. If, for instance, we question the work of the three painters just mentioned from the viewpoint of expressive content, they immediately separate out. There is obviously no affinity for industrialism in Pollock or Louis, but it does characterize an important aspect of the younger man's work. His 30-foot-long stripe paintings, consisting of parallel color bands, embody, beyond the subtlety of their color, principles of efficiency, speed, and machine-tooled precision which, in the imagination to which they appeal, tend to associate themselves with the output of industry more than of art (Fig. 9). Noland's pictures of the late '60s are the fastest I know.

The painter Vlaminck used to say that he wished to make pictures which would be readable to a motorist speeding by in an automobile. But Vlaminck's belated expressionism could never realize such an ideal. His palette-knifed snowscapes lacked every access to his ostensible goal. They possessed neither the scale, the format, the color radiance, nor even the appropriate subject matter: good motorists look for signals and signs, not at messages from a painter's easel. Vlaminck's statement remains naive because it is essentially idle. But there is nothing naive in Noland's determination to produce, as he put it, " 'one-shot' paintings perceptible at a single glance." I quote from a recent article by Barbara Rose, who continues: "To achieve maximum immediacy, Noland was ready to jettison anything interfering with the most instantaneous communication of the image."[16]

Noland's stated objective during the 1960s confirms what his pictures reveal — an idealization of efficient speed and, implicitly, a conception of the humanity at whom his "one-shots" are aimed. The instantaneity which his pictures convey implies a different psychic orientation, a revised relationship with the spectator. Like all art that ostensibly thinks only about itself, it creates its own viewer, projects its peculiar conception of who, what, and where he is.

Is he a man in a hurry? Is he at rest or in motion? Is he one who construes or one who reacts? Is he a man alone — or a crowd? Is he a human being at all — or a function, a specialized function or instrumentality, such as the one to which Rauschenberg's *Chairs* (1968) reduced the human agent. (A room-size transparent screen whose illumination was electronically activated by sound; the visibility of the chairs which constituted the image depending on the noises made by the spectator — his footsteps when entering, his coughing or speaking voice. One felt reduced to the commodity of a switch.) I suspect that all works of art or stylistic cycles are definable by their built-in idea of the spectator. Thus, return-

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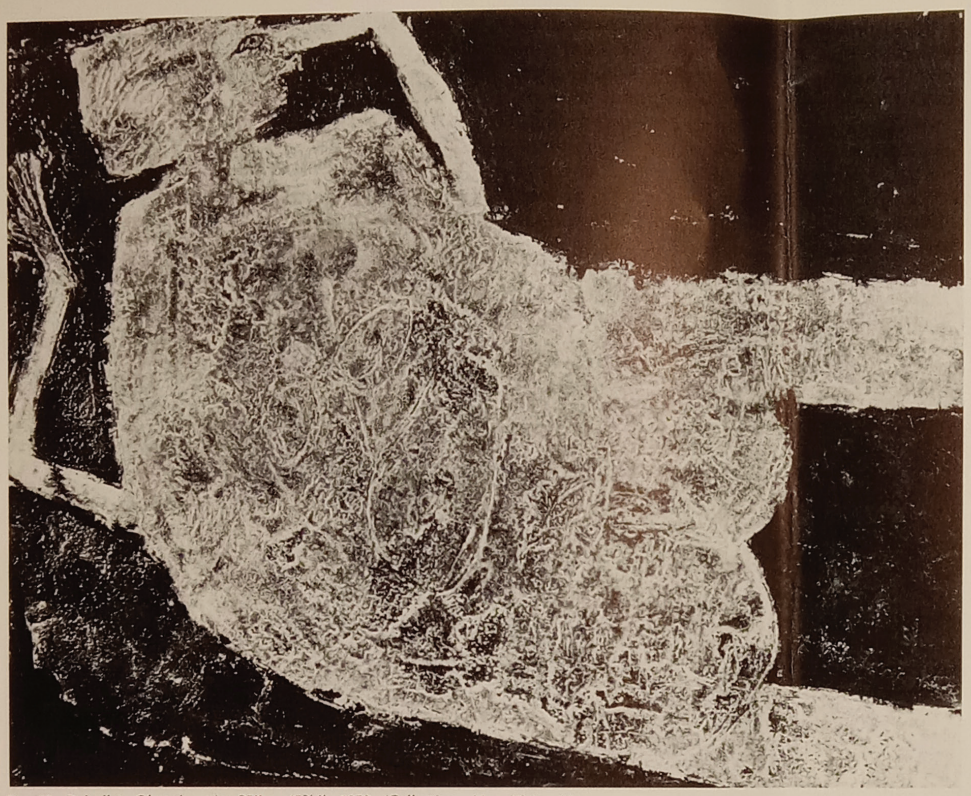


Fig. 10. Dubuffet, *Olympia*, o/c, 35" x 45¾", 1950. (Collection: Mrs. Victor M. Leventritt, New York.)

ing once more to the Pollock-Louis-Noland procession, the younger man, who separates himself from his elders by the criterion of industrial affinity, parts from them again by his distinct view of the viewer.

Considerations of "human interest" belong in the criticism of modernist art not because we are incurably sentimental about humanity, but because it is art we are talking about. And it appears to me that even such professional technicalities as "orientation to flatness" yield to other criteria as soon as the picture is questioned not for its internal coherence, but for its orientation to human posture.

What is "pictorial flatness" about? Obviously it does not refer to the zero curvature of the physical plane — a cat walking over pictures by Tiepolo and Barnett Newman gets the same support from each one. What is meant of course is an ideated flatness, the sensation of flatness experienced in imagination. But if that's what is meant, is there anything flatter than the *Olympia* (1950) of Dubuffet (Fig. 10)? If flatness in painting indicates an imaginative experience, then the pressed-leaf effect, the graffito effect, the scratched-gravel or fossil-impression effect of Dubuffet's image dramatizes the sensation of flatness far beyond the capacity, or the intention, of most color field painting. But in fact, these different "flatnesses" are not even comparable. And the word "flat" is too stale and remote for the respective sensations touched off by the visionary color veils of Morris Louis (Fig. 11) and the bedrock pictographs of Dubuffet. Nor need flatness be an end product at all — as Jasper Johns demonstrated in the mid-1950s, when his first *Flags* and *Targets* relegated the whole maintenance problem of flatness to "subject matter." However atmospheric his brushwork or play of tonalities, the depicted subject ensured that the image stayed flat. So then one discovers that there are recognizable entities, from flags even to female nudes, which can actually promote the sensation of flatness.

This discovery is still fairly recent, and it is not intelligible in terms of design technology. It demands consideration of subject and content, and, above all, of how the artist's pictorial surface tilts into the space of the viewer's imagination.

The Flatbed Picture Plane.

I borrow the term from the flatbed printing press — "a horizontal bed on which a horizontal printing surface rests" (Webster). And I propose to use the word to describe the characteristic picture plane of the 1960s — a pictorial surface whose angulation with respect to the human posture is the precondition of its changed content.

It was suggested earlier that the Old Masters had three ways of interpreting the picture plane. But one axiom was common to all three interpretations, and it remained operative in the succeeding centuries, even through Cubism and Abstract Expressionism: the conception of the picture as representing a world, some sort of worldspace which reads on the picture plane in correspondence with the erect human posture. The top of the picture corresponds to where we hold our heads aloft; while its lower edge gravitates to where we place our feet. Even in Picasso's Cubist collages, where the Renaissance worldspace concept almost breaks down, there is still a harking back to implied acts of vision, to something that was once actually seen.

A picture that harks back to the natural world evokes sense data which are experienced in the normal erect posture. Therefore the Renaissance picture plane affirms verticality as its essential condition. And the concept of the picture plane as an upright surface survives the most drastic changes of style. Pictures by Rothko, Still, Newman, de Kooning, and Kline are still addressed to us head to foot — as are those of Matisse and Miró. They are revelations to which we relate visually as from the top of a columnar body; and this applies no less to Pollock's drip paintings and the poured veils and unfurls of Morris Louis. Pollock indeed poured and dripped his pigment upon canvases laid on the ground, but this was an expedient. After the first color skeins had gone down, he would tack the canvas on to a wall — to get acquainted with it, he used to say, to see where it wanted to go. He lived with the painting in its uprighted state, as with a world confronting his human posture. It is in this sense, I think, that the Abstract Expressionists were still nature painters. Pollock's drip paintings cannot escape being read as thickets; Louis' veils acknowledge the same gravitational force to which our being in nature is subject.[17]

But something happened in painting around 1950 — most conspicuously (at least within my experience) in the work of Robert Rauschenberg and Dubuffet. We can still hang their pictures — just as we tack up maps and architectural plans, or nail a horseshoe to the wall for good luck. Yet these pictures no longer simulate vertical fields but opaque flatbed horizontals. They no more depend on a head-to-toe correspondence with human posture than a news-

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Fig. 11. Morris Louis, *Floral*, acrylic on canvas, 103" x 142", 1959.

