

The Intersection of Materiality and Mattering:
Acrylic Paint and Montreal Hard-Edge Painting

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ABSTRACT

The Intersection of Materiality and Mattering: Acrylic Paint and Montreal’s Hard-Edge Painting

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Set in Montreal with the advent of Hard-Edge painting and the invention of acrylic paint, this thesis takes a critical look at the relationship between materiality and mattering. The Hard-Edge painters, Guido Molinari, Claude Tousignant and Yves Gaucher undertook a new medium to express their new way of seeing and encountering the world and they did so in a way that was unique from other contemporaneous abstract painters. And that new medium, acrylic paint, contributed to their vision and capability to do so. Examining Hard-Edge paint through the vantage of materiality and materialist frameworks, and considering the role of acrylic paint on a new level, takes advantage of the opportunity to confront the presumption of overt statements of authorial completion and destabilizes the assumption of their statement being solely artist-determined. Unlike some contemporary art, whose materiality is more obviously fluid, Hard-Edge paintings look like they are stable, but they are not. If object-stability is demonstrated to be untrue of Hard-Edge painting, then we have an opportunity to examine the entirety of art’s history through a new lens.

This thesis proposes a new way of understanding the relationship between making, material, epistemology and ontology and proposes that when we understand Hard-Edge painting as object-fluid, we then understand the breadth of art history as a mattering whose “objects” play less of a primary role and whose materiality is instrumental. If making cannot be defined by the ideation of the artist then neither can the “object” that is made. Examining the influence of acrylic paint over this one instance of making in Montreal in the late modern period contributes to an understanding of making and continued mattering that has consequences for Hard-Edge painting, which matters to the late modern epoch of a city and its people and their aspirations, and also to how we classify, sort, narrate, and perpetuate our art. If we continue to put Hard-Edge painting

into a finite category we undermine what it is capable of doing now. This thesis highlights the consequence of understanding artworks as the products of ideas and thus materially (object-) stable. I demonstrate that they are object-fluid and that this understanding will help us understand art's history differently and be better art stewards.

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Table of Contents

List of Figures	ix
Chapter 1 – Introduction	1
Chapter 2 – Molinari, Tousignant, and Gaucher: Montreal Hard-Edge Painting	27
The Plasticiens.....	31
Molinari	36
Tousignant	46
Gaucher	59
Conclusion	71
Chapter 3 – Immateriality and Abstract Painting	74
The Spiritual and The Formal: The Development of Abstract Painting	80
The Montreal Context: Painting A New Spatial Reality	94
The [Im]materiality of Hard-Edge Painting	100
Immateriality and Material Agency	113
Conclusion	119
Chapter 4 – Modern Art Materials: The Break with Traditional Art Making	122
History of Synthetic Paint Media and Artistic Use	126
The Impact of Independent Colourman	143
Chromatech Acrylic Paint and Montreal Hard-Edge	149
Conclusion	161
Chapter 5 – A New Understanding of Materiality	163
Hylomorphism and Material Culture	166
Artistic Intention.....	168
Intention and Hylomorphism	178

Intention and Object-Stability	182
Object-Stability and Onto-Epistemology	188
Onto-Epistemology and Perception	198
Conclusion	202
Chapter 6 – Conclusion	206
Bibliography	216
Appendix A: Figures	227

List of Figures

- Figure 1.** Guido Molinari, *Blanc totalisant*, 1956, Duco on canvas, 127x115cm. Fondation Guido Molinari.
- Figure 2.** Paul-Émile Borduas, *3+4+1*, 1956, oil on canvas, 199.8 x 250cm. Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal.
- Figure 3.** Guido Molinari, *Mutation vert-rouge*, 1964, acrylic on canvas, 200.5 x 244cm. Fondation Guido Molinari.
- Figure 4.** Guido Molinari, *Abstraction*, 1955, duco on canvas, 120.7 x 150.1 cm. Fondation Guido Molinari.
- Figure 5.** Claude Tousignant, *Hypnose*, 1956, enamel on canvas, 149.8 x 128.5. Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal.
- Figure 6.** Claude Tousignant, *Chromatic Accelerator*, 1964, acrylic on canvas, 76.6 cm diameter. Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal.
- Figure 7.** Claude Tousignant, *Bi-chrome n° 1-10-91*, 1991, acrylic on aluminium, each painting 152.5 x 152.5 cm. Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec.
- Figure 8.** Yves Gaucher, R-M-III N/69, 1969, acrylic on canvas, 305.5 x 203.5cm. Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec.
- Figure 9.** Yves Gaucher, *Ochre, jaune et vert*, 1974, acrylic on canvas, 203.2 x 254 cm. Private Collection

Chapter 1

Introduction

The acrylic materiality of Guido Molinari, Claude Tousignant and Yves Gaucher's Hard-Edge¹ painting is on the move; far from being static and stable it dynamically contributes to the form of the paintings and actively influences what can be known about them. Acrylic paint was invented in 1955 and its uptake changed the face of painting in Montreal. And now the materialization of these artworks are changing again the way we understand Hard-Edge painting. The abstract painters demanded that their paintings be understood in duration and thus understood that viewer perceptions would change contextually and contingently. Molinari wrote: "the space one experiences within a painting is never completely produced by the painting alone. It's always fictive, assisted into being by the free associations the viewer inevitably brings to it. The experience unlocks your memory, which then always challenges your connotative processes."²

Molinari, Tousignant and Gaucher understood that perception of the paintings would change, but

¹ Hard-Edge is capitalized because it is a distinct painting style typified by smooth, geometric surfaces and crisp lines. The style of Hard-Edge that I discuss in this dissertation is distinct to Guido Molinari, Claude Tousignant, and Yves Gaucher in Montreal. Andrew Hudson distinguishes between "colour painting" and "hard-edge" painting in his 1964 article, "Phenomenon: Colour Painting in Montreal," *Canadian Art*, Vol. 21, No.6, Iss. 94 (Nov/Dec 1964): 358, emphasis added. He writes: "By colour painting I mean, of course, the new cool, flat type of abstract painting, composed of geometric or near-geometric areas of pure colour, that has emerged out of, and as a successor to, abstract expressionism. I'm calling it colour painting as I think that hard-edge, *the term currently used in Montreal*, as in New York and elsewhere, gets inaccurate from a critical point of view. Hard-edge is eminently appropriate as a name for the clear-cut contours of a painter such as Ellsworth Kelly, but it won't do as a general term to cover painters such as Morris Louis, Keneth Noland, Jules Olitski and Frank Stella, whose edges are ragged, hazy or blurred, and fade away into the canvas rather than stay abruptly, rigidly defined on its surface." Hudson distinguishes the early 1960s painting of Molinari and Tousignant as "hard-edge" and thus different from American colour painting being produced at the same time. The capitalization of Hard-Edge used throughout this dissertation is the spelling that is preferred by the Musée des beaux arts, Montréal. Note, the Tate Gallery writes that the term "hard-edge" was coined by the Californian art critic, Jules Langster, in 1959 to describe the painting style of West Coast painters. Tate Gallery, "Hard Edge Painting," <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/h/hard-edge-painting>, accessed 12 January 2020. However, the writing that documents the Montreal Hard-Edge painters does not reference this etymology and their work is not materially similar to the work of Ellsworth Kelly with whom Langster's term "hard-edge" appears to be most closely associated.

² Gary M. Dault, "Guido Molinari, a home movie: on the eve of the artist's forty-year retrospective, Gary Michael Dault zooms in for a closeup (Interview)," *Canadian Art*, Vol. 12, Iss. 2, (Summer 1995) 65.

they did not understand that the paintings themselves were materializing and therefore contributing to changes in perception. Nor did those who wrote about them. That Montreal abstract painting went from the expressiveness of the Automatistes to Hard-Edge was duly documented, but the influential role of plastic paint was not. The making side of painting was understood to be subservient to the ideology of the painter. What Molinari, Tousignant and Gaucher did with acrylic paint is phenomenal: they pushed it to the outside limits of medium-capability and remained loyal to it for the entirety of their painting careers. However, within the formal, high modernist discursive framework of the time, Hard-Edge paintings were understood to perform autonomously, formally, and phenomenally, as the realization of an ideology. Their materiality was not discussed and their ability to materialize meaning was not even considered. But the assumptions underlying the high modernist disciplinary apparatus did not actually prevent Hard-Edge painting from also being subjective, contingent, and always in-realization: one history might occlude another, but it does not erase it. My research explores the intersection of materiality and mattering with a focus on the context of acrylic paint and Hard-Edge painting in Montreal in the second half of the twentieth century. I am studying this particular moment for two reasons, first in order to re-examine the role of the materials in art making at a time when new material, acrylic paint, was taken up by artists to push the boundaries of traditional art making and through its use, made for the large-scale un-modulated surfaces that were not actualisable before, and second to destabilize the notion of a complete and finite work of art. The large-scale Hard-Edge paintings of this period seem like stable art objects but they are not; they are moving and adapting with their environment. And in some cases they are the materialization of their environment.³ Of the importance of duration in relation to Yves Gaucher's monolithic swaths of cotton duck and acrylic paint, the art historian James Campbell writes:

³ By this I mean that they are not just 'ageing' *with* time, they influence the materialization of time: their mattering

Gaucher has always been preoccupied with the durational temporality of his work. He wanted to create paintings that would, in effect, reorganize themselves in front of the observer throughout the duration of one's experience... This "duration" is a block of time in which the observer becomes a creative participant in the work; that is, wherein the onus for constituting the work shifts over to the observer who takes on the status of a "creator" who must complete the work within his/her own sensibility and body-schema.⁴

Molinari, Tousignant and Gaucher were adamant that their paintings were indeterminate objects of perception; they embraced the duration and the dynamic contingency their colour relations insisted upon.⁵ The Hard-Edge painters were concerned with perception and were insistent that perception would unfold and change in the viewing space with their paintings. They did not intend their paintings to be understood in an instant, but instead to reveal meaning with each viewing interaction. And these painters' investments in embodied durational perception are part of what makes looking at Hard-Edge paintings and their materiality so productive: the artists applied their paint with the skill, care, and precision of old master painters and also insisted that their paintings were time-based perceptual endeavours and that their iterative ability was infinite.⁶ Thus they give the initial impression of fitting into the mould of the traditional 'finite' painting, however their insistence on duration routinely defies completeness and is distinctly non-traditional. For Tousignant, abstract art was fundamentally dynamic; he insisted that, "it should always be in a state of becoming."⁷ However, these artists' interest in duration and the becoming of their painting was exclusively interested in the subject-oriented notion of becoming: the paintings were able to cause different perceptions with different viewers, but they were not understood and themselves changing, only the perception of them. Whereas I am looking at how

effects change.

⁴ James D. Campbell, *The Asymmetric Vision: Philosophical Intuition and Original Experience in the Art of Yves Gaucher*. (Regina: The Mackenzie Art Gallery, 1989), 29.

⁵ Roald Nasgaard, *The Plasticiens and Beyond: Montreal 1955-1970*, (Markham and Quebec: Varley Art Gallery and the Musée National des Beaux-Arts du Québec, 2013), 76, 80, 89.

⁶ Nasgaard, *The Plasticiens and Beyond*, 71, 77.

⁷ *Ibid*, 71.

the paintings are changing. The *continued* materialization of the Hard-Edge paintings, a quality that is intrinsically tied to their particular materiality, is what makes the mattering of these paintings still relevant today.

What is often overlooked in the art historiography of this time is that in the 1960s, when the Hard-Edge painters came into their own, they had at the same time adopted the use of acrylic paint. Acrylic paint was first advertised in 1954 and once taken up by these abstract painters it forever changed the face of Montreal geometric abstraction – it became Hard-Edge, and then Razor-Edge.⁸ The technology of acrylic paint transformed the method, process, and scale of these artists' making and their distinct and enduring medium-methodology is what distinguishes their painting from other contemporary movements across Canada and their American counterparts. The Montreal Hard-Edge painters were doing something uniquely and notably different with their paint, and the significance of what they achieved is examined here in detail. I have arrived at this research from the perspective of a painting conservator. Conservation is a profession that has traditionally considered materials and making above other concerns and entered into the realm of ideas and artistic intention when the materials failed to reveal intention on their own. This oversimplification is in service to my next point that art historians tend to do the opposite of this. Nasgaard writes that, "Molinari's method [was] to prepare the canvas and cover it with paint as evenly, smoothly, impersonally and perfectly as possible."⁹ And while this is a good description of Molinari's method, its failure to mention that the material properties of

⁸ Molinari later comes to term his painting style as Razor-Edge – thus further distinguishing the unique contribution of Canadian abstract painting during the late modern period. Roald Nasgaard, "Le théoricien du molinarisme," in *Molinari*, (Montreal: Guido Molinari Foundation, 2018), 107. There are discrepancies with the release date of acrylic paint. It was either late 1954 or early 1955. R.G. Lodge, "A History of Synthetic Painting Media with Special Reference to Commercial Materials," *AIC 16th Annual Meeting*, New Orleans, Louisiana, (Washington D.C.: American Institute of Conservation Preprints, June 1988), 126.

⁹ Nasgaard, *Plasticiens and Beyond*, 74.

the newly formulated Liquitex acrylic medium were what made this smooth, impersonal, and perfect surface possible, disregards an important factor in this new development. Oil paint and the Duco and Cilux that Molinari and Tousignant were experimenting with in the mid 1950s, did not permit this kind of surface. This research exposes how new synthetic materials, such as acrylic paint helped these artists push their painting in new directions and further, how the apparent stability of these large-scale objects should not mislead us to think their becoming has ended.

The materiality and mattering that I explore here will be comprehended in their broadest possible understandings. *Materiality* encompasses the specific medium of acrylic paint, its chemical, material, and rheological¹⁰ properties, as well as the making-artist creation event and the material painting that is always becoming. This notion of materiality will always intimate *materialization* and the inherent mobility of our material environment in which we are always at once actors and materials; where we are all material-actors. *Mattering* is understood in a pan-species-object type of way and substitutes for the subject-oriented implication of the word “meaning”. This notion is developed from Jane Bennett’s research where she insists that,

We are...*an array of bodies*, many different kinds of them in a nested set of microbiomes. If more people marked this fact more of the time, if we were more attentive to the indispensable foreignness that we are, would we continue to produce and consume in the same violently reckless ways?¹¹

Mattering is neither controlled nor ascribed by the human subject but is co-extensive of us – in this way we impact and are impacted as matter-materialities. It will be the case that the intersection of materiality and mattering that I seek to explore will become blurred, the two are

¹⁰ Its working properties, the way it lends itself to painting.

¹¹ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 113.

never perpendicular nor are they distinct, they are co-becoming and mutually-defining. Mattering is agentic and is always already becoming. The notions of materiality and materialization that I develop in detail in Chapter 5 draw upon Karen Barad's assertion that there is no essence of things only a continued performativity and re-performativity that cuts through the discursive performance of boundaries.¹² and Tim Ingold's proposition that materialization (or becoming) happens from the inside and is a driving force in the process of artistic making.¹³ This thesis will examine the material-methodology of Molinari, Tousignant, and Gaucher's paintings and demonstrate that they are all in a process of materialization, which helps us to understand both their continued relevance and how materialization is not linear. These paintings came to be through a collaboration of agencies that are material, human and environmental and thus they will continue to materialize with and through these agencies. Via the paintings' materialization new knowledge is created which forces us to understand an epoch from a different perspective hence changing the mattering of the past. This (re)historiographical manoeuvre demonstrates how being attentive to materiality in art compels an understanding of our relationship with the materiality of ourselves and our environment in an integrated co-extensive manner. Thus, looking at Hard-Edge painting with and through the lens of materialist theory not only helps us to understand Hard-Edge painting differently but Hard-Edge painting also helps us understand the relevance and necessity of materialist theory for approaching practices and the nature of knowing and being in a way that includes the 'material environment' co-extensively. It also helps us interrogate the entrenched dichotomous boundaries that continue to function within our institutions, expose them, and begin to expel them. The concluding chapter of this dissertation will expound on the larger repercussions of assuming that matter is separate from idea. The

¹² Karen Barad, *Diffraction: Cutting Together-Apart*, *Parallax*, Volume 20, Issue 3, 2014, 173-174.

¹³ Tim Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2013).

critical issue with the privileging of idea over material is that it inherently privileges dialectical frameworks that are gendered and political and thus far from neutral. And the political consequences of a system entrenched in an immutable hierarchy is the maintenance of the institutionalized marginalization of all things, peoples, environments, and materials that are relegated to a devalued position within the power structure of these dichotomies. This dissertation addresses materiality, materialization, and underscores object-fluidity with the example of Hard-Edge painting and this in turn will set the foundation for beginning to address other problematic dichotomies that these paintings, and the way they have been inscribed, perpetuate.

