

AFTER REINHARDT

THE ECSTASY OF DENIAL

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Any attempt to provide a historical framework for the art in "After Reinhardt: The Ecstasy of Denial," must consider Ad Reinhardt's Black Paintings, which effectively represent the end of a tradition in painting; and yet they were precursors for the new painting that would follow. The painters identified as "opaque painters," many of whom emerged in the mid-1960s, began the project which would become known as critical abstract painting. Critical abstract painting is distinct from "monochrome" painting, which is an essentially conservative tendency. The art in "After Reinhardt" redefines the painting support and the relationship of that support to the wall.

The one, eternal, permanent revolution in art turns over art from art-as-also-something-else into art-as-only-art-itself. Progress and change in art is always a negation of the use of art for some end other than its own end. An avant-garde in art advances art-as-art or it isn't avant-garde.

—Ad Reinhardt

It is fitting that Ad Reinhardt's recent retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art should come at this historical juncture as abstract art recovers from the problematizing critiques of the 1980s when it could be said that abstraction had been thrown into crisis. For Reinhardt, there was little doubt about what kind of art to make; he was the first major American painter to have been an abstract artist from the start of his career. He never went through the collective agonistic vacillation between abstraction and representation of many of his colleagues in the New York School. His art, and perhaps more importantly, his ideas about art have much to say to an art world that has been largely uninterested in his ideas for the past two decades.

The situation was very different over twenty-five years ago, when Minimalism appeared to represent the culmination and vindication of Reinhardt's artistic mis-

sion to purge art of all extra-aesthetic associations (without concomitantly embracing Clement Greenberg's prescriptive essentialist and historicist conceptions of art). The Black Paintings, begun in 1954, adumbrate the phenomenological concerns of Minimalism by engaging the beholder in an intimate temporal relationship and making the act of *seeing* a painting a much more physical and concentrated activity than perhaps ever before. This precluded the much vaunted Formalist notion of instantaneity or "the accessibility of a work at a glance."¹ And yet, before he can be claimed for Minimalism, it must be noted that Reinhardt "refused to consider phenomenal literal space as one of the perceptual parameters of art. His abhorrence of the gloss of a painting's surface...had much to do with his fear of interference of actual space caused by the reflections."² Reinhardt was until the end a painter of "cryptic" non-representational images, but *images* nonetheless; he was the last great painter in the "behind the frame tradition."

Reinhardt's death in 1967 coincides with a general turning point in American art; it was the year in which Michael Fried's "Art and Objecthood" explicated the grand fissure between Formalism and Minimalism. For many, it no longer seemed possible to paint images (not just figural images but also the color illusionist images of late Formalism). For those who recognized that moment and its implications, there was no turning back. Or so it seemed.³

The moment dictated only a few possible options: give up painting altogether (as Judd had done earlier); retreat into a self-canceling illusionism by the precarious balancing of pictorial space through color advancement and recession (Noland, Stella); or simply to start over again with the bare essentials of painting—brush, paint, canvas—and develop a highly critical and historically aware involvement with the material practices of painting (Ryman).

The moment after Reinhardt belongs to those new "critical"⁴ abstract painters who took up the latter proposition (foremost among them Robert Ryman and Brice Marden, who both had their first one man shows in 1967). They were identified in a 1973 essay by Douglas Crimp as "opaque" painters who were "bound together almost exclusively by their commitment to anti-illusionism" and their attempts to "give to the painted surface an equivalent literalness to that which Minimalism had imparted to the sculptural object."⁵

Crimp is clearly sympathetic towards the new painting and he outlines the formal parameters within which it operates and breaks from the abstract painting that preceded it—Abstract Expressionism and Color Field Painting. He discusses how space and the painting's support function in critical abstract painting to defeat il-

lusionism—in contrast to Formalist painting's large expanses of color which mentally absorbed the viewer "in the ambiguous space of the color field."