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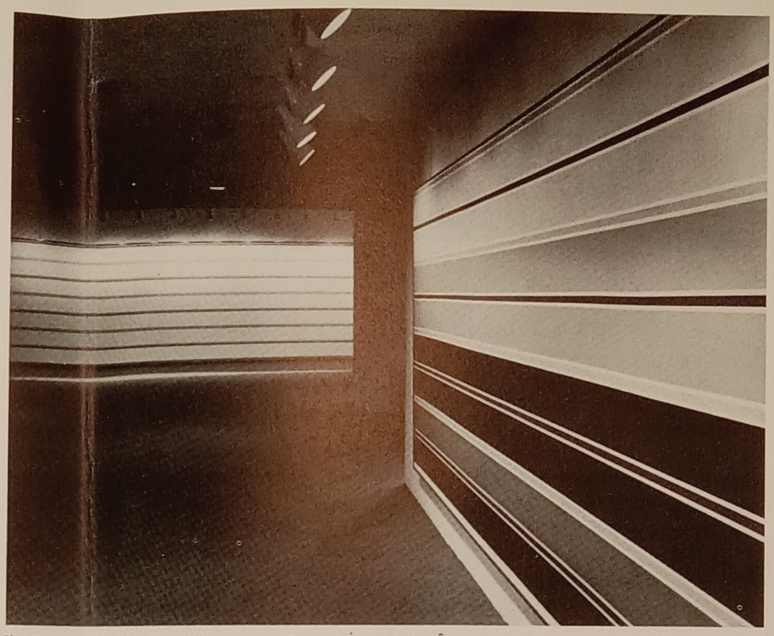


Fig. 9. Kenneth Noland, installation view: *Coarse Shadow* and *Stria*, André Emmerich Gallery, 1967.

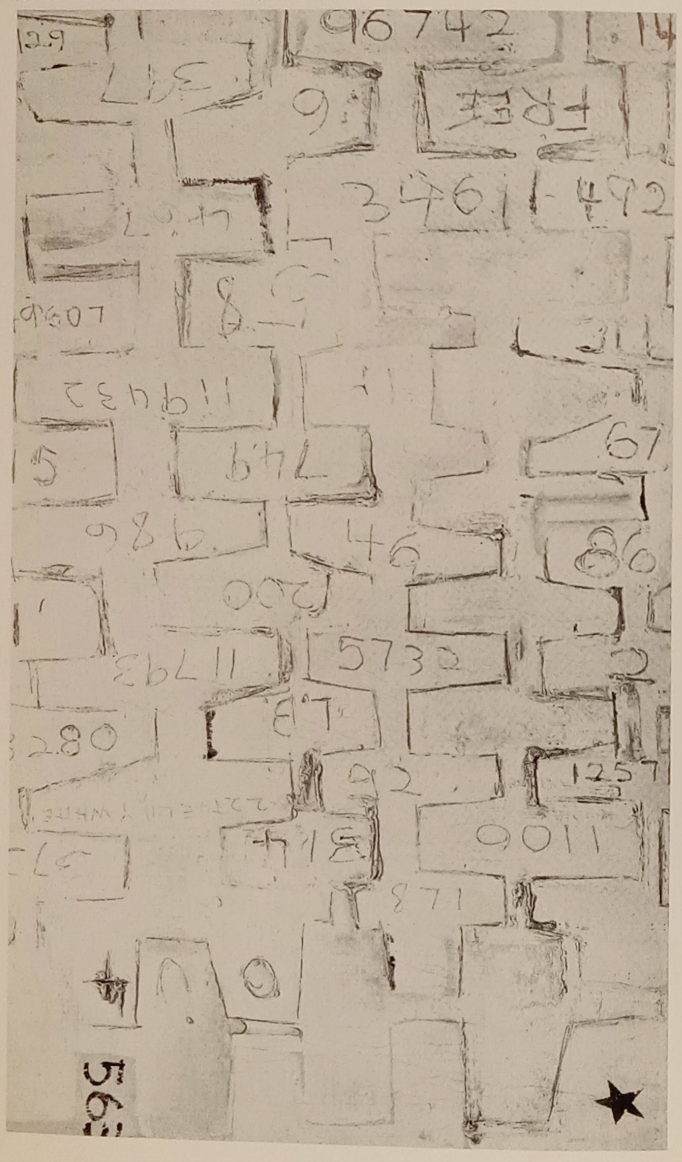


Fig. 12. Robert Rauschenberg, *White Painting with Numbers*, o/c, 40" x 24", 1949. (Collection: Mr. and Mrs. Victor Ganz, New York.)

paper does. The flatbed picture plane makes its symbolic allusion to hard surfaces such as tabletops, studio floors, charts, bulletin boards — any receptor surface on which objects are scattered, on which data is entered, on which information may be received, printed, impressed — whether coherently or in confusion. The pictures of the last 15 to 20 years insist on a radically new orientation, in which the painted surface is no longer the analogue of a visual experience of nature but of operational processes.

To repeat: it is not the actual physical placement of the image that counts. There is no law against hanging a rug on a wall, or reproducing a narrative picture as a mosaic floor. What I have in mind is the psychic address of the image, its special mode of imaginative confrontation, and I tend to regard the tilt of the picture plane

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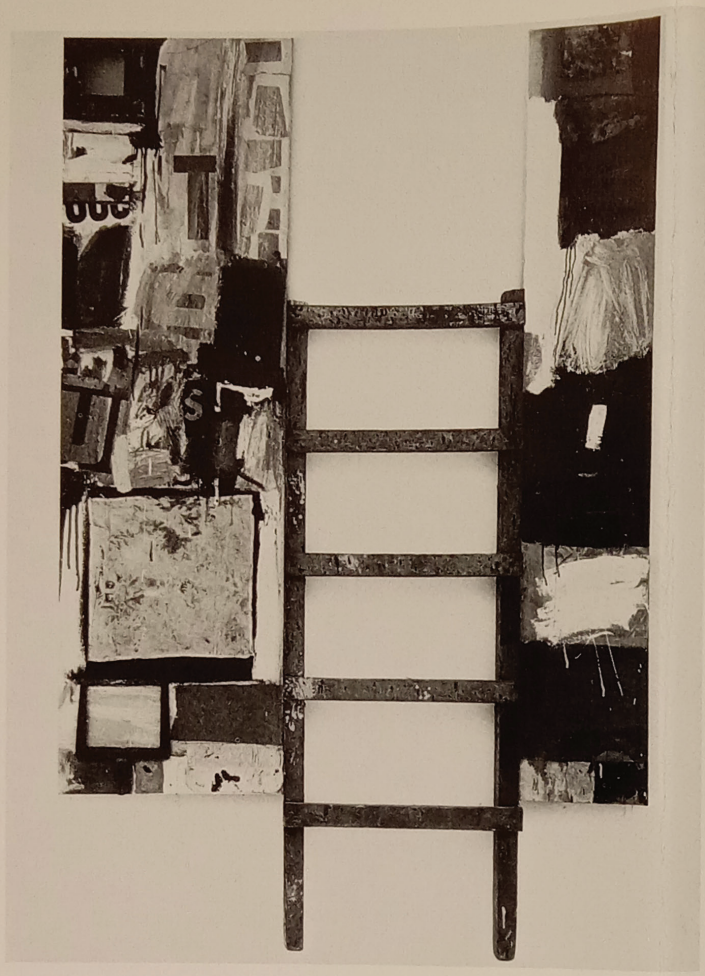


Fig. 13. Robert Rauschenberg, *Winter Pool*, m/m, 86½" x 58¼", 1959. (Collection: Mr. and Mrs. Victor Ganz, New York.)

from vertical to horizontal as expressive of the most radical shift in the subject matter of art, the shift from nature to culture.

A shift of such magnitude does not come overnight, nor as the feat of one artist alone. Portents and antecedents become increasingly recognizable in retrospect — Monet's *Nymphéas* or Mondrian's transmutation of sea and sky into signs plus and minus. And the picture planes of a synthetic Cubist still life or a Schwitters collage suggest like-minded reorientations. But these last were small objects, the "thingness" of them was appropriate to their size. Whereas the event of the 1950s was the expansion of the work-surface picture plane to the man-sized environmental scale of Abstract Expressionism. Perhaps Duchamp was the most vital source. His *Large Glass* begun in 1915, his *Tu m'* of 1918, is no longer the analogue of a world perceived from an upright position, but a matrix of information conveniently placed in a vertical situation. And one detects a sense of the significance of a 90-degree shift in relation to a man's posture even in some of those Duchamp "works" that once seemed no more than provocative gestures: the *Hatrack* laid on the ground, and the famous *Urinal* tilted up like a monument.

But on the New York art scene the great shift came in Rauschenberg's work of the early 1950s. Even as Abstract Expressionism was celebrating its triumphs, he proposed the flatbed or work-surface picture plane as the foundation of an artistic language that would deal with a different order of experience. The earliest work which Rauschenberg admits into his canon — *White Painting with Numbers* (Fig. 12) — was painted in 1949 in a life class at the Art Students' League, the young painter turning his back on the model. Rauschenberg's picture, with its cryptic meander of lines and numbers, is a work surface that cannot be construed into anything else. Up and down are as subtly confounded as positive-negative space or figure-ground differential. You cannot read it as masonry, nor as a system of chains or quoins, and the written cyphers read every way. Scratched into wet paint, the picture ends up as a verification of its own opaque surface.