In a discussion of materiality and modernist painting it is necessary to consider the possible perdurance of a notion of “medium-specificity”. Does a medium have a form of mattering that is self-defined, unique, and self-actualising? If we are talking about medium we have to talk about Clement Greenberg and what he established in the 1940s and 1950s. His conception of medium-specificity will be examined in relation to the art historical development of abstract art beginning in the mid twentieth century. The 1950s and 1960s were marked by the medium of painting, previously a vehicle for the representation of images, advancing to become the intended subject matter of painting. Greenberg’s advocacy for medium-specificity is mostly concerned with the medium of “painting” as defined against “sculpture” and other artistic disciplines. Effectively it has very little to do with the materiality of painting, and everything to do with the desire to elevate one art form above another. However, as explained above, the Hard-Edge painters were applying paint differently than the American Color Field painters, whom Greenberg championed, and the eminent critic and Molinari had words about this at the 1962 Emma Lake workshop in

Saskatchewan.¹⁴ It is therefore valuable to explore this term because the medium's specificity had flexibility it seems: a flexibility Greenberg did not care for and the Hard-Edge painters utilized to its maximum capability.

By highlighting the continued material evolution of artworks after their release from the process of making, the role of artistic intent in the making of meaning will be carefully interrogated.

Mattering is used throughout this thesis as opposed to *meaning* in order to subvert the human-appraisal-centered connotation attached to meaning. I argue that things "matter" whether or not they matter to us, and that making is not idea-driven. For this reason looking for mattering solely in the artists' intended meaning or their original idea undermines the continued becoming of our art. When we understand making as an activity of growth, "as a process of morphogenesis in which form is ever emergent rather than given in advance," as Tim Ingold compels us to do, then we can further understand the materialization of further entanglements as our art moves with and through time.¹⁵ Tounignant makes clear that his making was more a matter of doing than idea-driven:

The effects of my painting are in the realm of the non-verbal. Painting is a process. I make sketches or rather I make the big painting. I have a good idea what it is going to be like. It's non-verbal, a matter of experience.¹⁶

Understanding that making does not come from idea *alone* facilitates the understanding that the "finished" artwork cannot be contained/limited by idea alone either – that it will continue to materialize after it is "made".

¹⁴ Greenberg was critical of Molinari's use of paint. Greenberg advocated for the staining of paint into unprimed canvas, while Molinari preferred saturation and a smooth uninterrupted surface. Nasgaard, *The Plasticiens and Beyond*, 74.

¹⁵ Tim Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture*, (London and New York, Routledge, 2013), 21, 25.

¹⁶ Tounignant quoted by Michael White, "Two painters stage major exhibits," *The Gazette*, Montreal, Saturday 26 May 1973.

This argument is not the first to challenge notions of authorship or dualist frameworks that have defined the field of art history, the methods of art analysis, the art historical canon, and the ascriptions of value that underline all of these. Intentionalism has been interrogated and problematized from a number of perspectives that have informed the analysis that I am conducting here. Barthes declared the author dead in 1967 after observing that "...contemporary culture is tyrannically centered on the author, his person, his history, his tastes..." and that criticism of the work is resultantly based on the man.¹⁷ He proposed instead that "...the modern writer...is born simultaneously with his text; he is in no way supplied with a being which precedes or transcends his writing;"¹⁸ there is resultantly no place of origin. He further qualifies that "[t]o give an Author to a text is to impose upon that text a stop clause, to furnish it with a final signification, to close the writing,...[but] to refuse to arrest meaning is finally to refuse God and his hypostasis, reason, science, the law."¹⁹ Instead, he asserts, the text is a multiplicity that is 'collected' not in the author, but in the reader. Foucault later allowed the author to live, but demoted it to "something like a necessary constraining device."²⁰ Foucault explains that the "author as genius" is in actuality an "ideological product," a "historically given function,"²¹ and that the reader, or the viewer, is responsible for this ascription. In actuality, however, the subject is not an originator, but instead a "...variable and complex function of discourse." Contrary to Barthes, Foucault acknowledges a unity between the author and the work, but contests notions of an author's individuality. The texts differ on important levels, but for the purposes of this

¹⁷ Roland Barthes, "Death of the Author," Source: *Ubu/Uweb Papers*, accessed: December 6, 2013. Page 2. http://www.tbook.constantvzw.org/wp-content/death_authorbarthes.pdf

¹⁸ Barthes, "Death of the Author," 4.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 5.

²⁰ Michael Foucault, "What is an Author?" in *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, Ed. by Josué V. Harari. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979) 159.

²¹ Foucault, "What is an Author?" 159.

discussion I want to point out that while one text shifted the subject-privileged position to the other side of the object (to the viewing as opposed to making) and the other disputes the idea of the individual in favour of the determining collective discourse, both texts subscribe to the dominant tradition that assumes an inherent division between subject and object. These semiotic maneuvers still render the object a passive gathering place of signs that are either the product of a discourse or an autonomous unit to be interpreted as seen fit. With regard to intentionality however, this is a critical shift away from the Kantian and Greenbergian artist-genius. With their semiotic approach nothing is original, so why bother sifting through history for the “origin?” This dissertation will likewise argue that Hard-Edge paintings are not merely the products of the minds of “artist-geniuses” and thus cannot be contained by them, but I will also argue the paintings are more than passive objects: I will demonstrate that they compel ideas.

Different cultural approaches to the discipline of Art History have challenged meaning ascription and have helped to inform the approach I am taking here. While my approach shares some parallels in a few instances, how it differs is outlined below. For instance, Michael Baxandall attends to the art object itself and its ostensive culture-artist circumstances of creation however, his fixed account of the artwork precludes notions of discursive or material agency and does not attend to the art work’s passage through time.²² Svetlana Alpers uses current perception as a beginning point for the analysis of traditional artworks and is attentive to close visual readings of the images themselves, as I am, but is still interested in uncovering intention through the reconstructed visual reading.²³ David Freedberg is interested in “the relations between images

²² Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Exploration of Pictures*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985), 132.

²³ Svetlana Alpers, *The Making of Rubens*, (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1995), 65.

and people in history.”²⁴ Freedberg is critical of art historical accounts that emphasize context, such as Baxandall’s, for overlooking the individual response and distancing the current viewer from their personal response through a process of historicization.²⁵ Through problematizing the limitations of schooled response schemas and opening up his exploration of response to a broad range of images from a variety of cultures Freedberg argues that the “disjunction between the reality of the art object and reality itself” should be “reconsidered”.²⁶ He is emphasizing the metaphorical agency of a representational image to effect a power that is akin to the represented, but he is not arguing for a material agency or an ontological overhaul, as I am, just an acknowledgement that images force a “disjunctive lapse” from time to time. In *Eyesight Alone: Clement Greenberg’s Modernism and the Bureaucratization of the Senses*, Carolyn A. Jones explains that formalism was successful in large degree due to the overall purification and compartmentalization of the senses in the modern world. With regard to scent Jones explains the new preoccupation with sterilized, organized interiors and clean bodies effectively elevated the mind above the body.²⁷ Hearing was also separated; modern spaces unlike premodern spaces, were about dampening resonance and separating in order to elevate the independence of thought. As she writes:

Hi-fi music and color-field canvases shared crucial suppositions. Literally expansive and perceptually enclosing, they stimulated single senses through limited and intensely purified tones and hues. Each de-corporealized perception offered targeted and intense pleasures to the segmented percipient.²⁸

And talking about the materials of modern painting she goes on to argue:

²⁴ David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response*, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), xix.

²⁵ Ibid, 431.

²⁶ Ibid, 436.

²⁷ Caroline A. Jones, *Eyesight Alone: Clement Greenberg’s Modernism and the Bureaucratization of the Senses*, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 94, 393.

²⁸ Jones, *Eyesight Alone*, 409.

During the span of Greenberg's criticism in the 1950s and 1960s, when "pure" painting became the leitmotif of high culture, "pure" audio became fetishized in turn. Both purities experienced themselves as avant-garde... The new visual technologies (*enamel paint, acrylic media, airbrush, fluorescent pigments*) served to separate colours, highlight how they were layered, and make each constituent element of modern art more distinct and pure; the educated viewers of these paintings practiced a newly heightened, much more concentrated mode of viewing.²⁹

Jones makes clear that Greenberg's formalism made sense to people because of its function within such larger mechanisms of modernization. Within Jones' text, however, it is important to point out that the "technologies of painting" that made possible the supposed "separation of colour" and "highlighting of layering", are acknowledged in brackets, whereas the sound-proofing and Hi-fi technologies that allowed complete sound occlusion or all-encompassing sound received four pages of description/explanation.³⁰ This type of treatment is common and problematic. It is conditioned by the assumption that the "technologies" of painting are not actually active contributors to the understanding of a painting's meaning. And further, I believe this approach is also conditioned in part by the assumption that the reader understands paint. Its technology and methodology is taken for granted as being a relatively simplistic mechanism in relation to technologies like the Hi-fi system. Again, the roots of this lay in the assumption that it is the transformation of materials in the hands of the artists that is genius – not the technology itself. Whereas with the Hi-fi example it is the technology itself that is understood as changing sensorial perception. All of these art historians have confronted the assumptions of traditional art historical methodologies, how art acquires (or should acquire) meaning, and thus how art has been ascribed historical meaning. Some are pointing out the limitations of subjective or objective analytic methods and others interrogate the legitimacy of artistic intentionality. I will be looking at the context of production, as Baxandall does, and I will also be looking at the

²⁹ Ibid, emphasis added.

³⁰ Ibid, Jones explains the technology of Hi-fi from page 406 to 411.

current subjective response and first-hand analysis of the Hard-Edge paintings as Freedberg and Alpers do (in their respective methods), however I will also attending to the influence of materiality throughout my entire analysis and emphasizing how the Hard-Edge painting cannot be held still as object of study, as they are in each of the above methodological approaches, because this kind of approach is unable to take into account the continued materialization of the artworks.

The cultural theorist, Mieke Bal, developed a notion of “intentional abandon” that was influential in my process of rethinking the role of artistic intentionality. Bal points out that dualist frameworks may provide clarity for analysis, but they are destructive and limiting in their reliance on linear, teleological, cause-effect relationships. Bal proposes “narrativity as an antidote to intentionality”, but she is not talking about artworks narrating a story as religious paintings have done for us throughout history, but instead, as I understand, how artworks are capable of taking on the role of subject-objects in their own narrative.³¹ Thus instead of searching for artistic intentionality as the site of causation for an artwork’s meaning, Bal distributes and extinguishes this methodology of convenient simplification by,

accounting for the agency of images over time. This agency can be attributed neither to the artist nor the viewer, but... [instead] to the process that happens between these two parties when the product of the former becomes the product of the latter, that is, when viewing becomes a way of making.”³²

The proposition of distributed and thus contingent agency has been critical in my understanding of distributed materialization and object-fluidity that I am proposing here. I am building on the work that has been done by other art historians and interrogating dualist assumptions from a

³¹ Mieke Bal, “Intentionality,” in *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide*, (Toronto, Buffalo, and London: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 256.

³² Bal, “Intentionality,” 256.

materialist perspective. From a different stance, I am building on their perspectives and arguing that dismissing the material and materiality of art-making will continually undermine advances that are made in the disassembly of dichotomies.

The terms *material* and *materiality* convey different things in different contexts and are important to define clearly here because my argument uses both. Although it is also critical to my argument that these terms cannot really be neatly separated, it is important that I clarify how my approach is different from other art historians' and conservators' descriptions and investigations of materials. The field of technical art history is involved in advanced material investigations that involve material testing and analysis, and different imaging techniques such as x-rays and infrared. These studies identify all the material components of an artwork, often the sequence in which they were added or layered, and give art conservators and historians insight into the methodology of the artist, the visual intention they may have had, and whether or not the artwork is authentic to the artist and/or time period.³³ These studies are illuminating, but they are different enterprises than the materialist approach I am taking here. I am discussing the materials used by the Hard-Edge painters to emphasize that their materiality *compelled* artistic idea. Technical art history focuses on finding material evidence to *uncover* artistic idea and this is not the same thing. Furthermore, my focus on the material/materiality of Hard-Edge painting is to set a groundwork for the larger theoretical argument that I will make in Chapter 5.

Materials/materialities *compel* ideas. Therefore they are dynamic, not static, and will continue to compel ideas and contribute to mattering after the artist has completed making. I will argue that materialist theoretical frameworks will provide useful approaches for the understanding and

³³ See Harry Cooper and Ron Spronk, *Mondrian: The Transatlantic Paintings*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Museums, 2001); Marie-Claude Corbeil, Kate Helwig and Jennifer Poulin, *Jean Paul Riopelle: The Artist's Materials*, (Los Angeles: Getty Trust Publications, 2011).

stewardship of our art collections, and invite important methodological approaches into art historical studies that will take apart a different facet of dualist frameworks, that dividing material and idea.

Likewise there are art history studies that discuss materials in detail, such as Yve-Alain Bois and Anthea Callen, but similarly these studies are not examining how material influenced idea, they are looking for how material reveals idea and gives us insight into the artist. Critically, Bois writes that the idealist tradition has resulted in very real interpretive issues that have translated into equally real and irreversible conservation decisions. In the case of Piet Mondrian, art historical misinterpretation of his methodology has led to preservation practices, such as overpainting, that counter Mondrian's investment in the materiality of his medium.³⁴ Later art historical analysis has revealed that "Mondrian was not a traditional, projective painter, working up an idea in a small scale on paper before transferring it carefully to canvas, but a direct artist for whom size, shape, and materials were determinant,"³⁵ however for many of his paintings this realization is too late. For many years when a painting by Mondrian was damaged it was sent to a conservator who in accordance with the ideology of design at the time and at the request of everyone, repaired it so it looked perfectly new again. Fewer than ten abstract Mondrian's remain untouched right now.³⁶ Another compelling discussion of artistic medium is Callen's description of the material characteristics of pastel, its nineteenth century connotations with frivolity, femininity and thus a "lack of depth" necessary for academic painting, and how Degas'

³⁴ Yve-Alain Bois, "Encountering Newman," Panel discussion from *The Object in Transition* conference, Video, Getty Centre: Los Angeles, 2008. Day 2.

³⁵ Cooper, *The Transatlantic Paintings*, 18.

³⁶ Bois, "Encountering Newman."

use of pastel “brought the medium to a new notoriety...[and] inscribed pastel as modern.”³⁷

Pastel was “redefined as masculine,” but this transformation was done through the nuancing of the discursive metaphorical agency of the pastel/feminine framework. Callen’s argument offers insight into the ability of pastel, in the hands of Degas, to complicate masculine/feminine readings of his late nineteenth century voyeuristic tub paintings, but she is not arguing that the materials compelled the idea of the making. These accounts have been informative to my research and look at materials in ways that are imperative for the field of art history, but they differ from my approach in that they remain subject-oriented in their conclusions: we need to understand the materials of Mondrian and Degas differently because they intend different things than what we originally assumed that they did. My materialist approach will not be looking for a new artistic intention or metaphorical material agencies. Instead, like Bal, I am interested in distributing intention.

This investigation is in part motivated by what could be described as a material crisis in contemporary art: the material-conceptualities and practices of Post-Modern and contemporary art making are challenging art professionals in ways we are not accustomed to.³⁸ And these new challenges are compelling. Artworks that are digital quickly become obsolete because the technological material become out of date, artworks that are purposely ephemeral defy museum preservation standards, artworks that are installed seemingly dare the authenticity and originality generally required of high art. These are only some of the challenges that present alongside the

³⁷ Anthea Callen, *The Spectacular Body*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), 124-126.