The mural-sized canvas of Abstract Expressionism and Color Field Painting "obliterates our sense of the frame in order to propel us directly into fictive space." To Crimp's hardened Minimalist eyes, this was a breach of Modernism's aspirations towards an obdurate anti-illusionism; in contrast, opaque painting is midway between the easel picture and the mural-sized canvas. One cannot experience its surfaces in terms of the Renaissance conception of the painted rectangle as an "open window" or the engulfing presence of late Formalist painting which has been likened to an imaginative penetration of outer space.

Most of the artists associated with critical abstract painting in the 1960s used one color in the execution of their work, making the paintings "monochrome" but not necessarily making them "monochrome" painters in the historical sense of that term (*i.e.* as direct morphological descendants of Alexander Rodchenko's pioneering monochromes of 1921). Critical abstract painting contains a structural complexity that by definition is absent from monochrome painting proper.⁶ Monochrome painting usually refers to those painters who take a single canvas or support and cover the entire surface with one color. Thus, the work's aesthetic interest primarily lies in *how* that surface is painted: thick or thin brushstrokes (when they are visible at all), matte or glossy finish, and the particular chromatic qualities of the singularly chosen color.

Because of his uncompromising championing of abstract art and the phenomenological transformation his art implies, Reinhardt's example was significant for the initial development of critical abstract painting.⁷ But a far greater number of painters selectively (mis)read the ramifications of his work, brought his surface up from behind the frame and attempted to resuscitate that most venerable of twentieth-century devices, the monochrome canvas. The program for monochrome painting was perhaps laid out most clearly by Reinhardt himself in 1962, years before the proliferation of monochrome painting in the late 1960s and 1970s:

The one work for a fine artist, the one painting, is the painting of the one-size canvas—the single scheme, one formal device, one color monochrome, one linear division in each direction, one symmetry, one texture...⁸

The most articulate and relentless contemporary exponent of monochromatic abstraction is painter Marcia Hafif who writes:

Monochrome painting, by which I mean a flat painting surface, usually rectangular, covered in some fashion with what is effectively one color of paint... "deconstructs" the medium not by taking it apart, but by giving painting a fresh reading and rebuilding it from its foundations; object and color. Along with Unism and Greenbergian Formalism in general, it accepts the flat, usually stretched support, and the notion that painting should be true to the elements it does not share with any other medium.⁹

Hafif's essay (1988) is remarkable in its privileging of Greenbergian Formalism some twenty years after the fact. It is also ironic that Hafif should retain such an outlook despite the fact that Greenberg and his epigones have no use for her type of abstraction, condemning it as "dull—far out dullness, which has become a drug on the art market ever since the Minimalists."¹⁰ From an historical perspective, it is also curious that Hafif should claim Formalism for monochrome painting since her artistic lineage can be traced to the early Soviet and Eastern European Modernists and not the decidedly Parisian cast of Greenberg and Fried's pre-New York school Modernist canon. Finally, the evidence over the past decade strongly suggests, as one commentator has written, that "as a major conquest monochrome...lies in the past, exhausted and wrung dry of meaning."¹¹

The artists in this exhibition extend the tradition mapped out in Crimp's "Opaque Surfaces," but their work contains some fundamental differences from the critical abstract painting of the 1960s. The painting of the 1960s and early 1970s almost always accepted the traditional support of stretched canvas.¹² The new painting, however, is primarily involved in a redefinition of the painterly support and the relationship of that support to the wall.

The support is now made up of materials alien to previous painting, including earlier critical abstract painting: steel (Christian Eckart, Alan Uglow), sheetrock (Ford Beckman), lead (Tadaaki Kuwayama). Elements which have traditionally been unseen, such as the wall, are foregrounded (most of the artists frame or expose the wall: Karin Sander "polishes" and paints the wall directly in her wall pieces; Uglow's cut-outs frame a small portion of the wall; Alan Charlton's multiple panels are separated by disruptive divisions revealing the wall, making it an integral part of the painting's composition). The fecundity of Ryman's interest in

attaching/fastening the support to the wall is particularly evident in the amount of small hardware on display—bolts, screws, and nails—each taking on a different signification from work to work.