In the year following, Rauschenberg began to experiment with objects placed on blueprint paper and exposed to sunlight. Already then he was involved with the physical material of plans; and in the early 50s used newsprint to prime his canvases — to activate the ground, as he put it — so that his first brushstroke upon it took place in a gray map of words.

In retrospect the most clownish of Rauschenberg's youthful pranks take on a kind of stylistic consistency. Back in the '50s, he was invited to participate in an exhibition on the nostalgic subject of "nature in art" — the organizers hoping perhaps to promote an alternative to the new abstract painting. Rauschenberg's entry was a square patch of growing grass held down with chicken wire, placed in a box suitable for framing and hung on the wall. The artist visited the show periodically to water his piece — a transposition from nature to culture through a shift of 90 degrees. When he erased a de Kooning drawing, exhibiting it as "Drawing by Willem de Kooning erased by Robert Rauschenberg," he was making more than a multifaceted psychological gesture; he was changing—for the viewer no less than for himself — the angle of imaginative confrontation; tilting de Kooning's evocation of a world-space into a thing produced by pressing down on a desk.

The paintings he made towards the end of that decade included intrusive nonart attachments: a pillow suspended horizontally from the lower frame (*Canyon*, 1959); a grounded ladder inserted between the painted panels which made up the picture (*Winter Pool*, 1959-60; Fig. 13); a chair standing against a wall but ingrown with the painting behind (*Pilgrim*, 1960). Though they hung on the wall, the pictures kept referring back to the horizontals on which we walk and sit, work, and sleep.

When in the early 1960s he worked with photographic transfers, the images — each in itself illusionistic — kept interfering with one another, intimations of spatial meaning forever canceling out to subside in a kind of optical noise. The waste and detritus of communication — like radio transmission with interference; noise and meaning on the same wavelength, visually on the same flatbed plane.

The picture plane, as in the enormous canvas called *Overdraw* (1963), could look like some garbled conflation of controls system and cityscape, suggesting the ceaseless flow of urban

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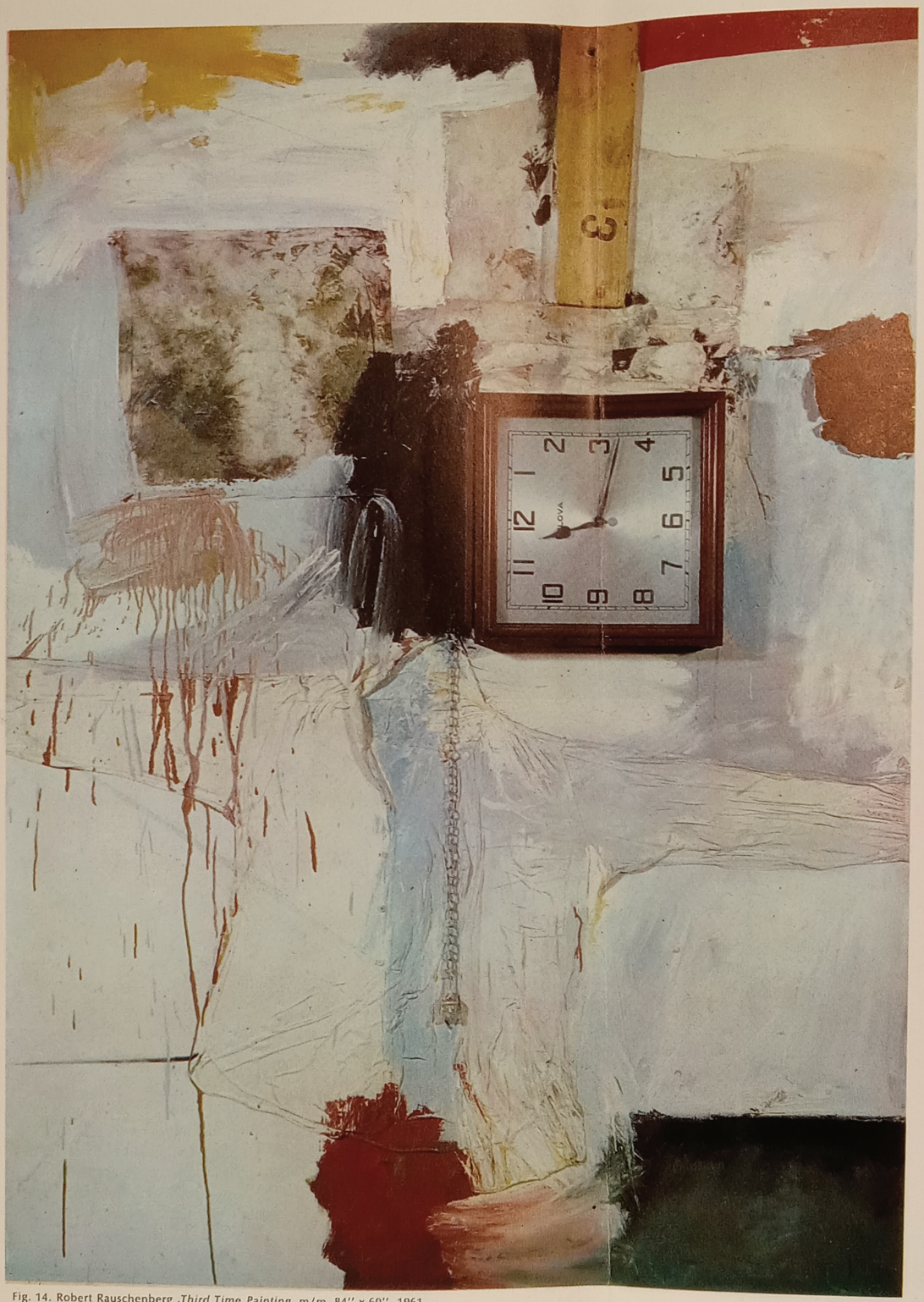


Fig. 14. Robert Rauschenberg, *Third Time Painting*, m/m, 84'' x 60'', 1961.
(Collection: Harry N. Abrams Family, New York.)

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message, stimulus, and impediment. To hold all this together, Rauschenberg's picture plane had to become a surface to which anything reachable-thinkable would adhere. It had to be whatever a billboard or dashboard is, and everything a projection screen is, with further affinities for anything that is flat and worked over — palimpsest, canceled plate, printer's proof, trial blank, chart, map, aerial view. Any flat documentary surface that tabulates information is a relevant analogue of his picture plane — radically different from the transparent projection plane with its optical correspondence to man's visual field. And it seemed at times that Rauschenberg's work surface stood for the mind itself — dump, reservoir, switching center, abundant with concrete references freely associated as in an internal monologue — the outward symbol of the mind as a running transformer of the external world, constantly ingesting incoming unprocessed data to be mapped in an overcharged field.

To cope with his symbolic program, the available types of pictorial surface seemed inadequate; they were too exclusive and too homogeneous. Rauschenberg found that his imagery needed bedrock as hard and tolerant as a workbench. If some collage element, such as a pasted-down photograph, threatened to evoke a topical illusion of depth, the surface was casually stained or smeared with paint to recall its irreducible flatness. The "integrity of the picture plane" — once the accomplishment of good design — was to become that which is given. The picture's "flatness" was to be no more of a problem than the flatness of a disordered desk or an unswept floor. Against Rauschenberg's picture plane you can pin or project any image because it will not work as the glimpse of a world but as a scrap of printed material. And you can attach any object, so long as it beds itself down on the work surface. The old clock in Rauschenberg's 1961 *Third Time Painting* (Fig. 14) lies with the number 12 on the left, because the clock face properly uprighted would have illusionized the whole system into a real vertical plane — like the wall of a room, part of the given world. Or, in the same picture, the flattened shirt with its sleeves outstretched — not like wash on a line, but with paint stains and drips holding it down — like laundry laid out for pressing. The consistent horizontality is called upon to maintain a symbolic continuum of litter, workbench, and data-ingesting mind.

Perhaps Rauschenberg's profoundest symbolic gesture came in 1955 when he seized his own bed, smeared paint on its pillow and quilt coverlet, and uprighted it against the wall. There, in the vertical posture of "art," it continues to work in the imagination as the eternal companion of our other resource, our horizontality, the flat bedding in which we do our begetting, conceiving, and dreaming. The horizontality of the bed relates to "making" as the vertical of the Renaissance picture plane related to seeing.

I once heard Jasper Johns say that Rauschenberg was the man who in this century had invented the most since Picasso. What he invented above all was, I think, a pictorial surface that let the world in again. Not the world of the Renaissance man who looked for his weather clues out of the window; but the world of men who turn knobs to hear a taped message, "precipitation probability ten percent tonight," electronically transmitted from some windowless booth. Rauschenberg's picture plane is for the consciousness immersed in the brain of the city.