³⁸ For discussions of how contemporary art materialities are destabilizing traditional notions of intentionality, originality and authenticity see, Martha Buskirk, *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art*, (London and Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2003) and Rebecca Gordon and Erma Hermens, “The Artist’s Intent in Flux,” *CeROArt* [En ligne], 2013. Posted October 27, 2013, accessed November 15, 2013. URL: <http://ceroart.revues.org/3527>

materiality of contemporary artworks. The motivating benefit of this challenge, however, is that contemporary art is compelling us to re-think classical notions of making and meaning because it refuses to sit in stable object categories. Our museums were developed to preserve pre-eminent examples of our culture through time and are based on the notion that artworks and artefacts, once acquired, can be maintained as stable objects. While this collecting practice is ideologically and economically understandable, artworks are not in fact stable objects and their aging, just like ours, cannot be forever held at bay. By destabilizing traditional notions of making and ages-long theory and philosophy that has all but cemented acceptance of the idea that minds are somehow separate and distinguishable from matter (moreover, that minds can control matter), and that subjects and objects operate on and in different spheres, this study proposes that the anxiety felt over contemporary art could be alleviated beginning with a theoretical overhaul employing materialist philosophy. If we were to think matter/mind, subject/object together and banish the forward slash of debilitating semiotic dichotomies, we would arrive at fluid continuums of matter-mind-subject-object. The new materiality of contemporary art is demonstrating to art professionals and art collecting institutions that our compartmentalized expectations and collections standards were always flawed, were always (tenuously) held in place with strategic language, but never suited nor reflected the artwork's ontology. This is why it is useful to go back just a little way to late modernism and explore the relationship between acrylic paint and Hard-Edge painting, because the result is *seemingly* stable art objects. As I will argue, these late modern paintings are not stable and their beginnings chart an incredibly creative period where new theory and radical industrial materials meet. The paintings of Molinari, Tousignant, and Gaucher did not happen through idea; they came together with the industrial availability of acrylic paint, socio-cultural and art historical motivations to re-define art, and the three painters'

unrelenting ambition and rivalry. These paintings are not finite objects upon which we can cast our ideas and perceptions; the artworks also compel understanding, as Gaucher insisted, they are complicit in narrating their story. It is strategic to begin here (even though I ultimately contest the notion of ‘beginning’³⁹), with seemingly stable objects that would satisfy idealist Kantian philosophy, in order to demonstrate that their object boundaries have always been stabilized by words, institutional practices, and disciplines rather than inherent. Taking another look at our stabilization practices and acknowledging where they are flawed will help us contend with contemporary art materialities that keep stubbornly escaping and mutating through our previously reliable semiotic containment system.

The significance of this research being undertaken in Montreal is two-fold. First, what was happening in Quebec, and specifically Montreal with regard to Hard-Edge painting was different from what was happening in New York with Color Field painting. They are, and were similar in many ways perhaps, but far from the same. Traditional art histories will have charted cultural, sociological and political reasons for this without considering the possibility of art-making and materials having played a role. I propose that the meeting of material-making-idea happened uniquely in Montreal during high modernism, not exclusive to the other more socio-cultural influences, but in concert with them. Second, Concordia University as an institution has played a significant role in the art history of this research. Guido Molinari and Yves Gaucher, were

³⁹ “A beginning has already clearly begun. The beginning will never arrive. This beginning like all beginnings is always already threaded through with anticipation of where it is going, but will never simply reach, and of a past that is yet to come. It is not merely that the future and the past are not there and never sit still, but that the present is not simply here now.” Karen Barad: *Re-remembering the Future, Re(con)figuring the Past: Temporality, Materiality, and Justice-to-Come*, Women Studies at Duke, produced by Duke University, Published May 19, 2014, Accessed Sept 30, 2015, Art and Education <http://www.artandeducation.net/videos/karen-barad-re-remembering-the-future-reconfiguring-the-past-temporality-materiality-and-justice-to-come/>

teachers in the studio art department⁴⁰ for a majority of their practicing artistic careers. Their material relationships have imprinted through their teachings, as attested by their students.⁴¹

The fortuitous conflation of acrylic paint and Hard-Edge painting is the story of art theory and modern industry making something together and both arriving at the opportune time. Art historiography thus far has championed only the practitioners and their ideological intentions, however, the blatant reality is that their Hard-Edge painting as we know it would not exist without acrylic paint. And the widely collected paintings continue to narrate the new and unique possibilities of acrylic paint. These surfaces, far from being simple announcements of solid colour, are a subtle build-up of layers, highly refined colour relationships and technical ability. Additionally, their large, flawless, expanses of colour make them uniquely fragile: just one bump or smudge, and the entire painting feels interrupted. Even the edges play a role, albeit in different ways for different paintings, but the tacking margin, traditionally considered the demarcation of the painting's end, is in play with the Hard-Edge paintings. This means that they insist on being handled differently; picking them up by the edge is the same as grabbing them by the face. It is acrylic paint that nurtured and allowed for these large, consistent, expanses. In my survey of the documentation surrounding Hard-Edge painting, I sought out discussions of their materiality. I have looked for references to properties of acrylic paint and how these properties allowed for and perhaps influenced a manner of making. And I have looked for details regarding the making-methodology of the three painters. Chapter 2 documents this survey and reveals that material-methodological discussions are nearly absent from discussions advancing the meaning

⁴⁰ It was called the Fine Arts department at the time at Montréal's Sir George Williams University (which became Concordia University in 1974). Yves Gaucher taught from 1966 to 2000, and Guido Molinari taught from 1970 to 1997. Gaucher began as a printmaking instructor and later became a painting instructor.

⁴¹ Two of their students, Marc Séguin and Marc Garneau, provided insightful detail into the material methodological relationships that Molinari and Gaucher have with their painting, see Chapter 4.

and significance of Hard-Edge painting. A significant component of the continued mattering of these paintings was not recorded. However, this oversight is not unique to the curators, critics and historians of the Montreal Hard-Edge painters, it is an inherited convention of Modern art historical writing and amplified by the historical relationship between abstract art and notions of the *immaterial*.

Modern art historical conventions traditionally privilege the artist-maker in a determining role and the materials of making in a passive role. Moreover, the beginnings of abstract and formalist art making were motivated against materialist interests (the industrial, capitalist kind) and toward transcendent communion with the spiritual/immaterial/universal. The earliest practitioners of completely abstract, non-representational art, Wassily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian were theosophists and intended their paintings to be a kind of medium through which one could commune with another dimension. For Mondrian this was the ‘new harmony’:

The coloured planes, as much by position and dimension as by the greater value given to order, plastically express only *relationships* and not forms. The New Plastic brings its relationship into *aesthetic equilibrium* and thereby expresses *the new harmony*.⁴²

And for these reasons writers and practitioners alike commonly relate the meaning of abstract art to the immaterial, and material concerns are rarely understood as relevant – or they are understood to be too self-evident and thus redundant to discussions intending to advance greater insight into abstract art’s significance. The nuances of the enduring intra-relationship between abstract art and the notions of the immaterial are recounted in Chapter 3. The Hard-Edge painters and the people who wrote about them were/are inheritors of this tradition and this has contributed to first, a lack of material discussion – despite the Hard-Edge painters’ impressive

⁴² Piet Mondrian, “Neo-Plasticism: The General Principle of Plastic Equivalence” (1920), in in *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, 289. Original emphasis.

utilization of acrylic paint; and second, numerous descriptions equating Hard-Edge painting with ‘the immaterial’ – despite none of the painters entertaining spiritual aspirations and all of them being deeply wed to embodied, durational, perception which is a practice that is overtly based in the tangible/material.

Critical to my argument is the understanding that materials do in fact contribute to making. The acceptance of artworks as continuously materializing entities, and thus capable of narrating ideas beyond what the artist contributed during the making process, cannot be properly furnished without also understanding that materials shape making in profound ways. Chapter 4 documents the influence of synthetic media on making practices in the modern period. From the introduction of dried watercolour palettes and the paint tube in the mid 1900s affording plein air painting and the Impressionist movement, to the first solvent soluble acrylic paint, Magna, and its contribution to the American Color Field movement, materials can be seen to have always influenced not only method but also idea. The significance of material contribution cannot be taken as a given or understood as being passive to the agency of the artist. However, my argument does not intend to make the artist subservient to materials either. Rather, elevating the material to a contributing function lays important groundwork for the more theoretical argument that I advance in Chapter 5.

In Chapter 5 I argue that in addition to art historical conventions, there are socio-cultural and philosophical underpinnings that are rooted in dualist frameworks that support the ontology of the subject/object divide. This is the same divide that supports the mind/matter divide and thus the notion that materials are passive and lie in wait of form. With the theorists Tim Ingold,

Karen Barad, Jane Bennet, Alva Noë, Daniel Miller, Mark Rowlands, Gilles Deleuze, and Vivian Van Saaz, I propose a new way of understanding the interconnection between epistemology and ontology. When we understand the nature of knowing, understanding, and being as materially and environmentally integrated and mutually determining, it is a natural next step to then understand art material-making-idea as co-dependently realizing, and thus “completed” artworks to be continuously (re-) materializing. According to Barad “[m]atter doesn’t move in time, matter doesn’t evolve in time, matter materializes and enfolds different temporalities.”⁴³ In other words, matter *is* time. “Time leaves traces in a multitude of layers and scales in the realm of life. Everything is time. Stone, tree, mountain, ocean; thoughts, doubts, clouds – we are time.”⁴⁴ The intra-action of matter-temporality, the self-reflexive and self-actualizing understanding of matter is the final move necessary to disband the notion of dualism. Understanding perception as being performed *intra-actively*, a term borrowed from Barad,⁴⁵ within the duration of matter’s time is a critical component of this study. Also significant is Barad’s apparatus: the apparatus, akin to discourse, “is that which constrains and enables... and is at once ...productive of (*and part of*) the phenomena produced”⁴⁶ So the *apparatus*, with regard to the artwork, would be the particular arrangement of the maker-material configuration with the concept of art, in relation to the current and past practices of art, intertwined with the viewer/discourse about the art that both creates and is also created by the art. It is also determined by and determining of the institutions of art, the discipline of art history and art conservation. Because the thing that is the *thing* (object-subject-materialization) is constantly shifting within and by the apparatus, the meaning shifts

⁴³ Karen Barad, *Re-remembering the Future, Re(con)figuring the Past*, 2014.

⁴⁴ Barad, “Diffracting Diffraction: Cutting Together-Apart,” *Parallax*, 2014, Vol. 20, No. 3, 183.

⁴⁵ Through emphasizing the action ‘within’ as opposed to ‘between’ Barad’s ‘intra-action’ resists dichotomies and deterministic cause–effect relational thinking. Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Vol. 28, no. 3 (Spring 2003): 814.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 819.

accordingly, depending on the particular arrangement at a particular time. Barad's *apparatus* helps us approach an artwork by giving us not an object, but a momentary spacio-temporal-material stabilization of the thing that is being discussed and that includes the perceiving viewer. Barad's insistence that meaning and mattering are mutually constituting will help us find ways to interject strategically within the assemblage of matter's materialization. Alva Noë asserts that not only do we perceive by doing, but also that doing is actually constitutive of perception.⁴⁷ Noë's enactive approach reveals an embodied perception that disassembles the barrier between conceptual and nonconceptual thinking and doing. For Noë, sensori-motor skills are conceptual⁴⁸ and things *are* how they appear.⁴⁹ Noë's leveling of the conceptual with the sensori-motor to the extreme that they mutually constitute is paramount. Because if we agree with Barad that materialization is time, then sensori-motor understanding is materialization and so are conceptions. If idea *is* materialization *is* time and vice versa, then we have a loop wherein we can begin to understand how our actions are idea-materials and materials are action-ideas and this will effect real onto-epistemic change.

My goal is that by accentuating that material and ideas are mutually constituting, we will also understand that our relationship with the art of our culture is nuanced and indeterminate and this will make us better art stewards. Philosopher Manuel de Landa writes, "when you begin believing in a material world that is beyond us, then you believe in a world that is affected by our actions and then begin to take responsibility for them."⁵⁰ A world that is affected by us, and affects us, is not reliant on our perceptive abilities to exist, as much of the idealist continental

⁴⁷ Alva Noë, *Action in Perception*, (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2004), 9, 31, 179.

⁴⁸ Noë, *Action in Perception*, 183.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 85.

⁵⁰ Manuel de Landa, *Deleuze and the New Materialism*, European Graduate School, live video lecture, 2009, accessed September 25, 2015. <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/manuel-de-landa/videos/>.

philosophy tradition would have us believe. The ethic that is furnished with materialist philosophy will help us to better understand the trans-materiality and a-materiality of contemporary art and re-evaluate institutional collection standards that necessitate and perpetuate stable (collectable and preservable) art objects. Effectively, in understanding that we are partners in our material becoming (us, our artworks, our environment are all materially integrated and becoming together), we become implicated and therefore responsible in a new way. We then understand, for instance, that when we preserve art we are preserving ourselves. Jane Bennett and her reflections on the shortcomings of the environmentalist movement highlight the ethical upshots of materialist frameworks. There are parallels between the stewardship of the artwork and stewardship of the environment, Bennett writes:

If environmentalism leads to the call for the protection and wise management of an ecosystem that surrounds us, a vital materialism suggests that the task is to engage more strategically with the trenchant materiality that *is us* as it vies with us in agentic assemblages.⁵¹

A vital materialist does not advocate for passivity in the face of deteriorating agentic assemblages, the call is not to stand by and allow the material matrix to unfold as it will, because it will. In acknowledging material agency [autonomy], a conservator's and art historian's role is not to disregard intention, or culture, and allow the newly recognized vibrant materiality of the art object to proceed through time as it wishes, but instead, as Bennett argues, to engage strategically with the *assemblage*. And thus as we understand material as *contributing* to idea and upend the notion of the 'stable' artwork we are better able to see how we are intra-materialized with the assemblage and not independent subjects who are outside of the assemblage.

⁵¹ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 111. Emphasis added.

Taking the context and physical production of late modern Hard-Edge painting as the departure point for examining both the materiality of painting and the bearing of materialist philosophy on our understanding of both Hard-Edge painting and art making practices in general is to take a point in art's history where painting was experimental (DUCO car paint, acrylic paint, large-scale, non-traditional canvas shapes) *and* artists were engaged with art theory, but where art creation was (is) considered to be reliably object-stable. Hard-Edge paintings, more than any other contemporaneous abstract art production like Color Field or Abstract Expressionist painting, appear more resolutely finite. With their large-scale, exceedingly crisp edges and implacable surfaces, the Montreal Hard-Edge painting of Molinari, Tousignant, and Gaucher give off the first impression that their surface quality and objectness can be indefinitely relied upon. Because Hard-Edge painting produced *seemingly* finished products that satisfied both consumer and collection demands they present a less obvious lens through which to deploy materialist philosophy. However, by taking a close look at the materials, making, writing, and theorizing that surrounded and contained Hard-Edge painting in the late modern period this thesis will demonstrate that the Hard-Edge paintings are materializing *now* and creating new onto-epistemology *now*. If I challenge finiteness and scholarship here, where things were still comfortable, and point out how the Aristotelian and then Kantian philosophical frameworks were actually failing us, Hard-Edge painting will help us to understand that all of our art is object-fluid and will demonstrate the benefit of materialist philosophy for understanding challenging materialities. Contemporary art is not so much breaking boundaries as it is drawing attention to the false security that dysfunctional boundaries used to define and examining Hard-Edge painting and demonstrating its object-fluidity will allow me to demonstrate this.

In the following chapter I will outline the history of Hard-Edge painting practices in Canada, demonstrate their significant contribution to abstract art, and examine the critical writing that surrounded the three painters, Molinari, Tousignant and Gaucher. This next chapter will shed light on the disjunction between the way the artists were using their materials – the experimental and deeply thoughtful material-methodology that each painter arrived at – and the way the paintings were being discussed and written about by both the painters themselves and those who documented their achievements. We will come to understand that the lack of attention to materiality in the writing surrounding the Hard-Edge painters effectively only gave us one side of the picture.

Chapter 2

Molinari, Tousignant, and Gaucher: Montreal Hard-Edge Painting

This chapter examines the painting history of Guido Molinari, Claude Tousignant, and Yves Gaucher beginning in 1950 and how these artists and their artworks were written about by art historians, curators, and critics throughout their careers. My research draws attention to a common convention in the period contemporaneous to the Post-Plasticiens, as they were known, wherein the materials and methodology of making in critical and art historical writing – that is the specific mediums used and the way they are deployed – are routinely overlooked in examining how the paintings look and *act*. The power of these incredible large-scale, unmodulated, acrylic canvases is always attributed to their persuasive colour, their ability to affect the perceptual space of the viewer, and their makers' ability to “free” their artworks from their own subjectivity such that the artworks can do their “work” untethered.¹ In this formulation, which has everything to do with one tangent of the modernist preoccupation, the significant contribution of the new paint media is possibly inadvertently overlooked. The fact that modern plastic paints were not available to previous generations of artists and the fact that these artists, Molinari, Tousignant, and Gaucher, trusted the advertised properties of acrylic paint without reservation and dedicated their careers to exploiting its unique properties to their own creative ends, is avant-garde in itself and has not been given due attention. That these artists used new materials by no means goes undocumented; what has not been documented – and is the argument of this chapter – is that these materials changed the way painting was made just as much as the modernist preoccupation with transcending Euclidean space. The modernist writing

¹ The paintings are objective presentation of the artist's subjective experiences and thus meant to be understood independently of the subjectivity of the artist.

that surrounds the art of these artists is focused on three things: pure perception, content that is objective and non-representational, and universal truth. Within this formulation, the materials of making were possibly deemed to be far too basic a consideration for the artists, their critics and historians. Despite the artists' clear preoccupation with their materials, made exceedingly evident through their respective mastery and exploitation of paint's properties, Molinari, Tousignant and Gaucher rarely discuss their mediums or methods. When I spoke with Tousignant in 2016 about the materials he used and his working methods, the painter commented that it was unusual that he was asked questions about this aspect of his making and I am not sure that he saw the significance of my enquiry.² Problem solving and creating with new materials happens in "real" time. It is a physical pursuit and understood intuitively in the making body-mind consciousness of the artist. When it comes time to describe intentionality and what their artwork is trying to do, the artist has left that creative space and the conventions of writing and talking about art do not usually include the messy(er) side of how the artwork was found/realized. This chapter will draw attention to the material influence of medium and process – the "messy" side – as it reviews the critical writing that has documented the careers of these three Hard-Edge painters and will demonstrate how acrylic paint changed the face of Hard-Edge painting in Montreal.