My own work utilizes transparent sheets of poly-vinyl plastic in order to expose the wooden stretcher bars—the literal support of painting since the Renaissance. The screws that hold the stretcher bars together and the nails on which the painting rests are made visible, as is the wall on which it hangs.

For the new painting of the 1990s, painting is not a timeless enterprise, but rather its *meaningfulness* (after Reinhardt) is now contingent upon its ability to suspend all claims to timelessness. Its reexamination of what constitutes a painting is in marked contrast to the Modernist conception of painting as vertical field, and the post-Modern critique of verticality ushered in by Robert Rauschenberg's horizontal "flatbed picture" which shifted attention from nature to culture.¹³ The painting in this show supercedes both the Modernist and post-Modernist conceptions of painting by positing neither a vertical field of pure opticality, nor a site for textual images. Perhaps what we are witnessing is the aesthetic formulation of a new paradigm—a *Supra-Modernism* (beyond both the Modern and post-Modern).¹⁴

If so, then *Supra-Modernism* will have to bear the burden of maintaining the viability of painting, of art *itself*, as a (serious) cultural enterprise—distinct from both the praxis of life and collusion with the mechanisms of capital. *That* is Reinhardt's legacy.

1.Yve-Alain Bois, "The Limit of Almost," in *Ad Reinhardt*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles and Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1991) page 33, footnote 92.

2.Bois, page 13.

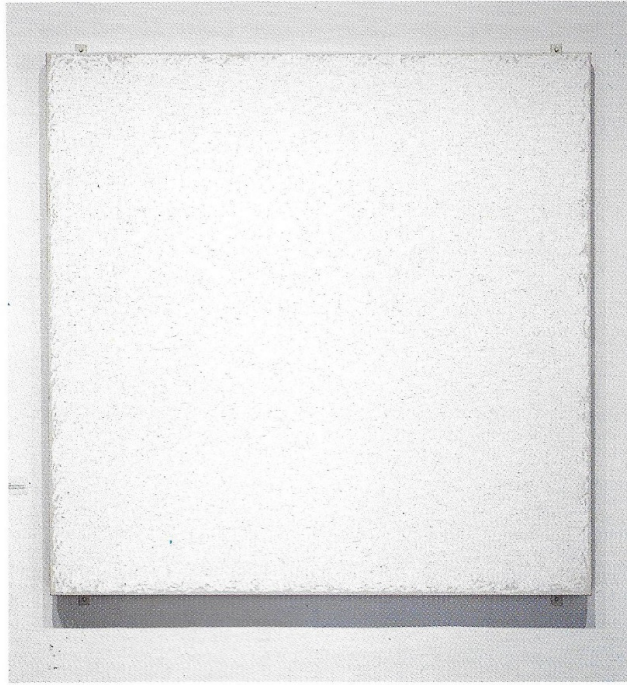
3.Frank Stella was a crucial figure in creating the climate for Minimalism, and the objectification of painting that grew more intense as the 1960s unfolded. But his paintings after 1965 turn increasingly away from "objectness" and towards the kind of two-dimensional color illusionism of his Formalist colleagues. For a more thorough discussion of this see Philip Lieder, "Literalism and Abstraction: Reflections on Stella at the Modern," *Artforum*, April 1970, pages 44-51.

4.In Hal Foster's "Signs Taken For Wonders," *Art In America*, June 1986, pages 90-91 and 139, he argues that Simulationist abstraction (Halley, Levine, Taafe, *et al.*) suffers from "conventionalism" and is contrasted with "serious" and "critical" abstract painting, which is "in historical involvement with its material practices"(page 86). Other names for this type of painting have included "minimal" painting, "radical" painting and "analytical" painting. All of these terms are insufficient, I think, mainly because of their association with "monochrome" painting, which is far from "critical."