The flatbed picture plane lends itself to any content that does not evoke a prior optical event. As a criterion of classification it cuts across the terms "abstract" and "representational," Pop and Modernist. Color field painters such as Ken Noland, Frank Stella, and Ellsworth Kelly, whenever their works suggest a reproducible image, seem to work with the flatbed picture plane, *i.e.*, one which is man-made and stops short at the pigmented surface; whereas Pollock's and Louis' pictures remain visionary, and Frankenthaler's abstractions, for all their immediate modernism, are — as Lawrence Alloway recently put it — "a celebration of human pleasure in what is not man-made."[18]

Insofar as the flatbed picture plane accommodates recognizable objects, it presents them as man-made things of universally familiar character. The emblematic images of the early Johns belong in this class; so, I think, does most of Pop art. When Roy Lichtenstein in the early '60s painted an Air Force officer kissing his girl goodbye, the actual subject matter was the mass-produced comic book image; Ben-day dots and stereotyped drawing ensured that the image was understood as a representation of printed matter. The pathetic humanity that populate Dubuffet's pictures are rude man-made graffiti, and their reality derives both from the material density of the surface and from the emotional pressure that guided the hand. Claes Oldenburg's drawing, to quote his own words, "takes on an 'ugliness' which is a mimicry of the scrawls and patterns of street graffiti. It celebrates irrationality, disconnection, violence and stunted expression — the damaged life forces of the city street."[19]

And about Andy Warhol, David Antin once wrote a paragraph which I wish I had written:

> In the Warhol canvases, the image can be said to barely exist. On the one hand this is part of his overriding interest in the "deteriorated image," the consequence of a series of regressions from some initial image of the real world. Here there is actually a series of images of images, beginning from the translation of the light reflectivity of a human face into the precipitation of silver from a photosensitive emulsion, this negative image developed, re-photographed into a positive image with reversal of light and shadow, and consequent blurring, further translated by telegraphy, engraved on a plate and printed through a crude screen with low-grade ink on newsprint, and this final blurring and silkscreening in an imposed lilac color on canvas. What is left? The sense that there is something out there one recognizes and yet can't see. Before the Warhol canvases we are trapped in a ghastly embarrassment. This sense of the arbitrary coloring, the nearly obliterated image and the persistently intrusive feeling. Somewhere in the image there is a proposition. It is unclear.[20]

The picture conceived as the image of an image. It is a conception which guarantees that the presentation will not be directly of a worldspace, and that it will nevertheless admit any experience as the matter of representation. And it readmits the artist in the fullness of his human interests, as well as the artist-technician.

The all-purpose picture plane underlying this post-Modernist painting has made the course of art once again nonlinear and unpredictable. What I have called the flatbed is more than a surface distinction if it is understood as a change within painting that changed the relationship between artist and image, image and viewer. Yet this internal change is no more than a symptom of changes which go far beyond questions of picture planes, or of painting as such. It is part of a shakeup which contaminates all purified categories. The deepening inroads of art into nonart continue to alienate the connoisseur as art defects and departs into strange territories, leaving the old standby criteria to rule an eroding plain. ■

1. Published posthumously, New York, 1939, p. 150.
2. Albert C. Barnes, *The Art in Painting*, N.Y., 1925, p. 408.
3. Clement Greenberg, "Picasso at Seventy-Five," *Art and Culture (1961)*, Boston, 1965, p. 62.
4. Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," *The New Art*, ed. Gregory Battcock, New York, 1966, pp. 101ff. The essay first appeared in *Art and Literature*, Spring, 1965.
5. Greenberg, "Abstract, Representational and so forth," *Art and Culture*, p. 136.
6. Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, New York, 1963, p. 37. Cf. her analysis (pp. 29-30) of the ideal American woman as presented in an issue of *McCalls*, July, 1960—"pared down to pure femininity, unadulterated."
7. Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," p. 102.
8. Greenberg, "Cézanne," *Art and Culture*, p. 53.
9. Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," pp. 103-104.
10. Don Judd, *Art News*, October, 1971, p. 60.
11. Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," p. 107.
12. Greenberg, "Collage," *Art and Culture*, p. 72.
13. Greenberg, "Collage," pp. 73-74.
14. The deliberate exploitation of surface-to-depth oscillation characterizes all major painting; it is the inexhaustible resource of the art. But the degree to which the resultant duality registers on the viewer's attention depends on the culture and the set of expectancies he brings to his appreciation. He mistakes the goal of the Old Masters if he imagines them aiming for that near absolute dissolution of the picture plane which distinguishes late 19th-century academic painting.
    To take an outstanding example of illusionist Old Master art—Velázquez' *Menippus:* the heavy impasto that molds the scrolls and books in the foreground tells you explicitly where the paint is. But the jug and bench in the "background," where the raw canvas appears barely stained by a thin wash of pigment, says—"this is where the canvas is." And the palpable mystery of the painting is the old cynic's material presence inserted in the non-dimensional film between canvas and paint. No painting was ever more self-defining than this.
15. Barnes, *Art in Painting*, p. 408. For the author's insistence on synthesizing the elements of design, see pp. 55, 61, 67f.
16. Barbara Rose, "Quality in Louis," *Artforum*, October, 1971, p. 65.
17. The fact that some Louis paintings may actually hang upside down is immaterial. Their space will still be experienced as gravitational, whether the image suggests falling veils or shooting flames.
18. Lawrence Alloway, "Frankenthaler as Pastoral," *Art News*, November, 1971, p. 68.
19. Quoted in Eila Kokkinen's review of *Claes Oldenburg: Drawings and Prints*, *Arts*, November, 1969, p. 12.
20. David Antin, "Warhol: The Silver Tenement," *Art News*, Summer, 1966, p. 58.

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Greenberg's "How Art Writing Earns Its Bad Name" appeared in the periodical THE SECOND COMING (March 1962, pp. 58-62.

Rosenberg published a rebuttal to this article in ART NEWS, December 1962- "Action Painting, A Decade of Distortion.

By contrast with the interweaving of light and dark gradations in the typical Abs Exp. picture, all the artists in this show move towards a physical openness of design, towards linear clarity, or towards both." (Tendency already begun in work of Still, Newman, Rothko, Kline (1950-54) and even Pollock).

[Notes that "stain" technique, of diluting paint and soaking it into unsized + unprimed canvas, followed Pollock's lead in his black and white paintings of 1951].

On Pops: "... as diverting as Pop art is, I happen not to find it really fresh. Nor does it really challenge taste on more than →

ryone knows is flat, and which, not give depth illusion because rther. He made the altering the shape of the canvas e began experimenting with color, put together before because really are flat objects, with cts. By contrast, Noland is tists who really broke with the hol.

after the 1964 Biennale turning Rauschenberg, Johns, Stella, so important: Abe and Vera es (collectors since 1930s), Ben Heller(?) much, but always significant), Leon Kraushaar (whose collection went to Germany when he died and started Ludwig), and in a somewhat eccentric way Count Panza di Biume (who would buy only if he could be sure of getting large quantities of work by the artist). Very little help from museums -- MOMA wasn't buying anything, Barr couldn't see the new art. During this period Leo was really king - everything of importance happened at his gallery. Then came Biennale and the nounter-revolution.

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"Post-Painterly Abstraction" by Greenberg
(Cat. to show he chose of 31 US + Canadian artists, opening at LA County Museum in April 1964)

"Having produced art of major importance, it (Abstract Exp) turned into a school, then into a manner, and finally into a set of mannerisms."

"By contrast with the interweaving of light and dark gradations in the typical Abs Exp. picture, all the artists in this show move towards a physical openness of design, towards linear clarity, or towards both." (Tendency already begun in work of Still, Newman, Rothko, Kline (1950-54) and even Pollock).

[Notes that "stain" technique, of diluting paint and soaking it into unsized + unprimed canvas, followed Pollock's lead in his black and white paintings of 1951].

On Pop: "... as diverting as Pop art is, I happen not to find it really fresh. Nor does it really challenge taste on more than →

ld "Rauschenberg

unpublished ms.)

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a superficial level. So far (aside, perhaps, from Jasper Johns) it amounts to a new episode in the history of taste, but not to an authentically new episode in the evolution of contemporary art."

(Show also went to Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and The Art Gallery of Toronto).

[Greenberg defines her use of word "painterly," from the German "malerisch" of Heinrich Woelfflin, to mean "blurred, broken, loose definition of color and contour." The opposite of painterly is clear, unbroken, and sharp definition, which Woelfflin calls 'linear.'"

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Clem Greenberg, on a panel, once said "Rauschenberg is a very meretricious artist."

(Douglas Davis, unpublished ms.)

painting a red-white-and-blue flag, which everyone knows is flat, and which, in spite of the effects of red and blue, does not give depth illusion because we know it's flat. Stella went a big step further. He made the painting itself an object, a flat object, by altering the shape of the canvas to accomodate the stripes(pattern). Later, he began experimenting with color, and used together colors that nobody had ever put together before because they clashed so violently. Stella's pictures really are flat objects, with no reference or resemblance to any other objects. By contrast, Noland is a much more traditional painter. The only artists who really broke with the past in art, after Jasper, are Stella and Warhol.

Two phases of 1960s

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(Geldzahler)

Leo Castelli - lunch ~~1/27~~ 1/26/71

Clem Greenberg is immensely influential, as an eminence grise whose judgement becomes a form of holy writ. He's influenced Rowan in Pasadena (now selling Warhols to buy Hoffman), he influences Bill Rubin at MOMA, and his ideas permeate the thinking of the whole Geldzahler-Emmerich-Larry Rubin group. He doesn't even have to write to wield this influence. Alan Solomon was never impressed by him, though. Greenberg et co. was in eclipse until about 1965, then he came on very strong for the colorfield people, Hoffman, Olitski and put them over, breaking Castelli's near-hegemony of the field. Leo, in fact, was surprised to find how many toes he had stepped on up to that time and how many enemies of his flocked to the new standard. Greenberg's line is the Apollonian, the detached, the purist side of sixties art. He is responsible for its recognition, more than any other single figure.