While there were many other late modern Montreal-based and Canadian painters who adopted acrylic paint, none did so quite like Molinari, Tousignant and Gaucher. Some, like Otto Rogers in Saskatchewan, adopted acrylic paint early, and like Tousignant and Molinari never used oil or

² Conversation with Tousignant, Artist's Studio, St. Henri, Montreal, 20 August 2016. However, he did express interest in the final product and advised me to hurry up so he could read it.

any other medium again.³ However, Rogers' landscape-inspired style and execution of medium is worlds away from these three Hard-Edge painters. There were also the west coast Hard-Edge painters, Gary Lee Nova, Bodo Pfeifer, and Michael Morris, who also used acrylic paint and applied it smoothly and with crisp edges. These painters showed far more affinity to the pop art side of Hard-Edge abstraction, though none of them continued their painting practices after 1970.⁴ In Montreal there were a number of painters who either used acrylic paint similarly or were associated with or part of the Post Plasticiens such as Marcel Barbeau, Charles Gagnon, and Jacques Hurtubise. All of these painters had long, successful painting careers, but none of them used acrylic paint with the distinctive consistency that Molinari, Tousignant and Gaucher did. These Montreal painters' use of acrylic paint was unique from other Canadian painters as well as their American counterparts. Barnett Newman used oil and acrylic throughout his entire career and preferred a somewhat painterly finish, and Gene Davis, whom Molinari was charged with mimicking, employed vertical stripes but his execution was more in line with the soft-edge characteristic of American abstraction and did not achieve the crisp visual quality of Molinari's stripes.⁵

In seeming contradiction to the hypothesis argued here, in 1972 Molinari writes, "New materials provided by technology may have stimulated new realisations in art, but in no fundamental way."⁶ He further qualifies that:

³ Conversation with Otto Rogers, Artist's Studio, Prince Edward, Ontario, 18 April 2016. Rogers began using Liquitex acrylic paint in 1957 when living in Madison, Wisconsin. He ceased using oil paint entirely by 1967.

⁴ These artists were using Hard-Edge painting methods, but they were representing pop images and elevating the everyday into high art circulation. Roald Nasgaard, *Abstract Painting in Canada*, (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 2007), 221.

⁵ Roald Nasgaard, "Le théoricien du molinarisme," in *Molinari*, (Montreal: Guido Molinari Foundation, 2018), 107.

⁶ Guido Molinari, "Colour in the Creative Arts," in *Molinari: Écrits sur l'art (1954-1975)*, ed. Pierre Théberge (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1976), 86. Speech given at the National Research Council, Ottawa, 15-16 May 1972.

Any external stimulants to art, may it be scientific outlooks or technology, social or psychological theories, primitive or exotic arts, new environments, etc., must be translated in the specific language of art to become of any value or meaning in the field of art itself.⁷

Molinari would likely be resistant to any formulation that elevates the properties of acrylic paint as being an equal player in the actualisation and perceptual experience of his paintings. Not even colour, the arguable subject of all of his paintings, should be conceived as having any independent objective status: “Colour as such does not exist,” Molinari clearly states.⁸ And echoing this position Gaucher communicated to the art critic May Ebbit Cutler in 1965 that materials in no way drove the form of his art making – he is talking about his print-making experimentation at the time, but his comment can be extrapolated to apply to his painting process as well.⁹ This stance, however, does not negate the fact that when Molinari and Tousignant picked up acrylic paint in the late 1950s and Gaucher in 1965, not only did their painting change significantly, but they never sought out another paint medium after this time. It is with the benefit of hindsight that it is possible to evaluate that their work from the adoption of acrylic paint forward has a *medium-consistency*¹⁰ that is unparalleled by other abstract painters working during the same period. To be clear, this is not to say that acrylic paint is the primary reason that their painting looked the way it did, it is to elucidate that the unique materiality of acrylic paint played a more contingent role in the development of Montreal Hard-Edge painting than has been realized or acknowledged before now. This insistence does not detract from the intellectual and methodological innovation of these three painters, rather it complements and elaborates upon previous historiography. Certainly, and in agreement with Molinari, these artists ‘translated’ the

⁷ Molinari, “Colour in the Creative Arts,” 87.

⁸ Ibid, 86.

⁹ May Ebbit Cutler, “Yves Gaucher,” *Canadian Art*, volume 22, No. 4, 1965.

¹⁰ This is not to be confused with Greenberg’s medium-specificity, but is a deliberate play on words to draw attention to, but also distinguish between, the role of medium from his formalist position and the role of medium from my materialist position.

technology of acrylic paint into the ‘specific language of art’, but we can also recognize now that without it they would not have had the vocabulary to do so. And while Molinari, Tousignant, and Gaucher would likely be resistant to the positioning of acrylic paint into a determining role, I do not believe they would go so far as to dismiss its contingency in the becoming of their expansive and environmentally extrusive paintings. The context of Hard-Edge painting was uniquely conditioned by two competing movements in Montreal: first the Automatistes and later the Plasticiens. Molinari, Tousignant and Gaucher were a part of the group known as the Post Plasticiens but their views about the practice of painting share many of the same roots as those of the earlier Plasticiens.¹¹

The Plasticiens

The Plasticiens (1954 – 1956) were driven to distinguish themselves from the earlier Montreal-based Automatiste movement. Automatiste painting takes inspiration from the Surrealist movement and as such was defined by automatic and spontaneous gesture. Their paintings were tachist and expressive and feature thick applications of oil paint with a palette knife. By contrast, the early Plasticiens, which included Louis Belzile, Jean-Paul Jérôme, and Fernand Toupin in addition to Jauran,¹² looked to Piet Mondrian and advocated as their formal orientation to reduce painting even further and embrace the plastic aspects that were specific to painting alone: tone, texture, form, line, and the relations between elements¹³. The next vanguard, Espace Dynamique, better known as the Post Plasticiens, Molinari, Tousignant, Denis Juneau and Jean

¹¹ However, Yves Gaucher, having taken up painting only in 1965 was only very loosely associated with the Post-Plasticien movement. Gaucher himself would have denied any affiliation with the Post Plasticien painting movement. The 2013 *The Plasticiens and Beyond: Montreal, 1955-1970* exhibition organized by Roald Nasgaard and Michael Martin included the ‘and beyond’ for the accommodation of artists like Gaucher.

¹² Jauran was a pseudonym for Rudolphe de Repentigny and was the name under which he wrote the Plasticien manifesto.

¹³ Denise Leclerc, *The Crisis of Abstraction in Canada: The 1950s*, (Ottawa: National Gallery of Art, 1982), 50.

Goguen, took this reduction a step further in 1956 by fully embracing the radicalism of Piet Mondrian and his emphasis on the destruction of cubist three-dimensional space through his notion of the ‘dynamic plane.’¹⁴

Post Plastique painting is another distinct innovative break from earlier abstract art practices in Montreal. Claude Tousignant and Guido Molinari diverged from the earlier Plasticiens, whom they felt were overly concerned with French geometric abstraction, to create highly reduced colour planes and geometric relationships. They were drawing from Mondrian, but they were also critically aware of New York Abstract Expressionist painting. Their novel experimentations with idea and material were first exhibited at Galerie L’Actuelle in 1956. These exhibitions marked the announcement of their car enamel paintings and were pivotal moments in the careers of both artists. Jean Goguen and Dennis Juneau came to their own reduction of geometric form and colour, however neither of them cites Mondrian as an influence.¹⁵ The Post Plasticiens come together with former Automatiste, Fernand Leduc, and former Plasticiens, Louis Belzile and Fernand Toupin in the 1959 *Art Abstrait* exhibition at the École des beaux-arts in Montreal. Their paintings and their accompanying texts demonstrate a remarkable resonance that is not continued after this time. Goguen and Juneau experiment with Op Art in the 1960s, Leduc returns to Paris, and Belzile and Toupin are not associated with Molinari or Tousignant in exhibition after this date. The ideology that is expressed in the *Art Abstrait* exhibition is fundamental to understanding Molinari’s and Tousignant’s pictorial motivation and marks the beginning of their turn toward Hard-Edge abstraction.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Nasgaard, *The Post Plasticiens and Beyond*, 65-66.

The texts that accompany the Post-Plasticiens' 1959 *Art Abstrait* exhibition, reflect a formal intent and ideology that retained significant parallels with the earlier writings of Mondrian and Kazimir Malevich.¹⁶ The art historian Jody Patterson reflects that taken together, their texts “were implying that their pictorial researches could serve as a metaphor for a new social reality.”¹⁷ This is reminiscent of Malevich insisting that the Suprematist paintings could model a new architecture.¹⁸ Fernande Saint-Martin wrote in the catalogue to *Art Abstrait* that: “la peinture actuelle...révélera dans les cadres d’une nouvelle logique, d’une nouvelle psychologie et d’une nouvelle géométrie, les dimensions les plus profonde de l’homme nouveau.”¹⁹ This avocation for abstract painting to effect a new understanding greater than that contained within the space of the canvas curiously bypasses any mention of the way the artists use their paint materials. This is particularly unusual in light of how different their technique was from the Automatistes. For example, of the foreground/background reversibility of Molinari’s *Blanc totalisant* (1956),

Figure 1, curator Pierre Théberge writes:

The *shiny black*, far from giving the effect of being a hole in the middle of the white surface, asserts itself as a colour and is just as much a part of the surface of the painting as the white. Molinari set up a spatial equivalence between black and white, creating for himself the dynamic surface equilibrium which Mondrian had discovered.²⁰

What is important to underline here is that *Blanc totalisant*, (1956), was made with the car enamel Duco, and the smooth flatness of the shiny black that Théberge observes is what facilitated the reversibility of the white with the black and allowed for the dynamic tension. The materiality of Duco alongside the ideology of Molinari pushed Montreal geometric abstraction

¹⁶ Fernande Saint-Martin, *Art Abstrait*, (Montreal: École des beaux-arts, 1959).

¹⁷ Patterson, Jody. *Painting on the Edge: Geometric Abstraction in Montreal, The 1950s*. Master of Arts, Art History Thesis, Concordia University, 2001.

¹⁸ Malevich claimed that the art of Suprematism “will become the new architecture: It will transfer these forms from the surface of the canvas to space.” Kazimir Malevich, *The World As Objectless*, Trans. Anja Schlossberger, (New York: The Malevich Society, 2014), 198.

¹⁹ Saint-Martin, “Révélation de l’Art Abstrait,” *Art Abstrait*, np.

²⁰ Pierre Théberge, *Guido Molinari*, exhibition catalogue, (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1976), 21. Emphasis added.

into its unique avant-garde position. This point is particularly well exemplified by looking at Automatiste Paul-Émile Borduas' black and white *3+4+1* (1956), **Figure 2**, painted in Paris around the same time. The palette, the scale, and the reversibility are all very similar, however because of Borduas' thick, textural and expressive application of oil paint with a palette knife, the effect is completely different. There is a striking elimination of figure/ground in both paintings, but the texture of *3+4+1* does not achieve (nor does it desire to) the same surface tension of the smooth *Blanc Totalisant*.²¹ The materiality of the car enamel Duco would not facilitate the texture achieved by Borduas even if Molinari desired this effect. And while Molinari certainly does not desire the gestural effect that Borduas was able to achieve, the interaction of their material choices with their painterly ideology could not be better exemplified.

I am examining Molinari, Tousignant, and Gaucher together and in isolation from other contemporaneous painters who routinely exhibited alongside one or the other of them because materially and methodologically they resonate strongly and this resonance has never been looked at before. And furthermore their skill and consistency with the acrylic medium is part and parcel of their long and influential careers. Ideologically, they are analogous only to a certain extent in their desire to present a painting that is independent of their subjective consciousness such that it was free for the embodied-time-based perceptual experience of the viewer. But materially they all independently arrived at a very similar medium and methodology – in fact in the 1980s and 1990s they all share the same Montreal-based paint maker, Michael Towe of Chromatech paints. And while the three painters have been brought together numerous times in various exhibitions

²¹ Robert Welsh has also noticed this striking similarity in palette and figure-ground reversal between Borduas and Molinari in the second half of the 1950s and confirms that this was "...without mutual consultation or a shared theoretical basis." Welsh, "Molinari: Black and White to be Read All-Over," in *Guido Molinari 1951-1961: The Black and White Paintings*, (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1989), 13.

across Canada, the United States, and overseas, each one denies being a part of any larger movement – Gaucher denies affiliation with the Post Plasticiens and all three vehemently resist affiliation with the Op Art movement with which they had all been associated by art critics at various points in their early practice.²²

The various curatorial groupings that brought these artists together throughout their careers were invariably stylistic and ideological. Rarely were all three in an exhibition together, but often seen in various groupings of two of them.²³ This is the first text to discuss the three of them in absence of other painters associated with the Plasticien movement, such as Barbeau (who was frequently in exhibitions alongside these painters in the 1950s and 1960s).²⁴ Barbeau worked in a similar formally reductive manner, but did not paint with the same expansiveness of scale or the medium consistency of Molinari, Tousignant and Gaucher and he was also associated with the Automatiste movement.

This text will separate and examine the painting of Molinari, Tousignant, and Gaucher based on their medium-consistency and material clarity as opposed to their ideology, but not in exclusion to their ideology. As chapters 3 and 5 will make clear, the material focus of this study resists entrenchment of dualist structures that could operate to elevate the material above the ideological. The catalogue essays and later art historiography of these artists gives some attention to the materials they used, but usually with the intention of documenting their early

²² Cutler asked Gaucher in interview, “Your paintings seem to fit into the ‘op art’ movement. How do you feel about it?” To which Gaucher replied, “First of all, I think the term ‘op art’ is garbage. All painting has always been optical; it has to do with visual reactions. What is perspective except optical? I prefer David Carter’s term ‘kinetic painting.’” Cutler, “Yves Gaucher,” n.p.

²³ See Nasgaard for detailed exhibition history. Nasgaard, *The Plasticiens and Beyond*, 118-149.

²⁴ Ibid.

experimentation with car enamel and leather dye, in the case of Molinari and Tousignant, and almost never in the case of Gaucher. Because Gaucher's trajectory was different – entering into Hard-Edge painting through printmaking – writing surrounding him gives detailed accounts of his material ingenuity with regard to printmaking, but little to no mention of his use of acrylic paint. Exceptions to this are noted later in this chapter. Juicy snippets and off-hand comments with regard to materials appear in newspaper and journal articles from time to time in the 1950s and 1960s, but rarely make it into catalogue essays or later art history texts that are more concerned with ideological and aesthetic perspectives. One such juicy snippet appears in a 1964 article by Andrew Hudson: the art historian relates that Molinari was repainting his mid 1950s Duco paintings in the more stable acrylic medium.²⁵ Acrylic paint had only been on the market since 1955 and already it was understood to be *reliably stable*. It may be that little attention has been given to these artists' use of acrylic paint because nothing ever went wrong. The material reliability of acrylic paint does not negate, however, that what these three artists achieved with it was truly innovative and worth the closer examination it is afforded here.

Molinari

Molinari's early years were marked by rapid stylistic development and material experimentation. The transition between Molinari's early experiments with painting blindfolded and in darkness and the full maturation of this early and rapid painterly evolution into the black and white paintings during the 1950s and their culmination with the stripe paintings of the 1960s is aptly referred to by Molinari as his "genetic moment."²⁶ By 1955, "the self-styled 'theoretician of

²⁵ Hudson, "Phenomenon: Colour painting in Montreal," 360.

²⁶ Molinari quoted by Campbell. James D. Campbell, "A Radical Agenda for Painting: The Genetic Chronology of Molinari's Early Years 1950-1961," in *Guido Molinari 1950-1961: The Black and White Paintings*, (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1989), 19.