5.Douglas Crimp, "Opaque Surfaces," in *Arte Come Arte*, exhibition catalogue (Milan: Centro Comunitario Di Brera, 1973), n.p. The exhibition included Ad Reinhardt, Barnett Newman, Ellsworth Kelly, Frank Stella, Agnes Martin, Ralph Humphrey, Richard Tuttle, Dorothea Rockbourne, Jo Baer,

David Novros, Robert Mangold, Brice Marden and Robert Ryman. The latter four painters are singled out by Crimp as leading progenitors of Opaque Painting. It is interesting to note that while Formalism had a talented cast of apologists (both among critics, and institutionally in museums) and Minimalism relied heavily on the writings of its own artists, critical abstract painting has had very little written about it as a movement. Crimp's brilliant text is thus exceptional. More typical is a mainstream survey like Irving Sandler's 412 page book, *American Art of the 1960s* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988) which devotes a mere five pages to what he conventionally calls "minimal" painting.

6. Robert Mangold's paintings from the 60s, 70s, and early 80s illustrate how painting can be "monochrome" and yet involve itself in more than the mere presentation of surface-color. His multiple panels and inscribed geometry create a heightened awareness of the tension between what we see and what we know. He achieves this by setting up a subtle yet dynamic interplay between the structural necessities of the painting-object and the virtual form depicted on the surface. Simply put, there is a conceptual edge to critical abstract painting that is missing from monochrome painting. David Novros's paintings from the 60s are as equally exemplary of this conceptual quality as Mangold's.
7. Kay Larson has written that, "Reinhardt, always an odd man out in his own time, refined an analytic process that anticipated the concerns of the next three decades. Frank Stella's black paintings, Kosuth-style conceptualism, Robert Irwin's reductive space-and-light experiments, and aspects of minimalism, post-minimalism, and postmodernism all owe him a debt." From "Ad Vantage," *New York Magazine*, June 24, 1991, pages 49-50.
8. Ad Reinhardt, "Art-as-Art," *Art International*, December 20, 1962, page 37.
9. Marcia Hafif, "True Colors," *Art In America*, June 1989, page 193. Hafif, a New York-based painter, comments on the ambitious monochrome exhibition in Lyon, France in the fall of 1988. The show was entitled, "La Couleur Seule: l'Experience du Monochrome." ("Color Alone: The Monochrome Experience").
10. Clement Greenberg in an interview with Peter Plagens, *LA Weekly*, March 20-26, 1987, page 31.
11. Thomas McEvilley as quoted in Hafif, page 134.
12. This is not to suggest that using stretched canvas over wood supports precludes the making of advanced painting as evidenced by Alan Charlton's work. It's simply that much of the best recent painting has gone beyond stretched canvas. In thinking about those artists associated with critical abstract painting in the 60s and 70s, it is significant that by the 1980s many had abandoned their earlier positions. Stella had begun to do so by the mid-60s; Mangold began to introduce painterly gestural elements in the 80s; and Marden began his gestural lines in the 80s. But the most flagrant disavowal of one's earlier work was Jo Baer, who abandoned abstraction altogether. These events were part of the crisis of abstraction referred to earlier and precipitated in part by the retrogressive expressionist/figurative art of the Reagan era. Once again, Ryman stands out as an exemplary figure—never wavering from his early fundamental principles.
13. See Leo Steinberg, "Other Criteria," in *Other Criteria: Confrontations With Twentieth Century Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), page 91.
14. Needless to say, the idea of Supra-Modernism is highly complex and deserving of more discussion than is possible here. I plan to address its aesthetic and ideological implications in a future essay.



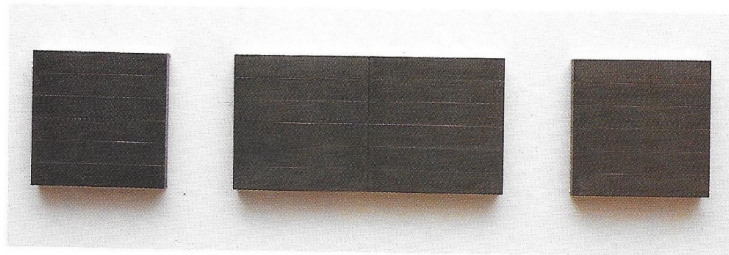
1 ROBERT RYMAN

CARRIER, 1979

Oil on cotton with metal brackets

81.5 x 78" (207 x 198 cm)