Frank Stella's importance: Ever since the beginning of the 20th cent. artists have been trying to effect a break with illusionism. To get away from Renaissance concept of a picture as a window in the wall, with illusionistic space through perspective. Cubism, for example. But the trouble was that it's very hard to paint "flat," because of the psychological effect of colors in combination -- blue always recedes and red always comes forward, giving effect of space. The first painter who really succeeded in banishing illusion was Jasper Johns, who did it by a psychological trick: by painting a red-white-and-blue flag, which everyone knows is flat, and which, in spite of the effects of red and blue, does not give depth illusion because we know it's flat. Stella went a big step further. He made the painting itself an object, a flat object, by altering the shape of the canvas to accomodate the stripes(pattern). Later, he began experimenting with color, and used together colors that nobody had ever put together before because they clashed so violently. Stella's pictures really are flat objects, with no reference or resemblance to any other objects. By contrast, Noland is a much more traditional painter. The only artists who really broke with the past in art, after Jasper, are Stella and Warhol.

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(Morris, et al)

Leo was going into conceptual art and "impossible" art, because what matters to him is to keep up with the artists not the market. Scull and the other collectors also became less active, if not committed to color field. Luckily, though, the new German collectors began buying ~~ex~~ pop art at unheard of prices, and are still doing so.

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(Geldzahler)

Andre Emmerich - 1/19/71

Emmerich delivered an historical treatise, going back to 18th century when the artist lost his former role in society. Until then he had been a craftsman, patronized by the rich classes, someone who filled a clear need in society. But this role disappeared in the 19th century. The artist withdrew into his own world to paint for himself. From then on it took about a generation for the artist's ideas to filter down into public consciousness so that they would be understood and accepted. This time lag lasted more or less up to the time of the Second World War; then, in the fifties and sixties, it was greatly speeded up. A major shift occurred, ~~[illegible]~~ especially in the U.S.

By the late fifties, American collectors had worked their way up through modern art and had begun to collect American paintings. Before, most had had the idea that "art happened in Paris." American artists too -- the Depression and the war kept the Pollock generation from going to Paris, as most of the others had done; by the time the Depression began to lift they were in their thirties, not twenties. So they did their work here. And in the late fifties people had discovered that real painting also happened in New York. The whole resistance to avant-garde art stopped at this point, evaporated. Suddenly, everyone was looking for "hot things" in American art; everyone felt that it had happened once (abstract expressionism), and that they'd better get in early when it happened again. It was at this precise moment that Henry Geldzahler appeared on the scene. (see Tom Hess "Tale of Two Cities")

Henry was ideally fitted to be "a guide and prophet to this unexplored jungle." It's always hard to tell the size of the trees at first -- which ones are just playing little games and which ones are the real pioneers. People look around for guides. Clement Greenberg was great on Pollock, Louis, Noland, Olitski, others; his track record had been brilliant, but would it be as good next year? Henry seemed ideal character for the role, ~~[illegible]~~

"And the trick was somewhat in the role. Henry's, and mine too, and Leo Castelli's. We're like surfboard riders. To be a surfboard rider you had to have, first, a wave. There's a certain lemming taste, a zeitgeist, which is not really individualistic at all. How do you catch the zeitgeist? If you have that feeling for the pulse, and are gifted with a responsive eye, you're very likely to work yourself into the vanguard. It also helps to be gifted with large ears. Henry has both. More than ears, he has sensitive nerve endings -- which incidentally is also a very good guide. Henry certainly caught the Pop art wave; but then it declined, so he caught the next wave."

Important to remember that art movements overlap. Monet painted his water lilies after the great period of Cubism. Surrealism and Mondrian existed side by side. Bonnard did his incredible pictures long after Impressionism was supposedly dead. "There is no main stream, but many eddies and currents."

Henry is very good at relieving the collector of the terrible burden of making a decision. What dealers do -- make him think he's right.

Future may be tough for him -- "Henry is like a political leader who has to run as hard as he can to stay ahead of the crowd he's leading. He has to keep on telling people who's good, or someone else will."

(see also quote on Henry's Show)

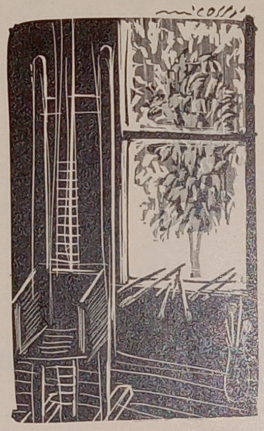
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Clem Greenberg's influence
There are six collections in Seattle, and every one follows the Greenberg line exactly. Why? Because Seattle has a fund to buy sculpture, and a panel of three experts to choose it, and Clem is on the panel - gets flown in regularly. He lords it over them out there in the sticks, and they buy what he says. Dan Christiansen, even. Greenberg ignored Johns, Rauschenberg, even Stella. His vision is so limited, and today he's more or less discredited around here anyway. But still a power in Seattle, San Francisco, and other cities.

Blum

Kenneth Noland retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum raises the question: What remains of art inspired and made publicly acceptable by critical doctrine after that conceptual cover has begun to disintegrate? Do the paintings revert to simple visual fact? Or do some tatters of their thought systems continue to cling to them? Noland was one of the spearheads of American formalist painting and sculpture—the simplified structures that increasingly preëmpted space in galleries, museums, private collections, and art magazines in the latter half of the sixties. Whatever their differences in appearance and handling, these fabrications were united by a preoccupation with problems of the material nature of painting—problems of surface, dimension, edge, color. The retrospective of Noland's twenty-year career divides itself into groups that pursue these problems in five formats: concentric circles (targets), wedge-shaped images (chevrons), diamond-shaped or horizontal paintings composed of colored stripes, and eccentric colored shapes on eccentrically shaped canvases. These more or less neutral, rationally conceived patterns have been much lauded for reducing painting to a single fundamental element—color—and for eliminating superfluities, such as emotional expression, personal narrative, and symbolic references. It has been argued that because the central impulse of modernism is to reduce each art to its essence—poetry to words, music to sound, drama to rhetoric and gesture, and so on—Noland and those who think like him constitute the avant-garde of painting today.



The formalist approach seemed to promise the possibility of new art that would not dissipate itself in eccentricities but would embody the essentials of the masterpieces of the past. By the first years of the present decade, however, the formalist aesthetic, with its systematic exclusion of everything of observer that the formalists' verbal dialectics were stronger than the paintings and sculptures that illustrated them. In 1971, the magazine *Artforum*—the central source of formalist emissions, in which articles on Noland and representations of his various formats had followed one another with obsessive frequency—changed its editor and its editorial policy. Since then, formalist domination of the art world has declined into the holding action of a handful of diehard theoreticians, plus a few docile curators of East Coast museums; the pioneers of the movement seem to be edging into other areas, and no new talent has emerged. In a recent article about *Artforum*, Jack Burnham, a critic who dates modes of art as if they were perishable groceries, flatly characterizes Noland and his peers (Olitski, Stella) as "fading wallflowers of the 1960's." Reviewing the Guggenheim retrospective, Robert Hughes, the art critic of *Time*, recalls the "intimidating" effect of the "supporting criticism" piled up in behalf of Noland's canvases, and exclaims, "Who, under that shadow, could call a stripe a stripe?" Quoting the closing paragraph of the Guggenheim catalogue, in which Diane Waldman, the curator who directed the retrospective, ranks Noland with masters since Delacroix, Hughes denounces as spurious and transient the version of art history on which Noland's elevation rests. "This litany," he writes, "might have read better ten years ago than it does today; it is incantatory rubbish. Delacroix was not a 'color painter' in any sense of the word that can be applied to Noland." Hughes then mentions some motifs to which color is applied in Delacroix's canvases: "theatricality, lust, tigers and Arabs."

A reassessment of the thinking on which an artist's recognition rests compels a reassessment of his work, particularly when thought and work are as closely identified as they are in Noland. The Guggenheim Museum deparatus, is a primary obstacle to critical evaluation. Only when the selling of the artist has run its course can a valid consensus be reached regarding the level of his work as an aspect of contemporary culture. It is not that the spectator, as Hughes suggests, should feel free to call a stripe a stripe but that he should be aware of distinctions in the ways that stripes are employed in art, and of the aesthetic, social, and philosophical consequences of those distinctions. Noland's striped canvases have rich decorative possibilities—although these are not fully realized at the Guggenheim, owing to the monotonous symmetry of the hanging, and in general because of Noland's bland sense of color (doctrinal emphasis on color does not guarantee talent in handling it). If the paintings' effectiveness as ornamentation were all that was in question, the determination of Noland's merits could be left to each spectator's taste in interior design. But the intellectual context of his canvases has involved them in a redefinition of painting itself—an issue that transcends decoration. Between one mode of art and another, what is at stake is nothing less than contemporary man's (to use a favorite phrase of Hans Hofmann's) "search for the Real."