Molinari's had linked his future with an historical development that he considered to be essential in twentieth-century Western art – that is, evolving from Matisse to Mondrian.”²⁷ His greatest innovation was, according to himself, “his uniquely original conception of pictorial space,” which developed from his early experiments with blindfolded painting.²⁸ In these blindfold paintings he discovered a personal formal consistency that included “a more static left side, a rather vertical movement at left, then a movement towards the right top corner, with a counterbalance mass towards the bottom right corner.”²⁹ It is his personal conception of pictorial space combined with his desire for dynamic equilibrium that drove his practice. He begins in the early 1950s by using oil paint and applying it in a similar tachist manner to the Quebec Automatistes. By 1955 he is using the car enamel Duco and a latex paint, he briefly experiments with leather dye, and by 1959 he has settled on the acrylic medium. During this “genetic moment” he is also drawing with pen and doing ink washes feverishly. He is finding his medium and his methodology during this time period as much as he is finding his desired expression and perceptual effect. Or more correctly, as is my argument, the material-methodology and the perceptual effect are being co-dependently realized.

Molinari's stripe paintings of the early 1960s, for which he is best known, are the culmination of his painterly research and material experimentation. The stripe paintings exemplify both the logical evolution of painting through their extinguishing of vertical-horizontal relationships, and their innovation with regard to the dynamic potentiality of colour through their deployment of high saturation, uniform intensity, juxtaposition, and seriality of adjacently placed colour

²⁷ Robert Welsh, “Molinari and the Science of Colour and Line,” *RACAR*, Vol.5, No.1, 1978, 5.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 7.

²⁹ Molinari quoted by Welsh. *Ibid*, 3-4.

planes.³⁰ Molinari's concept of seriality was visibly expressed in his painting beginning in 1961 and first enunciated in text in 1972, as can be seen in *Mutation vert-rouge* (1964) **Figure 3**. He expressed his concept of seriality as being reliant upon four premises: "the rejection of a single colour dominant, the recurrence or repetition of the chosen hues, a constancy of form and of colour qualities, and the elimination of secondary oppositions (such as textures and soft-hard contrasts)."³¹ The last premise, "the elimination of secondary oppositions" underscores the material research and experimentation the artist underwent to arrive at a surface that would not oppose his visual ideology. This last premise is inherently material because texture in painting is accomplished with the combination of canvas weave and the application and characteristics of the paint used. Molinari would have to strategically manipulate these components in order to "eliminate secondary opposition." This would not have been an ideological intervention; it would have been a material one. However, the material properties of Molinari's paintings are not discussed to the extent that they need to be in order to understand this creative and conscious artistic structuring. This leaves a material gap in our understanding of just how innovative the artist was and how much his paintings stand apart from "striped" canvases of other artists, such as Barnett Newman's "zip" paintings of the 1950s. Unlike Newman, who uses both oil and acrylic paint,³² Molinari adopts acrylic paint in the late 1950s and deploys it to its maximum potential of saturation, smoothness, and Hard-Edge ability. It is not just the medium that distinguishes the early stripe paintings from the abstraction trends of New York painting, but also his methodology. Molinari used tape to abut his coloured juxtapositions crisply, and applied his paint smoothly and opaquely, this method effectively satisfying his fourth premise of

³⁰ Ibid, 9.

³¹ Summarized by Welsh, Ibid, 9. From Molinari, "Colour in the Creative Arts," 95.

³² Newman alternated between these mediums throughout his career, whereas Molinari used only acrylic paint beginning in 1960.

eliminating secondary oppositions. Newman's zip paintings, on the other hand, were far more painterly by comparison and achieve a much different, more atmospheric, visual effect. Yve-Alain Bois writes of Newman's paintings, "the shiny gloss...[and] modulations function as a sort of internal respiration of the field of color that has become as indivisible as one's own body."³³ Bois explains that Newman would apply two layers by roller and the last by brush – it is the last brushed layer that leads to his observation that the coloured field looks as though it is breathing. Molinari and Newman differ methodologically and visibly – Molinari's surfaces have a smooth, even gloss and are entirely unmodulated. This move on Molinari's part is a purposeful differentiation from the spontaneousness of the Automatistes and arguably prevents to an even greater degree the possibility of looking into the paintings' surface. The frontality and perceptual experience of a Molinari is far more confrontational than that of a Newman and this is because of the *way* and *with what* he paints.

An example where a more thorough understanding and observation of material-methodology would have promoted stronger art criticism is Andrew Hudson's remark in 1964 that Molinari's black and white paintings were "like straightened up versions of Franz Kline."³⁴ This offhand dismissal of what Molinari achieved is unwarranted. The painter's medium, formal arrangement and execution are entirely different from Kline's. Kline worked with oil paint and house paint and used a projector to enlarge his smaller scale representational gestural sketches and transform them into abstractions.³⁵ While Kline's use of the projector, and the fact that he painted both the white and the black on his canvas indicate a lot more planning and exactitude than expected from his paintings' gestural appearance, the artist is still very much a part of New York Abstract

³³ Yve-Alain Bois, "Perceiving Newman," in *Painting as Model*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 213.

³⁴ Hudson, "Phenomenon: Colour painting in Montreal," 358.

³⁵ MoMA Learning: "The Painting Techniques of Franz Kline: *Chief*," video, accessed October 9, 2018.

Expressionist movement that was interested in conveying ‘action’ and interior emotion.

Molinari and Kline’s paintings share only the fact that they are black and white.

Likewise, it is Molinari’s mastering of this new medium that allowed him to achieve canvases that are a personalized perceptual event. Pierre Théberge explains that Molinari’s stripe paintings are “transformed into an event of visual and temporal energy vibrations through each viewer’s system of perception.”³⁶ The smooth, saturated, and abutted stripes vary in number and arrangement and thereby encourage multiple readings and active, personalized, and subjective participation from the viewer. The viewing experience would be significantly different were the hues modulated through texture, tint, or saturation because such modulations would effectively cue the viewer towards a more specific reading, one that might include a figure/ground relationship. Molinari’s capitalization on the smooth opacity and high chroma of acrylic paint facilitated the perceptual enterprise of the stripe paintings. His medium and methodology cannot therefore be looked at as an aside but instead understood as instrumental to his achievements.

Théberge also draws attention to how Fernande Saint-Martin emphasized how much the abstract paintings were engaged with reality and how their explorations were making headway into the territory of the *non-verbal* world.³⁷ She writes: “each of them, in fact, demonstrates, in a broader conception of realism and respect for objectivity, the primary concern of establishing *more adequate relationships with reality* that those vaguely suggested by classical paintings.”³⁸ This insistent relationship with reality would be even more strongly claimed with enunciation of the material means by which these paintings were realized. The critics, historians, and the Hard-

³⁶ Théberge, *Guido Molinari*, 34-35.

³⁷ Fernande Saint-Martin was a Quebec semiotic theorist and long-term partner of Molinari.

³⁸ Saint-Martin, *Art Abstrait*, np. Emphasis added.

Edge painters themselves very rarely mention their material processes, and this is a failed opportunity to understand at a more evocative structural level the way in which acrylic paint facilitated communication with “the deepest dimensions of the new man.”³⁹.

Despite his demonstrated material experimentation and his unique and consistent painting method, it is far more common for historians to emphasize the influence of ideological underpinnings to Molinari’s development. James Campbell explains that very early on Molinari is influenced by the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein whose theory asserts that, “every part of visual space must have a colour, and every colour must occupy a part of the visual space.”⁴⁰ And Campbell agrees that in Molinari’s painting: “indeed, [space and colour] are both indissolubly wed in the same radically undifferentiated fabric.”⁴¹ Space is colour, colour is space, but is colour not also material? Does not the fabric of space interpenetrate its appearance and experience as much as the area of space? Molinari readily acknowledges the inter-dependence of space and colour but never acknowledges material influence. It is an arbitrary maneuver to cordon off some formal properties (the material) while insisting that others are intrinsically understood together (space and colour). This requires a suspension of disbelief that may function in the artist’s statement and the theoretical art historical text, but deflates in the presence of the material space of the painting itself. The properties of materials influence both colour and space. This is not a cutting-edge materialist perspective; this is something that has been understood by artists for centuries.⁴²

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ludwig Wittgenstein quoted by Campbell, “A Radical Agenda for Painting,” 22.

⁴¹ Campbell, “A Radical Agenda for Painting,” 22.

⁴² However, the material nature of paintings is something that Modernism’s infatuation with flatness needed to ignore because materials signal a tactility and Abstract Expressionist painting was intended to appeal to the mind and the mind only.

For instance, the fact that colour affects space was deeply understood and feared by the Cubists, which is why the palette of early Analytical Cubism is so muted; Braque believed that “[colour] could give rise to sensations that would interfere with their [the Cubists] new conception of space.”⁴³ The art historian John Richardson explains that Braque came to resolve the issue when “he saw how to use texture to represent local colour by varying his paint surfaces with foreign substances and exploiting his repertory of decorators’ effects.”⁴⁴ For Braque:

the equation of colour with texture became a lifelong obsession. And he would illustrate his theories by dropping a piece of velvet and a piece of calico into the same pot of colour in order to show how different the results could be. He would also demonstrate how the same colour could vary in value according to whether it was opaque or translucent, a lacquer or an earth colour.⁴⁵

And similarly, Yves Klein’s trademarked International Klein Blue (IKB) is not a new colour at all; it is simply a different medium and therefore has a different textural appearance. Rather than being in oil paint, IKB is composed of ultramarine blue dispersed in the synthetic resin, polyvinyl acetate (PVA).⁴⁶ PVA is clear and allows the ultramarine pigment to retain its granular quality. For this reason the ultramarine colour of IKB appears differently from ultramarine dispersed in oil medium, which has a subtle yellow colour and refracts light very smoothly (thereby making the colour appear darker, smoother, and shinier than IKB). The smooth, opaque, and colour-rich qualities of acrylic paint likewise contributed to the perceptual effect of Molinari’s large-scale Hard-Edge paintings, however the role of the specific material-methodology was not credited at its inception nor later in the historiography. Acrylic paint

⁴³ Georges Braque quoted by John Richardson, “Crimes Against the Cubists,” *New York Review of Books Issue* 30, no. 10 (1983), 32-34.

⁴⁴ Richardson, “Crimes Against the Cubists,” 33.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Vivian Dominguez, “Yves Klein Blue and Venus: Conservation of Yves Klein Blue,” Art Conservation and Restoration Services, Miami Florida, 2015, accessed 24 March 2018, <http://conservationyveskleinblue.blogspot.ca/2015/06/conservation-of-yves-klein-blue.html>

moved from cutting edge to household so rapidly that its art historical inception and influence has gone relatively un-celebrated. Duco and latex house paint received a good moment of notoriety with the painting of Jackson Pollock and Clifford Still. And Magna paint will forever be associated with Morris Louis and the post painterly abstraction movement. But acrylic? It did everything it promised it would with very few performance issues and for this reason receded quickly from the spotlight of the new and novel. Chapter 4 documents the development and influence of plastics on modern painting in detail.

Molinari's black and white paintings begin in earnest in late 1955 and *Abstraction*, (1955), **Figure 4**, is the first of these to be shown at the H elene de Champlain restaurant on St. H elen's Island, in early 1956.⁴⁷ The painting was received with mixed reviews. By some it was considered to be "an attack on the plastic norms and conventions; [...] what really shocked people was the use of plastic paint and the radical simplicity of the composition."⁴⁸ Campbell documents that this was the "same kind of unthinking reactionary response that greeted Molinari's exhibition of 10 black and white paintings at L'Actuelle in May, 1956".⁴⁹ However, Rudolphe de Repentigny was not one of those critics – he lauded Molinari's black and whites in the May 15, 1956, edition of *La Presse*, writing:

The black and white surfaces attain real monumentality. If one wishes to gain something from looking at these paintings, one must forget that they are 'paintings' and rid oneself of any preconceived notions one might have about painting. Anything that contributes to localized tensions has been virtually wiped out. There remain only powerful balances, heightened by extreme contrasts; light and the absence of light.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Campbell, "A Radical Agenda for Painting," 32.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 32.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 33.

⁵⁰ Repentigny cited by Campbell, Ibid.

The extreme contrasts and the light and absence of light were of course heightened by the extremely glossy surface of the Duco paint Molinari used to make his black and white series.

The curator Denise Leclerc explains that the artists were “trying to get away from the illusion of space” and high gloss contributed to the frontality and impenetrability of the paintings and was thus (alongside the faster drying and novel industrial appeal) the primary draw of this paint.⁵¹

In the catalogue of the March 1964 exhibition at the Norman Mackenzie Art Gallery in Regina, Molinari clarified that the primary role of his paintings was exacting a “synthesis between the dynamics of duration and chromatic dynamics,” which would influence a new understanding of space during the viewing experience.⁵² And a significant contributing factor to the lengthened duration of viewing and subsequent new understanding of space was the enlarged scale of his paintings. Théberge documents that Molinari increased the size of his studio in January of 1964:

He was now able to do much wider canvases and, as it were, to give form and substance to this new spatial reality, by rendering it on a considerably enlarged scale, as is immediately demonstrated by *Blue-Ochre Space*, 1964, completed in February, in which the wide juxtaposed colour stripes create, amongst other things, a visual field equal in size to its surroundings – its “environment.”⁵³

And while it is not mentioned by Théberge, it is critical to point out that the unmodulated, environment-encroaching, coloured fields would not have had nearly the same effect if Molinari were still working with oil paint or car enamel; they look the way they do because he switched to acrylic paint. The automobile paint was too brittle for large-scale canvases, which have a far greater degree of flexibility than small canvases, and oil paint does not have the same ability to cover evenly, opaquely, and thinly.

⁵¹ Interview with Denise Leclerc, April 4, 2016, Ottawa, ON.

⁵² Molinari cited by Théberge, *Guido Molinari*, 40.

⁵³ Théberge, *Guido Molinari*, 40. Molinari’s widest painting prior to 1964 was 152.4cm; after 1964 his width expands immediately, and nearly doubles, with *Blue Ochre* 1964, measuring 206.4 x 274.3 cm.

By 1958 Molinari and Tousignant were working with hard edges, tape, acrylic paint and notions of perceptual engagement. Their ideology and their material-methodology were unique.

Nonetheless, In 1970 Francois-Marc Gagnon accused Molinari and Tousignant of mimesis, of borrowing their oeuvre from Mondrian, Barnett Newman, Gene Davis, and Kenneth Noland.⁵⁴

By way of clarification and defense, Molinari responded by distinguishing “between mimesis as a product of imitation on the one hand, and on the other hand, the process of development and maturation of the thinking individual based on ‘several broad hypotheses’.”⁵⁵ There are visual

parallels between the works of these artists for sure, but a close looking at the material-

methodology of the paintings makes a mimetic argument clearly unwarranted. Despite visiting

Barnett Newman in New York multiple times beginning in 1955, and freely acknowledging his respect for Newman’s painting, Molinari used paint differently.⁵⁶ Newman oscillated between

acrylic and oil mediums throughout his career whereas Molinari never did. Newman’s

brushstrokes are visible and his paint surface is irregular, Molinari’s are not. This is also true of

Tousignant. After Molinari and Tousignant adopted acrylic paint in 1958 they never looked

back. Their material-methodology distinguishes these painters clearly from their New York

counterparts, however neither the artists nor art historians offered the quality and methodology of

their painting in argument for their distinctiveness. It is possible that the painters did not realize

how unique their material-methodology was because they were far more concerned with the

perceptual side of their painting practice. Molinari stated in 1971 that,

The originality of the Canadian contribution was to give colour a new function and a new dimension, and then to define new spatial structures based not on opposing heterogeneous elements such as form and content, but on serial interrelational

⁵⁴ Théberge, *Guido Molinari*, 52.

⁵⁵ Molinari quoted by Théberge, *Ibid*, 53.

⁵⁶ Théberge, *Guido Molinari*, 44, 54.

systems, which alone create a tenfold increase in the dynamic and expressive function of colour.⁵⁷

Again here he does not mention his decisive switch to acrylic paint and its unique structural properties. This could also be because he was trying to divorce colour from the material world of representation and through the process divorced it (or tried to) from its materiality as well. This predilection is characteristic of high Modernism; the Modernist preoccupation with purity and immateriality will be examined in Chapter 3.

Tousignant

Molinari's and Tousignant's paintings have much in common. They share a similar material trajectory: from oil paint to car enamel and finally acrylic paint. And they share a similar scale and painting methodology: both worked with very large canvases and paint rollers in order to apply their paint smoothly and evenly. And both were concerned with perception and played with temporality and memory to influence their viewer into an existential viewing experience with their paintings. What their paintings looked like and how they manipulated space, however, was completely different. Molinari dismissively refers to Tousignant's monochromes as "beautiful...things, not paintings."⁵⁸ He explains that:

The *Quantifiers* demonstrate the very impossibility of the monochrome! [Molinari's *Quantifier* series, that is] Because, while I'm working with a unified field, the field is still anthropomorphic. Monochrome painting sets up a figure ground relationship to the wall it's hanging on. It's part of architecture. That's why I called Tousignant's painting "things." Monochromes are concerned with peripheries – where their colour meets the wall around the picture. And I am interested in the paintings' internal structure.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Guido Molinari, "Réflexions sur la notion d'objet et de série," in *Conférences J.A. de Sève, 11-12, Peinture canadienne-française: Débats*, (Montreal: Les Presses de l'université de Montréal, 1971), 80.