Collection of Whitney Museum of American Art, New York



2 TADAAKI KUWAYAMA

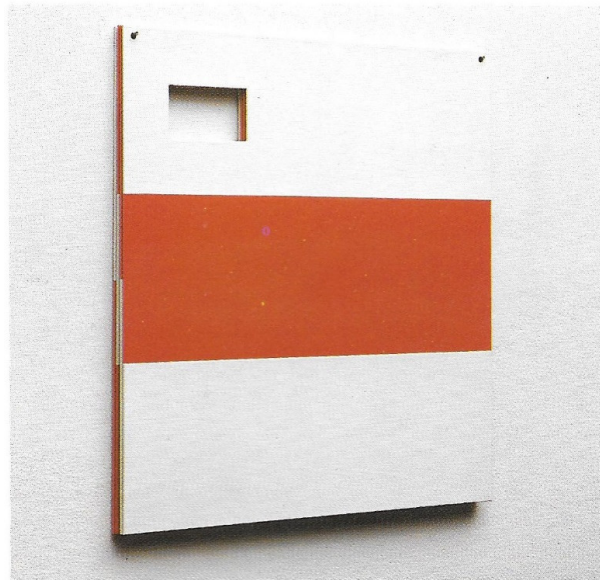
SET OF THREE LEAD PIECES, 1991

Lead on board and beeswax

3 panels; middle panel 12 x 24 x 2.5" (30 x 60 x 6.3 cm)

side panels 12 x 12 x 2.5" (30 x 30 x 6.3 cm)

Overall 12 x 60 x 2.5" (30 x 152 x 6.3 cm)



3 ALAN UGLOW

UNTITLED, 1990

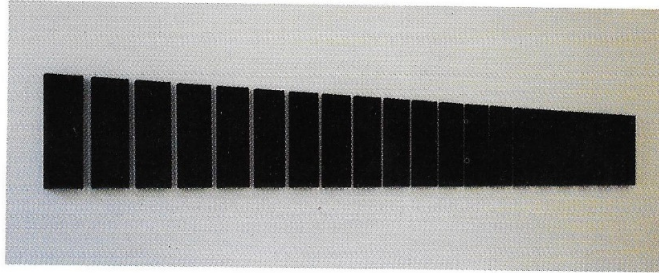
Auto lacquer on steel

4 panels, each: 14 x 14 x 1/16" (35.5 x 35.5 x .15 cm)

Overall 14 x 14 x 1/3" (35.5 x 35.5 x .83 cm)

(Side View)

Collection of John M. Simon, Los Angeles



4 ALAN CHARLTON

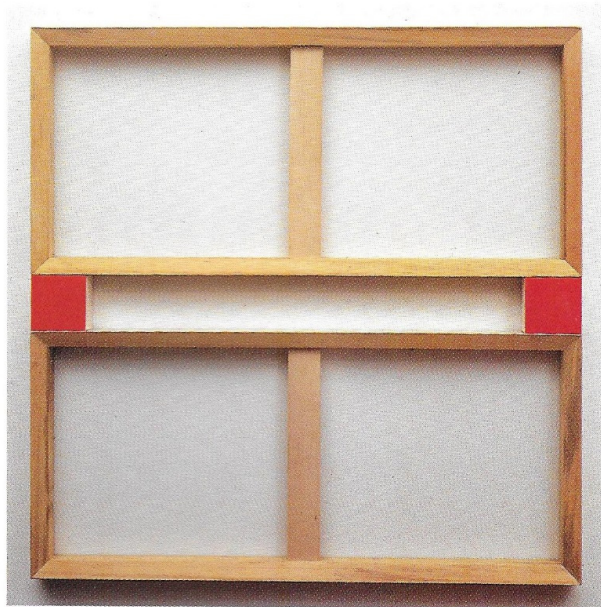
PAINTING IN 20 PARTS, 1990

Acrylic on canvas

20 panels, each 17.75 x 5.25 x 1.77" (44 x 13 x 4.5 cm)