Noland has drawn on a tradition, but one wonders what he has contributed to that tradition. He has been influenced by, among others, such painters of stripes and experimenters with color as Jasper Johns, Mondrian, Albers, Klee, Bolotowsky, and Newman—above all, by Newman. Johns' "Target with Four Faces," an immediate precursor of Noland's concentric circles, intimates a dramatic relation between the target shape and a shooting gallery or a firing squad by inserting in a space left above the circles sections of sculptured faces at which the marksman might be taking aim. In her catalogue essay, Mrs. Waldman attempts to distinguish between Johns' and Noland's targets on exclusively formal grounds. Noland, she writes, "concerned himself totally with flatness, achieved . . . by enlarging the circle as much as possible within the limits dictated by the square canvas." In fact, not all of Noland's targets approach the edge of the canvas, those that do are no "flatter"

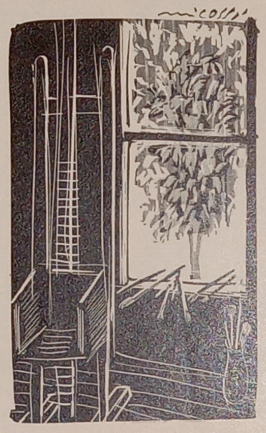
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THE ART WORLD

Kenneth Noland

In art, the nineteen-sixties was a decade of stylistic programming and public-relations coups rather than of outstanding creations. The Kenneth Noland retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum raises the question: What remains of art inspired and made publicly acceptable by critical doctrine after that conceptual cover has begun to disintegrate? Do the paintings revert to simple visual fact? Or do some tatters of their thought systems continue to cling to them? Noland was one of the spearheads of American formalist painting and sculpture—the simplified structures that increasingly preëmpted space in galleries, museums, private collections, and art magazines in the latter half of the sixties. Whatever their differences in appearance and handling, these fabrications were united by a preoccupation with problems of the material nature of painting—problems of surface, dimension, edge, color. The retrospective of Noland's twenty-year career divides itself into groups that pursue these problems in five formats: concentric circles (targets), wedge-shaped images (chevrons), diamond-shaped or horizontal paintings composed of colored stripes, and eccentric colored shapes on eccentrically shaped canvases. These more or less neutral, rationally conceived patterns have been much lauded for reducing painting to a single fundamental element—color—and for eliminating superfluities, such as emotional expression, personal narrative, and symbolic references. It has been argued that because the central impulse of modernism is to reduce each art to its essence—poetry to words, music to sound, drama to rhetoric and gesture, and so on—Noland and those who think like him constitute the avant-garde of painting today.



The formalist approach seemed to promise the possibility of new art that would not dissipate itself in eccentricities but would embody the essentials of the masterpieces of the past. By the first years of the present decade, however, the formalist aesthetic, with its systematic exclusion of everything of import to the mind and the imagination, had begun to expose its poverty as a basis for persuasive works. Indeed, it appeared to more than one observer that the formalists' verbal dialectics were stronger than the paintings and sculptures that illustrated them. In 1971, the magazine *Artforum*—the central source of formalist emissions, in which articles on Noland and representations of his various formats had followed one another with obsessive frequency—changed its editor and its editorial policy. Since then, formalist domination of the art world has declined into the holding action of a handful of diehard theoreticians, plus a few docile curators of East Coast museums; the pioneers of the movement seem to be edging into other areas, and no new talent has emerged. In a recent article about *Artforum*, Jack Burnham, a critic who dates modes of art as if they were perishable groceries, flatly characterizes Noland and his peers (Olitski, Stella) as "fading wallflowers of the 1960's." Reviewing the Guggenheim retrospective, Robert Hughes, the art critic of *Time*, recalls the "intimidating" effect of the "supporting criticism" piled up in behalf of Noland's canvases, and exclaims, "Who, under that shadow, could call a stripe a stripe?" Quoting the closing paragraph of the Guggenheim catalogue, in which Diane Waldman, the curator who directed the retrospective, ranks Noland with masters since Delacroix, Hughes denounces as spurious and transient the version of art history on which Noland's elevation rests. "This litany," he writes, "might have read better ten years ago than it does today; it is incantatory rubbish. Delacroix was not a 'color painter' in any sense of the word that can be applied to Noland." Hughes then mentions some motifs to which color is applied in Delacroix's canvases: "theatricality, lust, tigers and Arabs."

A reassessment of the thinking on which an artist's recognition rests compels a reassessment of his work, particularly when thought and work are as closely identified as they are in Noland. The Guggenheim Museum deserves credit for delaying its presentation of Noland until the artist was, so to speak, out in the open intellectually and aesthetically. Premature celebration of artists by major museums both here and abroad, which in effect make public money and institutional prestige available to reinforce a promotional apparatus, is a primary obstacle to critical evaluation. Only when the selling of the artist has run its course can a valid consensus be reached regarding the level of his work as an aspect of contemporary culture. It is not that the spectator, as Hughes suggests, should feel free to call a stripe a stripe but that he should be aware of distinctions in the ways that stripes are employed in art, and of the aesthetic, social, and philosophical consequences of those distinctions. Noland's striped canvases have rich decorative possibilities—although these are not fully realized at the Guggenheim, owing to the monotonous symmetry of the hanging, and in general because of Noland's bland sense of color (doctrinal emphasis on color does not guarantee talent in handling it). If the paintings' effectiveness as ornamentation were all that was in question, the determination of Noland's merits could be left to each spectator's taste in interior design. But the intellectual context of his canvases has involved them in a redefinition of painting itself—an issue that transcends decoration. Between one mode of art and another, what is at stake is nothing less than contemporary man's (to use a favorite phrase of Hans Hofmann's) "search for the Real."

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than those that don't, and "Target with Four Faces" crowds the edge more than Noland's "Winter Sun" or "Burnt Day." But what is the consequence of an artist's concerning himself exclusively with "flatness"—in itself an aesthetically meaningless quality, since it has been characteristic of the paintings of numerous unrelated cultures? Mrs. Waldman's formalist description of Noland's intentions supports the conclusion that concentration on flatness means that imagination and observation of phenomena have been excluded in favor of exercises in the optical behavior of colors: Do colors advance or recede when juxtaposed in circular bands? Nor are Noland's exercises carried out consistently, as are those in Albers' researches into the interactions of colors. For all its pretense of intellectual discipline, formalism has no content to explore—its sole ambition is to produce "good" paintings. Noland's early targets achieve an emotional effect through reference to Abstract Expressionist animation in their loosely brushed outer rims, which contrast with cores of hard-edged rings, as in "Rocker," "That," and "Round," all done in 1958-59. "Globe" (1956), a single hand-drawn circle on a vaguely spotted ground, is a suggestive hybrid that combines Abstract Expressionist informality with a kind of languorous desire for order which seems part of Noland's temperament. "Untitled" (1958), "Lunar Episode" (1959), and "Mesh" (1959) introduce a whirling motion into the target format by activating the outer circle through staining and directional brushstrokes, although the core of the target remains static to the point of rigidity. Noland's 1960 targets and his later "cat's-eye" paintings (circles within ovals) become increasingly mechanical as the artist deletes all effects except those that illustrate formalist doctrine.

More fundamental than his difference from Johns is Noland's difference from Newman—a difference that is also more subtle, since the works of both artists are totally abstract and devoid of visual reference. Newman's striped paintings provided Noland with his most contemporary model, one that even seemed relevant to the goal of "flatness." Yet the meaning of Newman's work places it at the opposite pole from Noland's. Newman's paintings, too, are predicated on the conviction that "less is more," but for him the decision as to what is superfluous is made in accord with the profoundest feelings of the individual artist. With Noland, committed to "objectivity," the