⁵⁸ Gary M. Dault, "Guido Molinari, a home movie: on the eve of the artist's forty-year retrospective, Gary Michael Dault zooms in for a closeup (Interview)," *Canadian Art*, Vol. 12, Iss. 2 (Summer, 1995), 67.

⁵⁹ Dault, "Guido Molinari, a home movie," 68.

However, it was Tousignant's objective that his monochromes become objects in their own right and that they interact with space, the paintings around them, and the viewer in order to effect a new understanding of space and colour in the active perceiver. Paradoxically, Molinari's pointed criticism thus effectively acknowledged his fellow painter's success.

Tousignant, like Molinari, went through an important transitional phase in the mid-1950s with the mediums of Cilco and Cilux made by the Canadian manufacturer of car enamel, CIL. The artist's June 1956 exhibition at Galerie l'Actuelle, a gallery founded by himself, Guido Molinari and Fernande Saint-Martin, displayed his first (and last) oeuvre of Cilux paintings. They were very poorly received. The prominent art critic at the time, Rodophe de Repentigny, panned the show claiming that Tousignant's paintings were without justification.⁶⁰ Tousignant later reflects that this reaction was an isolating experience for him.⁶¹ Like Molinari, Tousignant was pairing down the elements of painting, but uniquely he was taking full advantage of the brilliant chroma and reflective surface quality that could be achieved with car enamel and resin and using these characteristics to achieve bold juxtapositions, such as *Hypnose* (1956), **Figure 5**. However, it was the creation of the avant-garde 51-inch-square *Monochrome orangé* (1956) in high-gloss cilux at the same time as the exhibition was running that ended up being the pivotal painting in Tousignant's career.⁶² Tousignant painted *Monochrome orangé* while his 1956 Galerie L'Actuelle exhibition was on show, but it was not exhibited until 1970 in the *Peinture Québécois 1948-1970* show 14 years later. And this is partly because of the hostile reception that his Cilux

⁶⁰ Rodolphe de Repentigny, "De jeunes peintres aux prises avec un métier qui ne pardonne guère," in *La Presse*, 6 June, 1956.

⁶¹ Tousignant quoted by Campbell from a 1994 conversation with the curator. See chapter 4, page 148-149 for full quotation. In James D. Campbell, *After Geometry: The Abstract Art of Claude Tousignant*, (Toronto: ECW Press, 1995), 56.

⁶² The original *Monochrome orangé* was lost during transport to the National Gallery of Canada for the 1982 exhibition, *The Crisis of Abstraction in Canada: The 1950s*. Conversation with Tousignant, August 20, 2016.

paintings received in 1956. According to a number of art historians, *Monochrome orangé* is ground breaking for being amongst the first of its kind; Tousignant was entirely without reference at this time.⁶³ Aleksandr Rodchenko spoke of achieving the end of painting in the early 1900s with his triptych *Blue, Red, Yellow* (1921), and Tousignant may have been aware of this because Constructivist art and theories, certainly those of Malevich, were presented in magazines such as *Art News* and *Art D'Aujourd'hui*, which Tousignant was aware of. But a triptych of single colour paintings is not the same thing as a single, stand-alone, large-scale (for the time), monochrome in shiny orange plastic enamel.⁶⁴ And additionally, far from being interested in the nihilist reduction of painting until its end, *Monochrome orangé* triggered the beginning of Tousignant's lifelong ontological exploration of the nature of painting and sculpture.⁶⁵ In fact, in 1987 Tousignant confidently declared to Norman Theriault that he did not think the definition between painting and sculpture was all that important.⁶⁶ Considering modernism's obsession with purity and the self-definition of the arts, this statement is quite avant-garde. *Monochrome orangé* was also pivotal in that it marks the pointed diversion between the ideological practices of Claude Tousignant and Guido Molinari. Their painting careers followed a similar material development (aside from Tousignant's interest in sculpture), but a very different ideological intention. The way they asked their artworks to interact with space and therefore the viewer was distinct, and requires a deeper analysis of the material development of each artist.

⁶³James D. Campbell. *Claude Tousignant: Monochromes, 1978-1993*. (Québec: Musée du Québec, 1994), 76. Campbell explains further that, "monochrome painting was certainly not being widely practiced; it was still virtually an unknown quantity in the art world at large...Tousignant had therefore nothing with which he could meaningfully compare his painting. In fact, he had seen no monochromes at all before executing *Monochrome orangé*, so he was working entirely unencumbered by influence." Campbell, *After Geometry*, 58.

⁶⁴ Danielle Corbeil, *Claude Tousignant*, (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1973), 13.

⁶⁵ Denise Leclerc, "Colour Speaks," In *Claude Tousignant*. (Montreal: Musée d'Art Contemporain de Montréal, 2009). 203.

⁶⁶ Campbell. *Claude Tousignant: Monochromes*, 93.

About Tousignant's use of car enamels in the 1950s, the curator and historian Denise Leclerc explains that, "one of the attractions of these industrial car paints was that they were offered in a new range of colours quite close to pure pigments."⁶⁷ It is unclear why pigment *purity* was appealing to Tousignant, but likely it was related to the artist's interest in Piet Mondrian and Kazimir Malevich, both of whom stressed a primary colour system. The extremely high gloss of the enamels and slightly faster drying time (than oil paint) was also appealing, according to Tousignant.⁶⁸ The paintings of his 1956 show contained the high gloss enamel juxtaposed in wide horizontal and vertical stripes such as *Hypnose*, 1956, (**Figure 5**), *Oscillation*, 1956, and *Les affirmations*, 1956.⁶⁹ And like Molinari's 1956 black and white Duco paintings, the paint surfaces of these paintings are considerably cracked.⁷⁰ Car enamel, though attractive for its novel high gloss, hard surface quality, and avant-garde industrial appeal, was simply a poor medium for a flexible linen support: even the slightest fluctuation of movement in a linen support results in catastrophic fracturing throughout the paint surface. The smell of the enamel paint was extremely toxic; Tousignant remarked to Denise Leclerc during the *Crisis of Abstraction* exhibition at the National Gallery of Canada in 1992 that, "I was working in a garage...painting with automobile paints [and] the neighbors complained about the strength of the odours."⁷¹

⁶⁷ Denise Leclerc, "Colour Speaks," 202.

⁶⁸ Conversation with Tousignant, August 20, 2016.

⁶⁹ *Oscillation*, 1956, cilux on linen, 128.5 x 117cm, collection of the artist. *Les affirmations*, 1956, Cilux on linen, 128.5 x 117cm, collection of the artist.

⁷⁰ The cracking of the surfaces began almost immediately with drying. Any movement made them vulnerable to increased stress fractures. The first official conservation of the car enamel paintings was done by Marion Barclay at the National Gallery of Canada in 1981 in preparation for *The Crisis of Abstraction: The 1950s exhibition*. Barclay communicated that the damage was extensive and very difficult to conserve at this time. Conversation with Marion Barclay, April 26, 2016.

⁷¹ Leclerc, *Crisis of Abstraction in Canada*, 209.

Like Molinari, Tousignant was preoccupied with space and the elimination of the Cubist grid, however the way he proposed to explore and solve this was unique to him. Norman Theriault, the curator of Tousignant's 1987 exhibition at 49th Parallel in New York, quotes the artist as saying, "Today, I believe that whenever there is more than one visual plane on a surface there is necessarily an element of figuration."⁷² And Leclerc further qualifies that Tousignant was even more concerned with "any possible allusion to landscape, for he sees even Automatiste painting as enduringly "landscapist" in its inevitable atmospheric effects. Any painting with two planes of colour, one darker than the other, cannot fail to create a sense of depth."⁷³ Tousignant's immediate move away from the high gloss car enamel and gradual move towards a consistent monochrome practice is a reflection of this ideology.

His multi-coloured circle paintings, for which he is best known, initially seem like an anomaly in a nearly exclusive monochromatic practice. But they are not. Nothing eliminates the illusion of landscape more than a circle. The circle paintings explore colour vibrations and interactions that happen in the perceiving eye. They are an important evolution in Tousignant's practice bridging the historical nineteenth century Pointillist colour theory with his later in-depth study of the environmental impact of the monochrome. Daniel Corbeil, curator of Tousignant's 1973 exhibition at the National Gallery of Canada reflects on the coloured bands of the *Chromatic accelerator*, (1964), **Figure 6**: "their quality and position, the colours are mixed by the eye, an effect which evokes, in abstract terms, the research of the nineteenth-century Pointillists."⁷⁴

Tousignant explains in an interview with Corbeil in 1973, "My intention was that the confrontation of the pairs of colours – which by their juxtaposition produced, so to speak, a third

⁷² Quoted by Leclerc in "Colour Speaks", 202.

⁷³ Ibid, 202.

⁷⁴ Corbeil, *Claude Tousignant*, 15.

colour – should establish a series of relationships with these third colours.”⁷⁵ These works coincide with the emergence of the Op Art movement and the inclusion of Tousignant’s *L’Empêcheur de Tourner en Rond* (1964)⁷⁶ in the exhibition *The Responsive Eye* organized in 1965 by the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Tousignant, however, did not identify with the Op Art movement.⁷⁷

Tousignant’s circle series began with the *Interversions* in 1965. Here, concentric rings of brightly hued circles were painted in acrylic paint on a square canvas format. These canvases were fairly large in scale, but varied in size. For instance *Interversion New York, NY, 1965*, measured 254 x 305cm and *Interversion chromatique, 1965*, measured 122 x 129.5cm. In 1966 he began painting on circular canvases with first the *Gong* series and next the *Accélérateur chromatique* series in 1967. These evolutions of the circle paintings likewise exhibited multiple narrow concentric bands of colour painted in acrylic paint in a relatively large format varying from 183cm in diameter to 250cm in diameter. Akin to Molinari’s vertical stipe paintings, Tousignant’s circular bands of colour crisply abut one another without overlap or bleeding and with solid luminous opacity. This visual quality and technical execution would be extremely time consuming, if not impossible with oil paint. It is the quick drying, high colour saturation of acrylic paint that allowed for both the execution and striking appearance of these circle paintings. The paintings look difficult to paint, but when asked about this Tousignant smiled and denied that being the case.⁷⁸ With the right planning he could make one of his circle paintings in two

⁷⁵ Ibid, 15.

⁷⁶ *L’Empêcheur de Tourner en Rond*, 1964, acrylic on canvas, 72”x72”, East Hampton Gallery, New York.

⁷⁷ Corbeil, *Claude Tousignant*, 15.

⁷⁸ Conversation with Tousignant, August 20, 2016.

days.⁷⁹ Perhaps it is with this methodology in mind that Tousignant disclosed to the *Montreal Gazette* in 1973, “We discovered automobile enamel, which was quick drying and you could use it with tape and then they invented acrylic paints that we were able to use in a way that is impossible with oils. We were working directly with colours. For us it was a structural breakthrough in painting.”⁸⁰

An immediate comparison can be drawn between Kenneth Noland’s 1956-1960 circle paintings that were often referred to as his target paintings and Tousignant’s *Gong* and *Accelerator* series.⁸¹ However, with close looking, an important visual distinction is readily noticeable between Noland and Tousignant’s paintings and this is the result of both medium and methodology. Noland was one of the pioneers of the staining technique associated with Color Field painting and post painterly abstraction in the United States. Early staining was done with heavily solvent-diluted oil paint, a technique credited to Helen Frankenthaler.⁸² With the invention and discovery of the solvent-based acrylic medium Magna, new opportunities for staining while also retaining high pigment intensity were made possible.⁸³ The majority of Noland’s circle paintings were executed with Magna: these large-scale, square canvases feature softly edged concentric rings of bright mostly primary colours that resonate, but do not abut.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ White, “Two painters stage major exhibits.”

⁸¹ Tousignant was familiar with a number of artists working contemporary to him. Through his schooling Tousignant was familiar with the work of Paul Klee, Mondrian, Ben Nicholson, the Bauhaus artists and Albers in the early 50s. He was exposed to Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Adolph Gottlieb’s art in-person at the exhibition *Contemporary Paintings from Great Britain, the United States and France, with Sculptures from the United States*, which was organized by the Art Gallery of Toronto and shown at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts in January 1950. And he was particularly enthralled by the work of Rothko, Sam Francis, and Kasimir Malevich. He also lived in New York during the year 1965. In Campbell, *After Geometry*, 31, 60. But it has not been mentioned anywhere in the literature that he was familiar with Noland’s target paintings.

⁸² Karen Wilken, *Color as Field: American Painting 1950-1975*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), 31.

⁸³ When oil paint is diluted it thins out and loses its intensity. The hues become more like watercolour. This does to happen to the same degree with Magna paint – it will retain a high chroma even after significant dilution.

The execution style, intention, and visual effect of a circle painting by Noland are completely different than one by Tounsignant. And this is due to the difference in medium: the way that solvent-based acrylic can be used and the way water-based acrylic can be used is technically distinct. According to the curator Terry Fenton, Noland's switch to water-based acrylic coincided with his *Chevron* series, which began in the mid 1960s.⁸⁴ Fenton explains: "Water-thinned acrylic was more opaque and milky than Magna and didn't bond as readily with the canvas. He [Noland] developed methods to counter this: water tension breaker (household detergent) helped carry the pigment into the canvas and made the colour appear more transparent."⁸⁵ The material characteristics of Magna lent well to staining techniques, but water-based acrylic did not. Neither Tounsignant nor Molinari were interested in staining, therefore the working properties of water-based acrylic suited their methodological and expressive purposes perfectly. Thus, due to the physical properties of the paint, the working methodology, and the artistic intentionality, the perceptual effect of a circle painting by Tounsignant is distinct from that of a Noland.

After the circle paintings, Tounsignant began producing single colour surfaces that were increasingly environmentally extrusive. The monochrome at the time was associated with sculpture and Marc Lanctôt explains that it has a "taxonomic ambiguity."⁸⁶ Because of this ontological indistinctness, Lanctôt claims that the monochromes of Tounsignant are located in the

⁸⁴ Terry Fenton, *Appreciating Noland*, (Edmonton: The Edmonton Art Gallery, 1991), 16. Fenton explains that Noland switched to water-based acrylics in the 1960s, despite their poorer staining ability, for safety reasons. The heavy dilution of Magna with turpentine was thought to be a contributor to the 1962 death of Morris Louis from lung cancer.

⁸⁵ Fenton, *Appreciating Noland*, 16.

⁸⁶ I.e. what they are specifically is difficult to locate – are they painting or sculpture? Mark Lanctôt, "The Elusive Monochrome of Claude Tounsignant," In Claude Tounsignant. (Montreal: Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, 2009). 210.

spectator's realm rather than the painter's.⁸⁷ However, I propose that if we look more closely at this 'ambiguity' we will discover that it is not so much the monochrome colour and scale that elide the painting-sculpture barrier, it is more-so the smooth frontality of the *application of paint* that makes for the slippage. Were texture added to the paint the claimed ambiguity is far less pronounced. This point is illustrated by Tousignant's reaction to Yves Klein's monochromes when he first encountered them in 1968. Campbell cites that:

When he later saw the famous series of blue paintings by Yves Klein, reproduced in the magazine *Art et architecture d'aujourd'hui*, he felt somewhat let down. These works, and the ones he saw at *Documenta* in Kassel, Germany, in 1968, had sponges attached to their surfaces that, while quintessentially Kleinian, were, for Tousignant, a Baroque addition that detracted from the planar intensity and reductive purity of the monochromatic field.⁸⁸

And earlier in conversation with Norman Thériault, Tousignant described Klein's paintings: "There was nothing but texture. Monochrome I'll admit, but blue landscapes!"⁸⁹ It is not, therefore, just the scale and monochromatic quality of Tousignant's painting that makes for a slippage between the painting/sculpture categories – it is also the texture. It is a result of the type of paint he uses and the way he applies it. Despite this material fact, the contributing influence of paint materials and application were excluded from the conversation.

Of Tousignant's *Écrans chromatiques* (1988), his large monochromes painted on aluminum, Lanctôt writes: "Their mattness forces a non-material reading of colour and the 'screens' become images of 'colour-light'."⁹⁰ Here it is mattness, not smoothness, which carries us into the immaterial world. The qualities of acrylic paint and the type of physical opticality it affords are mentioned in off-hand ways, but they are not enunciated clearly and they need to be.