Overall 17.75 x 140 x 1.77" (44 x 355 x 4.5 cm)

Courtesy Louver Gallery, New York



5 MAX ESTENGER

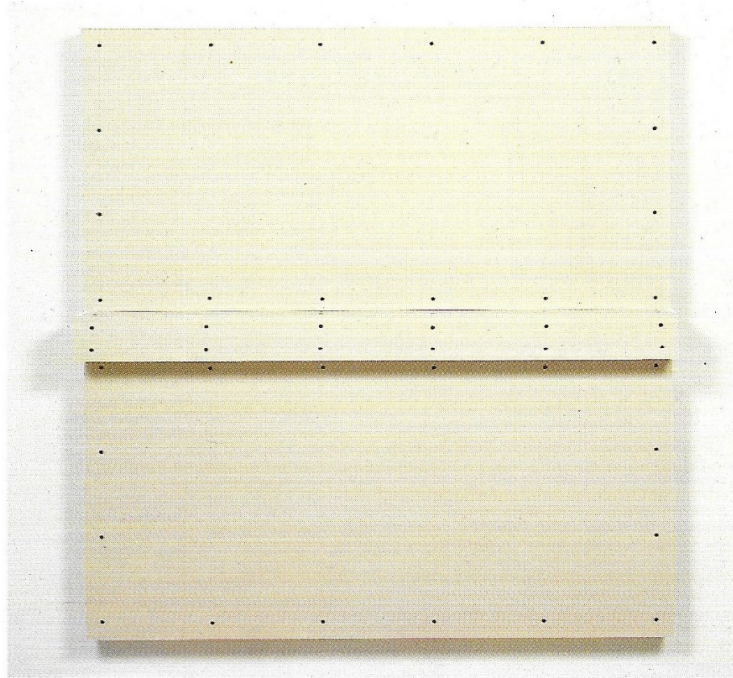
RED (SEE-THRU), 1991

Poly-vinyl plastic over wood; acrylic on canvas

4 panels; 2 large panels 27 x 60 x 3.25" (68.5 x 152 x 8.25 cm)

2 small panels 6 x 6 x 3.25" (15.2 x 15.2 x 8.25 cm)

Overall 60 x 60 x 3.25" (152 x 152 x 8.25 cm)



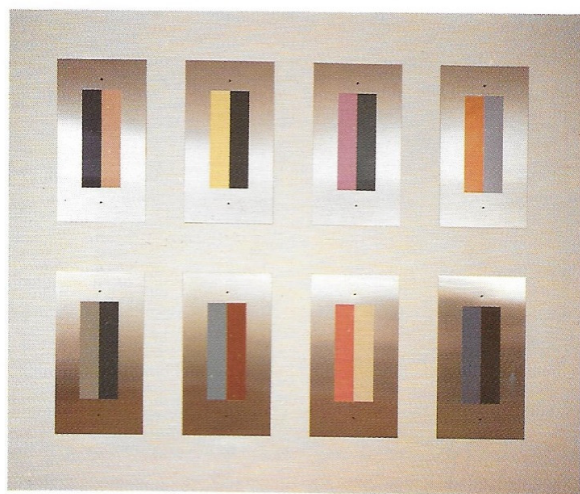
6 FORD BECKMAN

UNTITLED (SHEETROCK SCULPTURE), 1989

Sheetrock and metal screws on wood

54 x 52 x 8" (137 x 132 x 20 cm)

Courtesy Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York

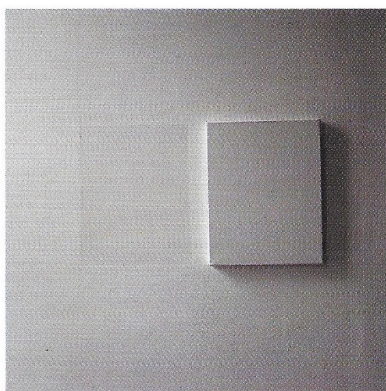


7 CHRISTIAN ECKART

ODYSSEY SUITE PORTFOLIO, 1988-1990

Lacquer on stainless steel

8 panels; each 33 x 18 x 1/16" (83 x 45 x .15 cm)