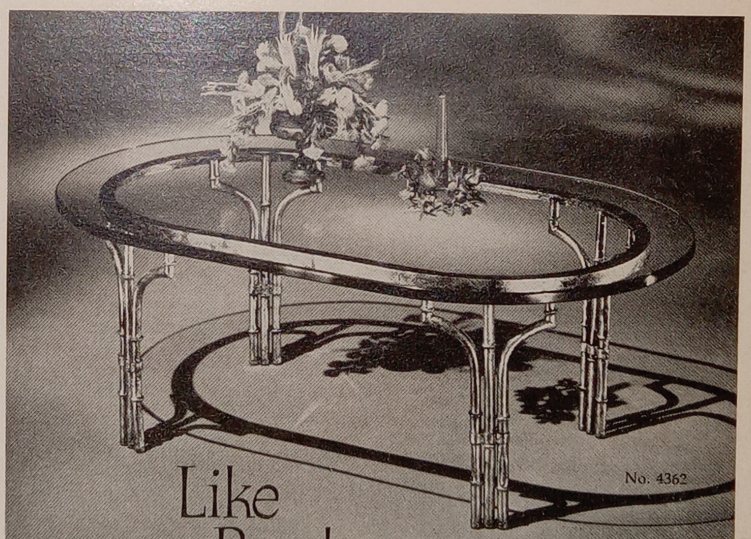
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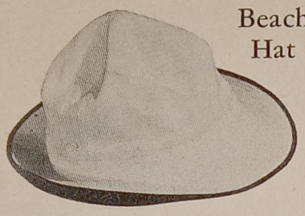
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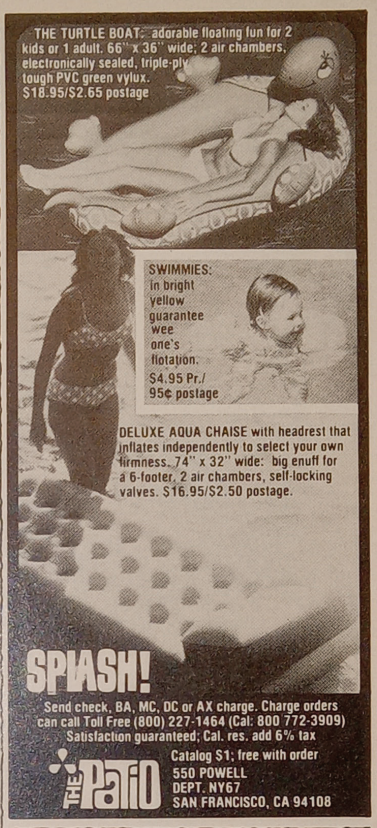
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elimination of elements of painting, like the elimination of subject matter, is carried out in obedience to a presumed principle of evolution in art. For him, Mrs. Waldman writes, "the primary function of shape is to serve as the vehicle for color. . . . Shape [is a] carrier of color." "Vehicle" and "carrier" are terms introduced by Newman, but for a purpose entirely different from the subordination of painting to color. The abstract shape, said Newman—rectangles, squares, chevrons—was for the Kwakiutl Indians of the Pacific Northwest "a living thing, a vehicle for an abstract thought-complex, a carrier of awesome feelings." In painting, Newman sought the power to transmit a reality beyond painting. Purging his format was a means of expanding its content. In contrast, Noland uses his colored stripes as a sufficient substitute for content. The resulting differences in the paintings of the two artists are enormous. A Newman, though it is composed of the same elements as other Newmans, has the tension of a singular creative act. A Noland, in which personality has been renounced in favor of theory and method, lacks the variousness of actual experience.

Whether by accident or intent, in Noland's most successful designs the primacy of color is sacrificed to other aesthetic factors. Extreme disproportion of length and width—a formal device in which Noland was preceded by Newman's "The Wild" (96 x 1½ inches) and "Outcry" (82 x 6)—lends tang to his horizontal paintings "Sound" (30 x 216) and "Intent" and "Kind" (both 10 x 144) and to "Plaid's Time" (103 x 14½), a vertical rectangle. Their odd dimensions give these paintings an Expressionist effect, which supersedes any reaction that their undistinguished pigments might induce. A successful exploitation of shape also occurs in the compressed diamond format of "Approach" (96 x 22) and of "Untitled," "Deep Pillot," and "Dry Shift" (all 96 x 24). The radical disruption of the rectangle and the diamond (a square set on end) changes a painting from a surface on which to transmit an image, or a "vehicle for color," into a thing. Noland's declared intention to "neutralize the layout" in order to stress color—a program similar to that of Albers' "Homage to the Square" series—is inconsistent with elongated and squeezed-together forms that distract the spectator by introducing elements of arbitrariness and surprise.

Paintings still more in violation of the formalist program, and the most





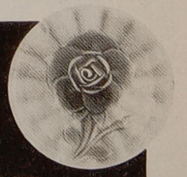
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enticing in the retrospective, are two horizontal lozenge-shaped canvases—"Shift" and "Shade" (both 1966)—that appear to float away from the wall, owing to an illusion created by perspective. Here, as in the elongated strip paintings, color plays a minor part. In "Shift," the illusion of a square receding from the spectator is heightened by the greater width and stronger colors of the bottom two bands. Since the bottom two bands of "Shade" also produce the illusion of being closer to the spectator than the top two, one may perhaps assume that the spatial illusion was deliberate and that Noland was quietly exploiting effects not contemplated by the formalist scheme.

In both its origin and its presentation to the public, however, Noland's is a collective art, bound by rules and principles rather than by an effort toward the realization of individuality (condemned by formalism as "romantic self-expression"). In different degrees, all art is, of course, a sharing—without imaginative and conceptual interchange, there could be no art movements or "schools," and certainly no style of a given place or period. But extremely refined gradations exist in the degree and manner of the intervention by others, from instruction and commands from above to hints derived from fellow-artists. All art study begins in doctrine, and the way out into art is through works. Centered on a set of predefined problems having to do with paintings as objects of a certain kind, and firmly repulsing chance, whim, accident, dream, and the irrational, American formalism achieved a conscious group purposefulness that had not been evident in art since the functional aesthetics of the nineteen-thirties. For the public, the authority of the formalists may have been augmented by their presentation of themselves as nonpersons, guided in their responses to works by objective axioms rather than by developing sensibility. One is interested to find Noland quoted in the Guggenheim catalogue as seeking in his pre-formalist days a way "to arrive at making art that was more personal" than that of the Abstract Expressionists. Yet his biography is charted by encounters with critics and like-minded painters and sculptors which seem more collaborative than "personal." Decisive for Noland was his meeting with Morris Louis in 1952 and their visit the next year to the studio of Helen Frankenthaler under the guidance of the critic Clement Greenberg. With Greenberg, whom Noland met frequently in Washington and New York, and with David Smith, who accom-



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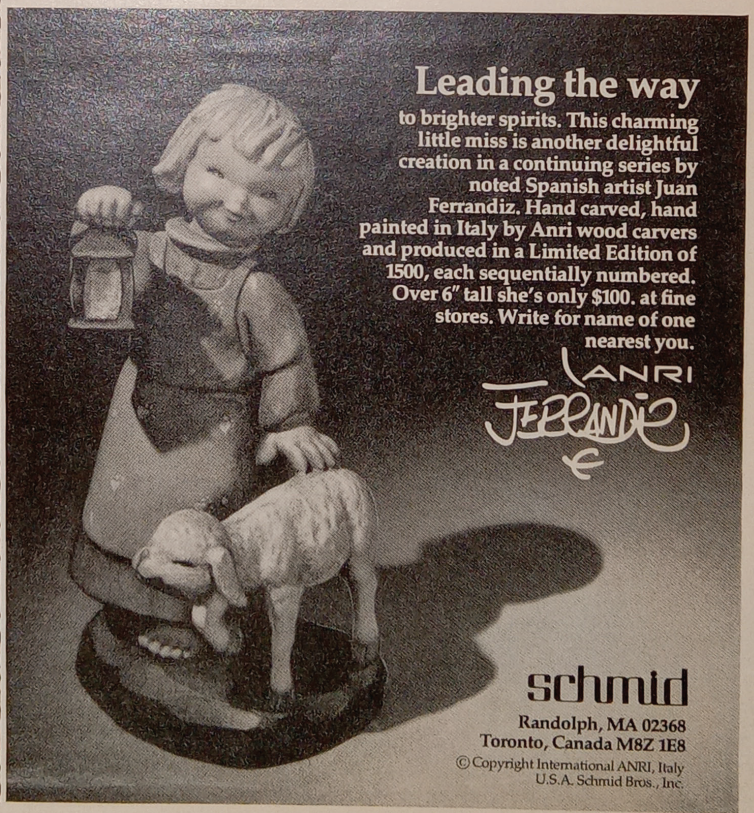
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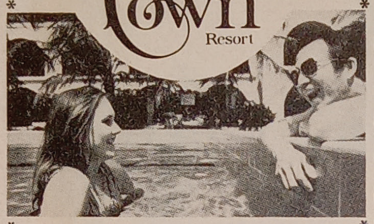


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panied Greenberg on his Washington visits, Noland established what the catalogue describes as an "intense relationship." Extending the collaboration story are Noland's colloquies with Olitski, Caro, and Jack Bush, the critic Michael Fried, the curator Kenworth Moffett, and other members of the Greenberg "family." Apparently, Noland's temperament made him ideally suited to personify the extroverted formalist outlook.

For all his awareness of the critical "intimidation" at work in behalf of Noland, Robert Hughes exemplifies the difficulty of shaking off its aftereffects. While he demolishes the absurd contention that the essence of the masterpieces of the past is crystallized in the A-B-C shapes of formalism, he remains convinced that Noland is an outstanding, though limited, painter. Noland's targets seem to Hughes to possess "an airy energy that few American painters (and no European ones at the time) could equal." They "bloom and pulsate with light. They offer a pure, uncluttered heroism to the eye." In short, Hughes has accepted the judgment of Noland as a spectacular colorist, though he insists that praise of Noland stop with that. Everyone is entitled to what he finds in paintings, but for me there is nothing distinctive in Noland's color. Contiguous bands of paint are always effective, either through harmony or through conflict. As wall decoration, stripes can't go wrong. As to "flatness," the point is not that the two-dimensionality of the canvas should be preserved by making the pigment one with it through soaking but that the act of painting should evoke counteractions from the hidden life of the surface. Noland's inert patterns rarely awaken the energies inherent in his materials.

—Harold Rosenberg

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[*From the Kentucky Enquirer*]

"Comrade Berlinguer," students yelled in Communist-run Bologna, "now more than ever, you are either with the Christian Democrats or with workers . . . the Communist Party with the bosses: that's a real provocation."