⁸⁷ Lanctôt, "The Elusive Monochrome of Claude Tousignant," 210.

⁸⁸ Campbell, *After Geometry*, 58-59.

⁸⁹ Tousignant quoted in Norman Thériault, *Claude Tousignant: Sculptures*, (Montreal: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 1982), 31.

⁹⁰ Lanctôt, "The Elusive Monochrome of Claude Tousignant," 210.

Tousignant's handling of acrylic paint was part and parcel of his success. Campbell, whose writing has secured Tousignant's place in the history of pre-eminent modernist painters, explains that the artist's "practice has always been predicated upon securing an *objectival* status for painting. By 'objectival' here we mean only that which remains of the painting as an object when it is stripped of all possible subjectively relative indices."⁹¹ These painterly and theoretical considerations are also why these paintings are interesting to think about in relation to broadening considerations of materialization – if they were intended to interact with their viewer in their own right *how* do they do this if not through exercising their own materiality? Campbell talks about some of the formal means – such as scale, structure, dimension, dynamic relation, and space – by which Tousignant's "picto-sculptures" interact with space and the viewer and thereby require embodied experience and comment directly on lived experience, but does not address medium. But, it must be *with* and *through* material(-ization), that these artworks achieve this. Campbell also clearly qualifies that Tousignant:

Defines the object through the application of paint, the choice of the support, the number of panels, the colours used. It becomes an esthetic thing. His authorial presence is affirmed through these variables, but it is not an autobiographical consciousness whose expressive manifestations are left in sensuous traces of pigment on canvas.⁹²

This needs to be nuanced here. The emphasis on the picto-sculptures not being "autobiographical" is important in relation to the style associated with the previous abstract expressionist and Automatiste movements that both Tousignant and Molinari were defining themselves against. Tousignant's "hand" is certainly visible in his artworks, just not in an expressionist way. It is visible in a decisive way: it is visible in the quality of the chroma – "Tousignant discovers his unique colours through a painstaking mixing process"⁹³ – and smooth

⁹¹ Campbell. *Claude Tousignant: Monochromes*, 69.

⁹² *Ibid*, 70.

⁹³ Campbell, *After Geometry*, 23.

texture – “the paint roller ensures the suppression of the presence of the hand.”⁹⁴ It is also visible in the scale and the relation between the elements – Tousignant often works with diptychs thereby creating a third space with the active perceiver as with *Bi-chrome n° 1-10-91*, (1991),

Figure 7. For example, Campbell writes:

One of the recent double monochromes – two different colour fields on aluminium sheets separated by five and a half bare inches of white wall space. As we stand before such a work, our perception of bilateral symmetry is heightened through the sheer hegemony of a chromatic space that seems to weigh on the body. Our handedness becomes apparent, and our movement is inside the space generated by both halves of the object become somehow self-conscious and self-revelatory. The subtle ramifications of the colour relationships between each panel become clearer and clearer in our minds the longer we spend with the work.⁹⁵

The physical effect of viewing these artworks is a result of the materialization with and through their materiality, and, of course, the distinctive hand of Claude Tousignant. With Tousignant’s monochromes, in an even more obvious way than with Molinari’s paintings, it becomes increasingly evident that we need to discuss their material existence in a more matter of fact manner. Tousignant intended his artworks to interact with perception in very physical ways and he intended them to be independent objects in that they are autonomous from his own subjectivity (i.e. the mattering that is found in them by the viewer will be a result of the viewer’s own experience and not tied to a specific message related to the artist), however they are like porous objects in that they are capable of multiple significations. Molinari also intended multiple significations, but he achieved this within the contours of the painting through the painting’s visual rhythm. Both viewing situations demand a physical interaction with the spectator and such interaction is effected materially. With both Tousignant and Molinari’s artworks we are forcibly, intentionally, and strategically no longer looking *into* them to discover their mattering, like with renaissance perspectival painting, we are looking *at* them and

⁹⁴ Ibid, 19.

⁹⁵ Campbell, *Claude Tousignant: Monochromes*, 70.

interacting *with* them and they are pushing back. More than any painting previous, these artworks are laying their materiality bare to the spectator. For this reason we need to probe more strategically into the materials that are present and how they are affecting the perception of space.

However, there are contradictions with regard to Tousseignant's desired "autonomous object". The artist's picto-sculptures may be void of gestural expression, but they are not freely autonomous from the artist's intentionality. Tousseignant, like Molinari, is specific about the exhibition space of viewing, which betrays the autonomy of the monochrome from subjective influence. For example, Tousseignant has instructed that some of his monochromes must be installed on an entirely black wall.⁹⁶ Campbell has said that a Tousseignant monochrome "transcends formalism in the sheer scope of its humanistic meanings,"⁹⁷ and to this I add that they do so just as overtly with their still-present traces of subjective intentionality. It is true that the monochromes' openness to perceptive interpretation underlines openness to moving with time and this also undermines formalism

Another point that is incredibly important to make with regard to Tousseignant's paintings is that they are not merely the enlarged execution of a design idea pre-configured in the artist's mind. It would be a mistake to understand their deceptive simplicity in this manner, just as it was a mistake to understand Mondrian's painting as mere design⁹⁸. The nature of painting is that the act of creating compels and nuances more making. Tousseignant reflects in 2009 that,

⁹⁶ Ibid, 73.

⁹⁷ Campbell, *After Geometry*, 18.

⁹⁸ Piet Mondrian's work was long misunderstood as being straightforward executions of geometric, formulaic, arrangements. However, contrary to this, Mondrian 'discovered' his arrangements through the process of painting

For Mondrian, it was mainly sensual-visual. If he felt that a line was too wide, he'd make it narrower. It was always about feeling. And it is the same in my work. I've always said that one painting begets another – you make one painting, then you look at it, and you say to yourself, 'Maybe it would be better if I did it this way. And so on.'⁹⁹

The creative process is sometimes generative in the space of a painting being made and sometimes in the space between paintings being made – the notion of the inspired artist-genius feeds romanticism but could not be further from reality. Tousignant's paintings were not made in a transcendent inspired-genius moment any more than they were designed in a moment. They are the product of process, research, and experimentation. Of his colours Tousignant explains that he would create them *through* mixing:

It's mostly that I need a certain colour because of the function I want to give it, so I create it through mixing. That's how it was with the monochromes – I had an idea, and to achieve it I'd end up mixing 25 colours. Now if one gets damaged it's quite the job to reproduce the colour.¹⁰⁰

The final colour the artist arrives at is the monochrome version of the 'artist's hand'. He is not putting paint from can directly to canvas like in the Cilux days, his colours are discovered through painstaking process. This emphasis is important: art that is not made in a moment, cannot be comprehended in a moment, nor can its mattering be confined to moment.

Tousignant's monochromes are not merely representative of modernist painting in Montreal, they are not illustrations, they continue to materialize and matter. Tousignant may have stopped adding paint to some of them, but that has not precluded their ability to materialize new meaning.

them. He explored ideas in real-time with his brush in contact with the canvas. The misunderstanding of his methodology has led to preservation practices, such as overpainting, that counter Mondrian's investment in the materiality of his medium. Bois, "Piet Mondrian: New York City," in *Painting as Model*. 157-83.

⁹⁹ Isa Tousignant, "Pop's Art," *Canadian Art*, Vol. 26, Issue 1, (Spring 2009), 67.

¹⁰⁰ Tousignant, "Pop's Art," 68.

Gaucher

More similar to Molinari in his preoccupation with colour and rhythm and to Tousignant with his concern for architectural monumentality, Gaucher remains distinct from these Post Plasticiens in that he has always been concerned first with his own human experience. His paintings reflect, depict, and re-create this lived experience. Molinari and Tousignant were far more concerned with theoretical considerations such as the elimination of geometric space and therein horizontal and vertical tensions and also the freeing and presentation of the dynamic plane. Gaucher was deeply concerned with the formal properties of his paintings, but not from a theoretical perspective. As the art historian Karen Antaki makes clear, Gaucher may have developed outside of the Plasticien tradition in Québec but he was still very much within the “stylistic context exemplified by structural classicism, formal reductiveness, and dynamic, chromatic correspondences.”¹⁰¹ For instance in 1965 Gaucher avers, “true art should be a purely visual language, just as music is a purely auditive language,”¹⁰² a modernist formal sentiment that would have been seconded by Molinari and Tousignant.

What sets Gaucher apart from Tousignant and Molinari is his early focus and technical mastery of the printmaking medium. Entering Hard-Edge painting a decade later meant that Gaucher had a different material trajectory, instead of transitioning through the new media made possible through industrial developments, Gaucher honed his printmaking practice with singular attention and when he took up painting again in 1964 he began directly with acrylic paint. And into his painting practice he injected the attention to material quality and perfection of execution that were critical to his success in printmaking. His different approach also affected his ideological

¹⁰¹ Karen Antaki, *Yves Gaucher*. (Montreal: Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery, 1995), 4.

¹⁰² Raymond Heard, “Yves Gaucher: The Energy of Colour,” *The Montreal Star*, Nov. 7, 1964.

mindset. He was less concerned with art historical problems such as horizontal and vertical tensions and how to eliminate once and for all figure/ground relationships and landscapist tendencies than Molinari and Tousignant in their earlier years, and far more concerned with answering, solving, or at the very least confronting philosophical and ontological questions. He was inspired by music and the philosophy of John Dewey; as Antaki notes, “he shares in the American philosopher John Dewey’s credence that art is ultimately a qualitative expression of human experience.”¹⁰³ Despite these differences in origin story and Gaucher’s predominant concern with lived experience, the materiality and materialization of all three artists’ painting practices have striking resonance.

Gaucher’s ideology differs from Molinari and Tousignant primarily in that his artworks are predicated on what Campbell describes as his “life-world,”

[They] are not only born of it but are indissolubly wed to it, find continuing sustenance within it and return us, his observers, to it wholesale in the act of seeing. Thus Gaucher’s philosophy as an abstract painter is manifestly an *existential* one.¹⁰⁴

What Campbell is describing is that the ontology of the artist at the time of making was fully infused into the ontology of the painting. Gaucher was concerned with imbuing the essences of lived experiences in abstract form into his painting – but not in an *absolute* form.¹⁰⁵ Of the notion of *absolute* form or *absolute* idea, Gaucher’s opinion is unequivocal: “That’s rubbish,” he shares with Campbell.¹⁰⁶ For instance, this statement from Gaucher explains how life experience became transposed to abstract painting for him. Regarding his admiration for the musician

Webern, Gaucher writes:

¹⁰³ Antaki, *Yves Gaucher*, 5.

¹⁰⁴ Campbell, *The Asymmetric Vision*, 12.

¹⁰⁵ What I mean by this is that Gaucher was not interested in reductive space or for his paintings to convey unequivocal universal meaning.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, 17.

I understood that he had changed the way I listened to music and also my way of seeing. What I understood was the spatial dimension of Webern, on the level of a synthesis in the writing, but where the synthesis is not arrived at through a reduction of the elements. The reduction of elements does not serve to simplify matters, but rather to make them more complex, which is another thing entirely. I understood the meaning of Albers' saying: "Less is more and more is less." I was completely astounded.¹⁰⁷

This clarifies the role of Webern, and the influence of music in general, in Gaucher's painting. His understanding of the music gave him a new understanding of space, which he then imbued into the plane of his canvas. Indisputably the influence of music is strong for Gaucher but it would be a mistake to understand his paintings or prints as illustrative of music in any way. It is not possible to *see* the music in his paintings. Referring to the American philosopher John Dewey, Gaucher believed that "Each medium in art speaks a language which may not be translated into any other without loss of meaning."¹⁰⁸

Regarding Gaucher's use of materials Campbell provides somewhat varied accounts. Initially the paint materials are paralleled with bruteness – something that must be transformed, subordinated, and transcended,¹⁰⁹ but later he describes that, "In painting, Gaucher tries to render his materials the meaningful medium for a more transcendent communion with the observer as opposed to creating a mere conduit for conveying a given 'message'."¹¹⁰ Here Campbell almost positions the materials themselves as being transcendent – as opposed to what they can be used to symbolize. This latter position, (rather than one of subordination), is closer to how Gaucher *treated* the materials he used for art making. Some of his students who went on to have successful careers in their own right, such as Marc Garneau and Marc Seguin; both describe

¹⁰⁷ Yves Gaucher, "From Webern to the Hommages À Webern" in *Yves Gaucher*, (Montreal: Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, 2004), 211. (Talk by Gaucher given 3 April 1996). Gaucher read Albers's *Interaction of Color* in 1963.

¹⁰⁸ Dewey quoted by Gaucher, "From Webern to the Hommages À Webern," 212.

¹⁰⁹ Campbell, *The Asymmetric Vision*, 16.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*, 18.

Gaucher as having an unparalleled perfectionist attention to the behavior and quality of all of his art making materials.¹¹¹ Gaucher was an empiricist in practice, but an idealist in belief system. “He holds that we live in a subjective world first, before living in that “objective” and supposedly true world that is based on and is being continuously buttressed by the objectivating norms of modern science. But the former, the subjective world, is the only one capable of being truly experienced.”¹¹² This portrayal of Gaucher as an idealist would condition a perspective on the nature and influence of materials in his practice that is more passive than the one I am insisting upon here as a materialist. However it is also evident that he was intensely involved with process and *discovery through process* and this suggests that he was actually more of a materialist in practice than he realized. Further emphasizing the paradox, Gaucher described his life experience and creative process in an idealist way, but described his making process in a more materialist way. The artist Robert Barry characterizes a quality of the conundrum between the different modes of art’s becoming – the creation, the discussion, the reception, etc. – that provides possible insight into why such a paradox could be maintained. He writes:

The artist making his work of art is entirely different from the artist presenting his work of art. And art for me is making art, myself. And if in the process of making art it involves things which are invisible, which you can’t see, which I can’t see, or which are imperceptible, which we can’t perceive through our senses, then that’s just the way it has to be.¹¹³

This research could be described as probing and revealing some of the ‘hidden’ things that have been previously invisible. Not necessarily because they cannot be seen, as Barry describes, but because they have been overlooked. By focusing on elucidating the materials and materialization of the paintings of these three painters it becomes clear that there is a specific and meaningful

¹¹¹ I elaborate on their comments in chapter 4, page 142. Interviews with Marc Seguin, Artist’s Studio, Montreal, 28 September 2017; Marc Garneau, Concordia University, Montreal, 24 August 2017 and 27 September 2017.

¹¹² Campbell, *The Asymmetric Vision*, 24-25.

¹¹³ Barry cited by David Thomas, “The Enigma of an Improbable Exchange: Yves Gaucher and Conceptual Art,” in *Yves Gaucher*, (Montreal: Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal, 2004), 220.

material relationship between acrylic paint and the perceptual fields of Montreal's Hard-Edge painting. However, it must also be presented that despite Gaucher's concerted material investment he clearly denies the possibility of material influence. In an interview in 1965, May Ebbit Cutler asks Gaucher about his printmaking experiments: "Did the materials you experimented with suggest the form and content of your prints?" Gaucher: "Never. My pictorial ideas have never been decided by materials. Rather I searched for the materials that would bring out those ideas."¹¹⁴ This is a curiously bold statement considering later in the same interview Gaucher explains that it was the "vocabulary" of printmaking, the parameters of its specific materials and their limitations that allowed him to work through a problematic before returning to painting.¹¹⁵ This statement contradicts his previous statement and suggests that the materials of printmaking did in fact suggest form in ways that Gaucher was not aware of at the time.