8 KARIN SANDER

POLISHED WALL PIECE, 1989-91

Polished white wall, acrylic on canvas

14 x 24 x 1" (35 x 61 x 2.54 cm)

Courtesy S. Bitter-Larkin Gallery, New York

THE ECSTASY OF DENIAL

MEG O'ROURKE

Not only will you confess to acts contravening the law, but you will seek to transform your desire, your every desire, into discourse.

—Michel Foucault

Whence the narrow constipation of a strictly human attitude, the magisterial look of the face with a *closed mouth*, as beautiful as a safe.

—Georges Bataille

The Madness of the Day (1973) by Maurice Blanchot is a narrative that fails to produce what is demanded of it, for it refuses to tell a story about the blindness of a man who has had glass crushed in his eyes. The narrator's indifference to death and poverty is undermined by the blow which rushes him onward to madness and delirium: "The worst thing was the sudden, shocking cruelty of the day; I could not look, but I could not help looking. To see was terrifying, and to stop seeing tore me apart from my forehead to my throat."¹ He is terrified by (and therefore desires) the blank, the white, the light of day, in short, the horror of nothing to see. "That was the truth: the light was going mad, the brightness had lost all reason; it assailed me irrationally, without control, without purpose."² It is a madness not held in check with an image or illusion—an event that has gone out of control because it hasn't been indulged with a story.

One remembers Bataille's identification of the blind spot in philosophy and science (that which will never be known), which "recalls the structure of the eye"³ and thinks of some of the works in this show which are blind spots that recall the structure of paintings—of Ryman's taut, emptied white canvases, Karin Sander's polished wall pieces and Max Estenger's "See-Thru" paintings. No matter how hermetic the surface, however, we are always seeing *something*, whether it is the reflection of light on the "See-Thru" paintings, or the "perceptual disorder" of Sander's wall pieces.⁴ But here the emphasis has shifted to the physical struc-

tures (nails, screws, stretcher bars, fasteners, the gallery wall) that have traditionally been invisible and relied upon to uphold the fiction of the image. Consider Christian Eckart's fixation on the frame: "The history of the frame/painting rendezvous is inscribed within Eckart's practice so as to reveal the conventional relationship between the index of the literal 'support' and the pictorial system that traditionally represses the presence of the former."⁵ The obsession with material details attempts to deny the metaphysical aspirations of painting, while simultaneously exposing blanks (Estenger, Sander, Uglow) and gaps (Charlton, Kuwayama). In this sense, the work is thoroughly post-structuralist. It posits the notion that there are structures underlying everything (which carries a host of ideological implications), but also displays or presents the absences lurking in the foundations of all signification.⁶

The narrator of *Madness of the Day* denied his doctors the satisfaction of a confession—a story to rationalize the insanity of his blindness, because of the acute ontological threat that their desire posed when he complied:

They would challenge my story: "Talk," and my story would put itself at their service. In haste, I would rid myself of myself. I distributed my blood, my innermost being among them, lent them the universe, gave them the day. Right before their eyes...I became a drop of water, a spot of ink.... The whole of me passed in full view before them, and when at last nothing was present but my perfect nothingness and there was nothing more to see, they ceased to see me too. Very irritated, they stood up and cried out, "All right, where are you? Where are you hiding? Hiding is forbidden, it is an offense," etc.⁷

But instead of fleeing from the law, he begins to keep his eyes on it, and everyone knows that it is far easier to conduct an illegal act when the policeman on the corner is in view. "We were prisoners, but we were prisoners with perspectives."⁸ Surveillance can never be absolute because what is visible is always being undermined by the perpetual shifting of what is not. The gaze wants to see everything (the illusion of meaning), just as the doctors and authorities want to be indulged with a narrative.