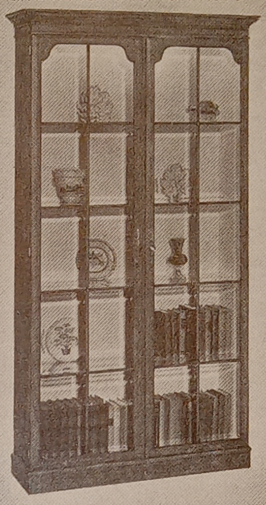
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SURFACE, EDGE AND COLOR

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SURFACE, EDGE AND COLOR, an exhibition of paintings by six artists, will open December 8, 1976 at the Downtown Branch of the Whitney Museum of American Art. Works from the 1960s and one recent work of the following artists will be presented: Al Held, Ellsworth Kelly, Agnes Martin, Kenneth Noland, Larry Poons and Frank Stella.

Although the six have always worked independently and have never considered themselves to be part of a group or school, each was a seminal figure in the movement that has been variously called "minimal," "hard-edge" or "post painterly" abstraction. The painting of these artists in the early and mid-sixties has been characterized as cool and emotionally detached; their canvases immediate in perceptual impact, clean-surfaced and flat. As painters, they all have been highly influential in the development of contemporary visual sensibilities. This exhibition is designed to reveal their visual statements in the 1960s and the diverse directions their work is now taking.

SURFACE, EDGE AND COLOR was organized by Susan Buckler; Stiles Colwill, George Washington University; Maureen Keesey, University of California-Davis; Owen Pratz; Karl Sandin, Rutgers University and Peter Zabielskis, Oberlin College, all Helena Rubinstein Fellows in the Whitney Museum's Independent Study Program, under the direction of David Hupert, Head of the Education Department.

The Downtown Branch of the Whitney Museum of American Art, located at 55 Water Street, is supported by the business community of lower Manhattan and the National Endowment for the Arts. Opening hours on December 8 will be from 4 to 7 p.m. The exhibition will continue Mondays through Fridays, 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. until January 12. Admission is free at all times.

Press day: Wednesday, December 8 from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Selected photographs are available upon request.

For Further Information: Maureen Keesey, Downtown Branch (212) 483-0011;
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Art

"Solmssen did the legwork and the footwork to get documents under Kissinger's nose so the protocol could be signed between Nixon and Brezhnev." (Thomas Hoving)

ART VIEW

HILTON KRAMER

Some Very Beautiful—But Very Limited—Paintings

WASHINGTON

The first thing to be said about the Morris Louis exhibition at the National Gallery of Art (through Jan. 9) is this: it is a very beautiful show. The eye is ravished by an experience of color that, though subtle in design and carefully calculated in effect, is nonetheless simple, fresh and direct. There is nothing "hidden" or mysterious in these paintings, and nothing metaphysical in our experience of them. They capture the eye with an easy immediacy, and hold it by eliminating everything but a naked appeal to the kind of optical pleasure that color, and color alone, can offer. Color is what Louis's painting is "essentially about," writes E. A. Carmean Jr., the curator at the National Gallery who organized this exhibition and wrote its catalogue — a judgment everywhere confirmed in the paintings on view.

The exhibition, which consists of only 16 paintings, is small enough, too, to avoid that sense of monotony and narrow purpose that a larger number of Louis's paintings would almost certainly induce. Louis, a founder of the Washington Color School who died in 1962 at the age of 49, was not, in my opinion, a "big" artist. He was an extremely gifted member of that class of painters who, searching for a way to go "beyond" what has immediately preceded them, settle on a strategy of attrition as a means of achieving the requisite "breakthrough." Louis concentrated his breakthrough on color, more or less rejecting all other considerations. The result, as I say, was often very beautiful, but also very limited, and not of a scope, I think, to justify Mr. Carmean in calling Louis (as he does in the current issue of Arts Magazine) "a great painter" — a judgment that would oblige us to find another way of describing Matisse and Cézanne.

A strategy of attrition, such as Louis pursued, requires both technical prowess — for what remains, after so much has been forfeited, must be made to support the entire pictorial enterprise — and great single-mindedness, and Louis was not lacking in either. It requires, too, a theory of the history of painting that reduces everything of importance to a succession of technical feats or innovations, each designed to reaffirm — but ever more insistently and unmistakably — the physical attributes of the medium, its flatness, its edges, its shape, etc. This theory, widely known as formalism, Louis also did not lack. Its foremost promulgator in our time is the critic Clement Greenberg, and it is Mr. Greenberg who served as Louis's guide and mentor — and Mr. Greenberg, too, who serves as the principal source of the ideas employed by Mr. Carmean in explaining Louis's work and the high esteem in which he holds it.

What we are being offered in this exhibition, then, is not only a selection of paintings by Morris Louis but also an "event" in the history of art. The first of these—the paintings themselves—are a delight. The second—the elevation of their creation to the status of a major milestone in the history of the modern movement—is a factitious irritation that burdens the paintings with claims they cannot support. Far from clarifying the kind of experience that Louis's paintings actually afford, such claims only obscure its real nature.

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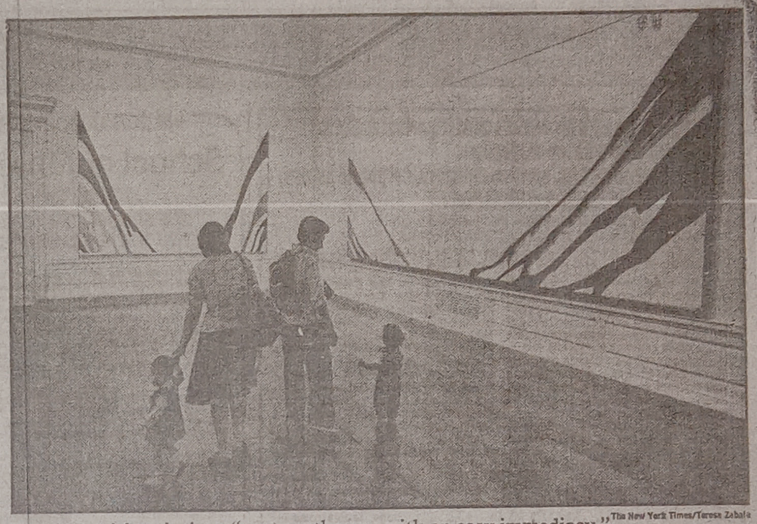
As an "event," Louis's accomplishment is said to hinge on the conversion he underwent in the studio of Helen Frankenthaler in the spring of 1953. Louis was then 40 years old, a painter struggling to find a way "out" of Abstract Expressionism. Visiting Miss Frankenthaler in the company of Mr. Greenberg and Kenneth Noland, he saw her painting "Mountains and Sea" (1952), and there —Eureka!—discovered the future course of Western painting. Miss Frankenthaler, Louis said, "was a bridge between Pollock and what was possible."

What was possible, in this case, was the technique of staining color into the raw canvas instead of applying it to a prepared surface with a brush or some other implement. Louis made of this technique the basis of everything he produced in the remaining years of his life. Miró had used it years before, of course, but Miró was insufficiently single-minded, perhaps, for the purpose at hand. He was obsessed with images, with poetry and puns, with objects and erotic scenarios and a sense of humor—with everything, one is tempted to say, that formalist theory rejected. "Mountains and Sea" provided a more direct and uncluttered access to the promised land.

Mr. Carmean leaves us in no doubt as to how we are to consider Louis's use of this technique. "Many examples of 20th-century art reveal a new expressive ability or a new direction based on the use of a novel technique or material," he writes in the catalogue. "We can cite pasted newspaper in Braque and Picasso collages, painted paper in a Matisse découpage, the painterly poured line of Pollocks classic abstractions, or David Smith's welded stainless steel. For Morris Louis the staining technique was such a breakthrough."

One could devote a long essay to unraveling this list of precedents, and placing them in their proper historical context, but the point is clear enough. The paintings that Louis produced in the last eight years of his life are to be taken as works of towering historical importance.

One result of this attitude is that the first painting we see, as we approach the Louis exhibition at the National Gallery, is Miss Frankenthaler's "Mountain and Sea," the significance of which is duly explained. We thus enter the exhibition appropriately prepared for the revelations to come.



Morris Louis's paintings "capture the eye with an easy immediacy." The New York Times/Teresa Zabala

What we then see is the work of a delicate, almost fragile sensibility that acquired extraordinary control over a very small area of the art of painting. Louis often worked on a large physical scale—the painting called "Beta Iota" (1960), on loan here from the Museum of Modern Art, measures more than 23 feet in width—but the conception governing his work is always a small one. He began by employing large, overlapping stains, or "veils," of liquid color that occupied most of the canvas. He then turned to something sparer, placing discrete irregular ribbons or rivulets of color in denser saturations that come in from the picture plane and leave a large central area a white void. He ended by laying in these dense saturations in stripes, which likewise left large areas of white space. Upon all these "themes" he produced numbers of variations—hence the title of this exhibition, which is called "Morris Louis: Major Themes and Variations"—and produced them all expertly, with an unfailing technical control.

• • •

And that, perhaps, is the crux of the experience we take away from these pictures—the experience of color, ravishing to the eye, as it is conceived by a mind in thrall to the very technique that yielded so many small perfections. Morris Louis was not the first modern artist to discover that, by jettisoning a great many of the traditional resources of painting, something small and perfect might be achieved with what remained. But it was something small, and it is a mockery of great art—or a convenient amnesia—to claim otherwise.