Foucault has also aligned power with the demand for narrative by describing practices in the 17th Century which served as a means of controlling and legislating desire, (that which most eludes the law):

But more important was the multiplication of discourses concerning sex in the field of exercise of power itself: an institutional incitement to speak about it, and to do so more and more; a determination on the part of the agencies of power to hear it spoken about, and to cause *it* to speak through explicit articulation and endlessly accumulated detail.⁹

Blanchot's narrator faces the madness of the blank, and turns to menace his confessors by giving them only silence. He endures, much in the same way that a painting does, according to Reinhardt, by refusing to be understood.¹⁰

Reinhardt retreated into self-reflexivity and inaccessibility through expulsion and negation, and by trying to deny, as much as possible, the signified. A similar objective is evident in the work of Ryman which, according to Yve-Alain Bois, "[struggles] against the tyranny of humanism."¹¹ Bois compares Ryman to Robbe-Grillet¹² in his attempt to defeat metaphor, and to Barthes' definition of tragedy (which is comparable to my use of "narrative"). Tragedy indulges and rationalizes "human misery" by inducing catharsis and "justifying" it with an illusion of completeness, whereas to deny the tragic requires facing something irrational, beyond comprehension, what Bataille deems "heterogeneity."¹³

The resistance inherent in new critical abstract painting is heir to Reinhardt's program. The work excludes and will continue to exclude that which painting can no longer be. It endows itself with a silence that bespeaks itself in the most insignificant details that structure the work, but refuses to answer for it.

We were all like masked hunters. Who was being questioned?
Who was answering? One became the other...The silence entered them....Then I noticed for the first time that there were two of them...one of them was an eye doctor, the other a specialist in mental illness....Of course neither of them was the chief of police. But because there were two of them, there were three...

A story? No. No stories, never again.¹⁴

1. Maurice Blanchot, *The Madness of the Day*, translated by Lydia Davis (Barrytown: Station Hill Press, 1981), page 11.
2. Blanchot, page 11.
3. Georges Bataille, *Oeuvres complètes*, edited by Denis Hollier, (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), volume 5, page 129.
4. Lucy Lippard has pointed out that there is “no such thing as an entirely homogenous surface or an entirely empty painting. There is a perceptual disorder inherent in *any* seen area.” Lucy Lippard, *Ad Reinhardt*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1981), page 160.
5. Joshua Decter, “Christian Eckart: The Self-Representation of Abstraction,” in *Christian Eckart (The Power Chord Cycle)*, exhibition catalogue (Calgary: Alberta College of Art, Illingworth Kerr Gallery, 1990), page 9.
6. “Human signification—‘there where human signification begins’—is the concealment of that for which it longs. It is a blind spot which constitutes the original representation, the paradigm of representation and the condition of possibility of a further representation: the sign of what shall never be known.” Jonathan Strauss, “The Inverted Icarus,” in *On Bataille*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), page 115.
7. Blanchot, page 14.
8. Marguerite Duval, “The Bridge Club,” in *Days That Are Like Years and Other Stories*, (New York: Scorpion Press, to be published 1992), page 66.
9. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1*, translated by Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), page 18.
10. Ad Reinhardt, “Creation As Content,” undated, in Barbara Rose, editor, *Art as Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt* (New York: Viking Press, 1975), page 191. “To endure (not to be understood)/ refusal to allow us to finish with them or ‘explain’ them away.”
11. Yve-Alain Bois, “Surprise and Equanimity,” *Robert Ryman*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Pace Gallery, 1990), n.p.
12. It is striking that Robbe-Grillet likewise catalogues a number of physical details in order to expose a gap—the hole in a time frame wherein a crime takes place (*The Voyeur*), or the absence of a woman with whom the narrator is obsessed (*Jealousy*).
13. “The *heterogenous*, on the other hand, fails beyond common measure, and in respect to the *homogenous* element of society it remains incommensurable and altogether other.” Strauss, page 107.
14. Blanchot, pages 17-18.

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