Just as Molinari had a concept of seriality, Gaucher had a 'program' for his paintings, which he detailed in his 1966 artist statement at Gallery Moos in Toronto:

(1) the development of chromatic antagonisms in colour-perception, (2) the dynamic logic of the contradictory in structural relationships, and (3) the empirical development of "visual rhythmic" through the usage of principles of 'relations of indetermination' have become my motive.¹¹⁶

Gaucher was using colour relations to achieve indeterminate perceptual encounters. And while the three artists have distinct ideological approaches in many respects, what they all share is a predominant concern with perceptual duration, and the notion of their paintings continuing their becoming over the course of this duration. "Gaucher has always been preoccupied with the durational temporality of his work. He wanted to create paintings that would, in effect,

¹¹⁴ Cutler, "Yves Gaucher," np.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Yves Gaucher quoted by Campbell, *The Asymmetric Vision*, 28.

reorganize themselves in front of the observer throughout the duration of one's experience."¹¹⁷

And similar also to Tousignant and Molinari, the monumental scale of his paintings is deployed strategically. This scale commands a fully-embodied perceptual experience:

The monumental scale of Gaucher's paintings is necessary for the apprehension and abiding articulation of the dynamic asymmetry of "gravitational space." As we stand in front of one of his monumental paintings, we experience in our bodies and through the mechanisms of our optic a genuine surrogate for the anisotropy of space.¹¹⁸

And Gaucher further explains that the "real time" and "real duration" of his paintings is the physical time spent in front of them by the viewer. He clarifies:

When you stand in front of a small picture, you look at it visually; if you stand in front of a larger piece, you have a different experience altogether: a physical experience. It is through the body that we feel its colours' contradictions, its juxtapositions with other ones, and not only visually.¹¹⁹

This statement reveals Gaucher's deep understanding of and belief in the continued materialization of his paintings after they had left his studio. He understood that they would materialize differently with and through different bodies, spaces and time. There is a phenomenal connection here between the way Molinari, Tousignant and Gaucher used paint and the way their paintings behaved perceptually. Molinari talked about the elimination of secondary oppositions (such as texture),¹²⁰ Tousignant talked about finding his colours *through* the process of mixing and Gaucher described his process as empirical and the necessity of building colour and form together,¹²¹ but none of them spoke directly to why they chose to work with opaque layers of acrylic – as opposed to staining and using washes as their US and Toronto counterparts, Kenneth Noland and Jack Bush were successfully doing. Nor did they speak of why the hard edges were

¹¹⁷ Campbell, *The Asymmetric Vision*, 29.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 30.

¹¹⁹ Gaucher, "From Webern to the Hommages À Webern," 213.

¹²⁰ Welsh, "Molinari and the Science of Colour and Line," 3-4; Campbell, *The Asymmetric Vision*, 73.

¹²¹ Sandra Grant Marchand, "Yves Gaucher: Spaces of Silence," in *Yves Gaucher*, (Montreal: Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, 2004), 172.

so important. This methodology of smooth, opaque layering, with crisp abutted edges was consistent throughout the entirety of all three of these artists' careers.¹²² In fact, their edges are so characteristically distinctive, Molinari later characterized them as being "razor edge," in order to emphasize and clarify their formal distinction from United States Hard-Edge painting.¹²³

Some of Gaucher's approach to colour was inherited from his printmaking methods. As

Campbell notes:

Always running parallel to advances in structuration is Gaucher's methodic complexifying of colour harmonics. His experiments in "pure" colour are readily discernable in the red, blue and yellow fields of many early *Signals/Silences*. With the painting called *Midnight Raga*, Gaucher started to consciously introduce harmonics into his colour, although arguably the later *Signals/Silences* demonstrate the first glimmerings of the methodology. Gaucher's concern for harmonics had its inception during the mixing of inks in his printmaking, specifically in creating different impressions of blacks through adding other colours. *When, in painting, he started to mix his colours, he was pursuing the lessons learned in etching.*¹²⁴

Gaucher's great skill and nuance of colour mixing is exemplified in his *Grey on Grey* paintings beginning in 1968 and for which he is best known, see *R-M-III N/69*, (1969), **Figure 8**. During the process of looking, "the grey starts to cast off its mute greyness, yielding to another hue so much more seductive and nuanced that we wonder how we could have mistaken 'mere' grey for this marvelous, seemingly unprecedented colour."¹²⁵ It is the environmental scale and incredibly subtle colouring of these Grey paintings that the art critic Bryan Robertson lauded in descriptive detail in his review of the *Canada 101* exhibition at the College of Art, Edinburgh in 1968.

¹²² Tousignant had a short-lived spell of applying acrylic in washes in the early 1960s before he launched into his target series. Ironically these rather unattractive wash paintings were reviewed very favorably by Andrew Hudson in his 1964 article on Hard-Edge painting in Montreal. Mentored by Greenberg, Hudson's argument conveyed clearly to his reader that the closer painting was to the United States style, the better it was. Hence his favorable description of Tousignant's wash painting and relatively poor reviews of any painting that was actually Hard-Edge (despite the title and focus of the article). Hudson, "Phenomenon: Colour painting in Montreal," 360.

¹²³ Nasgaard, *The Plasticiens and Beyond*, 15.

¹²⁴ Campbell, *The Asymmetric Vision*, 49. Emphasis added.

¹²⁵ *Ibid*, 58.

Regarding the materiality of Gaucher's colour Robertson remarked, "There are no side-tracks: the surfaces are even and anonymous, the grain of the canvas is concealed and, if there's no staining, there's no impasto either. The surface is like coloured Whatman paper."¹²⁶ And securing Gaucher's place as a leading international Hard-Edge painter Robertson concluded:

The artist is Yves Gaucher, a 34 year old French-Canadian from Montreal who, with a systematically programmed series of paintings, each with the unmistakable final imprint of a lyrical and radiant imagination, is making what are possibly the most beautiful and original – and awe-inspiring – paintings I've seen anywhere since the advent of Pollock and Rothko.¹²⁷

With the *Colour Bands* beginning in the early 1970s Gaucher moves away from subtle colour mixing and takes on the "dynamics of pure colour" for the first time, *Ochre, jaune et vert* (1974) **Figure 9.**¹²⁸ In 1989, Gaucher explained that these were his "first paintings to deal directly with colour."¹²⁹ The directness of colour Gaucher describes relates to his elimination of other formal elements from the colour field – such as the "signals" (coloured dashes) which populated his paintings in the 1960s creating rhythm and movement with their inflection, now his colour was inseparably tied to form. This is what Campbell means, I believe, when he describes these *Colour Band* paintings as dealing with "pure colour" and "heavy colour".¹³⁰ A critical difference between the kind of colour Gaucher could achieve and the kind of colour that was being produced by the U.S. Color Field due to the type of materials and the methodology and ideology of the painters is underscored in the quote below. Acrylic paint allowed the ability to "tune" a painting and Gaucher took full advantage of this in order to achieve highly nuanced colour relationships:

¹²⁶ Robertson, Bryan. "Eminence grise at Edinburgh ARTS," *The London Spectator*, 23 August 1968.

¹²⁷ Robertson, "Eminence grise." One of Molinari's *Stripe Paintings* was also in this exhibition and was commended as being "mature", but was otherwise given short shrift relative to Gaucher's *Grey paintings*.

¹²⁸ Campbell, *The Asymmetric Vision*, 69.

¹²⁹ Gaucher in conversation with James Campbell, 14 January 1989, in Campbell, *The Asymmetric Vision*, 70.

¹³⁰ Campbell, *The Asymmetric Vision*, 69-70.

Gaucher...speaks of having to “tune” the painting by adjusting one or more of its colours. Because he paints on primed canvases minor adjustments are not as difficult as they are for stain painters who must succeed in the first try or discard the canvas.¹³¹

Yet his exquisite precision and assuredness is the hard-won product of years’ practice in structuring a painting. In the years before 1970 Gaucher used working drawings but in the series after 1970, when *structure and colour became phenomenally intertwined*, drawings were used only as a vehicle for exploring new ideas as opposed to preliminary sketches for prospective paintings.¹³²

There are three important points to emphasize here: first Gaucher’s process directly affects the quality of his colour and distinguishes him from other painters, second, the process changes with production and vice versa, and third, with his *Colour Bands* he had to build colour and form together – his paintings could not be issued through idea – they had to be found through making. The painter’s direct, empirical process, which is a discovery, an actualization, or materialization *in situ* as opposed to an ideological process where Gaucher maps out the image and role of materials in advance and then merely *executes* a painting, is further evidenced in this transcript from a recorded interview with Chris Youngs in 1974. Gaucher explains:

The physicality of working a big painting, and the scale, is very different for a smaller one. I like to bounce between the big and the small, on the same premise basically, just to reassess where the problem is. Sometimes you get carried away with a very large painting and you try to convince yourself that it is working. But as soon as you bring the problem back to the small one you sense that there is something wrong which you have to settle in the small one before going back to the big one, or vice-versa. To work more than one painting refreshes my head and forces me to keep it open in more than one direction.¹³³

The art historian Sandra Grant Marchand also emphasizes the *in situ* materialization of Gaucher’s painting when she explains that his artwork is: “Neither a summary of formal premises nor a formal expression of preconceived notions, each of Gaucher’s works participates in its own actualization; each work is constructed in the experience it reveals, extols and

¹³¹ Roald Nasgaard, *Yves Gaucher*, (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1979), 109.

¹³² Campbell, *The Asymmetric Vision*, 73. Emphasis added.

¹³³ Yves Gaucher in Interview with Chris Youngs, 1974. Taken from transcript of taped interview. Cited in Campbell, *The Asymmetric Vision*, 73.

transforms.”¹³⁴ However, Marchand’s analysis intends that each work participates in its own actualization on the *perception* side of becoming; my argument brings to light that each of his works is active in its own actualization on the creation/making side of becoming as well and this is evidenced by Gaucher working on at least two paintings at once as he strategically works through the interrelated visual/formal/material problems of making. Gaucher stresses: “My work arises from an empirical process. I am continually calling my work into question, and I’m always starting over again.”¹³⁵

Another interesting documentation is Danielle Blouin’s observation that Gaucher’s painting process was beginning to drive the character of his printmaking process later in his career. “Gaucher’s prints during the 1980s are mainly associated with paintings... Gaucher preferred to work with serigraphy and lithography, which gave him the colour and flatness he desired and this is so characteristic of his painting.”¹³⁶ This is stylistically a radical departure for Gaucher because his intaglio prints of the early 1960s were ground breaking for their phenomenal mastery of three-dimensional printing processes. Materials and their methodology operate subtly and influence form in ways we do not always realize unless we are looking for it.

Like Tousignant and his circular format paintings, Gaucher’s *Colour Band* series shares superficial resonance with Noland’s horizontal stripe paintings. And for similar material-methodological reasons it is important to impress a strong distinction here. Nasgaard has characterized these differences clearly.

¹³⁴ Marchand, “Yves Gaucher: Spaces of Silence,” 172.

¹³⁵ *Ibid*, 178.

¹³⁶ Danielle Blouin, “An Unusual Printmaker,” in *Yves Gaucher*, (Montreal: Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal, 2004), 188.

Gaucher's emphatic exploitation of the tensions between colours, and between them and their structural container, also distinguishes him from Noland, who is more concerned with the immediate character of colours and with exploiting their relations in harmonious sequences. In his horizontal stripe painting Noland has also, on the whole, avoided extremes of saturation in his hues, especially in the broader bands. He has tended to separate his bands with narrow stripes of raw canvas to ease colour transitions.¹³⁷

The two artists share only the desire to enunciate stripes and horizontality, all other formal, methodological, intentional, and perceptual characteristics are different. And related to Gaucher's exploitation of the vertical band in his mid-career is a critical difference between his and Molinari's formal system. The horizontality of Gaucher's painting eliminates the possibility of sequential reading:

In bringing into play the dynamism of vertical relationships between the colour bands, and in the process formulating a system of dynamic tensions in both directions (and placing equal pressure on all peripheries of the picture plane), Gaucher rules out sequential reading strategies.¹³⁸

In contrast, Molinari's stripe paintings rely on sequential reading strategies tying them to the written word in ways that Gaucher's paintings do not. This being the case Molinari's painting could theoretically be criticized as being overly literary. However, Molinari would counter and criticize that the horizontal stripe is indelibly landscapist. The artist John Ferren, in his address prior to leading the 1960 Emma Lake workshop, neatly sidesteps the minutia of this avenue of debate:

No form, shape or colour is conceivable to the human mind that has not at some time and place been experienced by man. The most abstract painting is still a human document and a natural document – a trace of the man who has made a passage through this world.¹³⁹

Similar to Molinari and Tounignant, the environment of the viewing circumstance was important to Gaucher. Of his *Dark Paintings*, such as *Br Bl. Rd* of 1984, Campbell writes: "These works

¹³⁷ Nasgaard, *Yves Gaucher*, 111.

¹³⁸ Campbell, *The Asymmetric Vision*, 75.

¹³⁹ John Ferren, "Content in Contemporary Art," *Canadian Art*, Volume 18, November/December 1961: 415.

were first exhibited as a group in April 1985 at the Olga Korper Gallery in Toronto, and were seemingly anchored to the floor plane. The top line of each painting thus constituted a broken, but continuous line, which pulled all the paintings together into a cohesive environmental statement.”¹⁴⁰ Although it was his *Grey on Grey* paintings of the late 1960s that were the first to strategically interject themselves into the exhibition space, this above-described imposition into the environmental space forces embodied interaction and perception on the part of the viewer. Such embodied and environmental-based understanding runs counter to discourses on modernism prevalent at the time via Greenberg who championed ocular, disinterested perception. The large-scale of Gaucher’s paintings “literally become[s] a *situation* as opposed to a length of painted canvas; an *event* rather than an object.”¹⁴¹ Tousignant’s monochromes likewise become “situations” requiring the viewer to move and navigate space and duration in order to complete comprehension of the painting in relation to the space. And Molinari’s paintings create their own viewing space so perceptually contained and dominant, that they excluded their environment.¹⁴² Of Gaucher’s *Pale Paintings*, Campbell tellingly describes his viewing experience as a “feeling that one is actually *walking into the painting*.”¹⁴³ These large-scale, environmentally extrusive paintings are ‘walk-in-able’ as opposed to ‘see-at-able’: they do not offer the environment *in perspective*; they offer a new environment for a new perspective.

¹⁴⁰ Campbell, *The Asymmetric Vision*, 86.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid*, 89.

¹⁴² However, the less distracting and cluttered the space the better, hence Molinari’s contribution to the exhibition design of his 1995 Retrospective at the Musée d’art contemporain. The exhibit designer, Jacques Desbiens, defended the design against critic Ann Duncan’s remark that it was “bizarre”, claiming that he had worked with Molinari on the design and all of his requests had been followed. *Montreal Gazette*, 1995 from MACM Médiathèque, Folder # E008611, Guido Molinari.

¹⁴³ Campbell, *The Asymmetric Vision*, 93. Emphasis added.

Conclusion

This chapter has looked at the critical, curatorial, and art historical writing that surrounded Molinari, Tousignant and Gaucher and draws attention to a near absence of material discussion. A significant part of the mattering of these paintings was not inscribed into their history. In each section I have presented a condensed history of each artist and highlighted how the significance of their painting was always given to theoretical, formal, or perceptual concerns and never to material concerns. As such, the mattering of these paintings was always entirely subject-oriented – either what the artist intended or what the perceiver perceived. In concert with this criticism I have demonstrated how giving due attention to the artists material experimentation, their adoption of acrylic paint and their individual material-methodologies provides us with a more comprehensive understanding of what these artists achieved and the continued mattering of Hard-Edge painting. By looking more carefully at the material-method contribution to the becoming of these paintings we understand that they are not finite and contained objects solely demonstrative of the ideas of a past epoch; they are instead, via their materiality, contributing to the materialization of new ideas now. Chapter 5 will elaborate upon how understanding the materialization of Hard-Edge painting as in a state of continued becoming is critical to the full comprehension of their continued contribution to art's history.

The discursive framework guiding the reception and inscription of Hard-Edge painting in Montreal during the late modern and early post-modern time periods must be understood within the context of the Greenbergian and formalist critical reception systems dominant at the time. I will amalgamate formalism and Greenberg here, but will carefully unpack the development and influence of the formalist critical methodology in Chapter 3. Greenbergian formalism privileged

ocular perception, as opposed to embodied perception, the notion of the creative artist-genius, and medium-specificity. The emphases of these three things all undermine the potential consideration of materiality as an equally contributing role with idea. On one side of the artwork or the other, either the making side or the receiving side, what mattered about the artwork was subject-driven (as opposed to object- or material-driven) – either the artist’s idea or the receiver’s idea. The influence of Greenberg’s formalism was, and still is, widespread, particularly regarding the critical reception of abstract painting during the time period that Molinari, Tousignant, and Gaucher were putting their Hard-Edge paintings out into the cultural fabric of Montreal’s art scene. The adoption of acrylic paint into their practices, their uniquely meticulous application method and their unflappable loyalty to their medium and method were not documented as notable in art historical or art critical writing. This is in part due to the painters themselves not discussing materials or acknowledging material influence. And the absence of material discussion is possibly further caused by art historians and critics understanding their nature to be self-evident, which would render prolonged discussions of them redundant. However, the primary contributing factor was the pervasive influence of Greenberg’s formalism.

Compounding this is the way in which abstract art has been inscribed into art’s history from its inception. Abstract art developed along two often interwoven threads: a formalist preoccupation and a spiritual preoccupation and both privileged notions of the immaterial and the transcendent. The trappings of materialism and thus materiality in general was something the practitioners of abstract art were attempting to divorce themselves from and the legacy of art historical writing that surrounds abstract art reflects this preoccupation and occlusion to this day. The following

chapter discusses the art historical preoccupation with the immaterial in relation to abstract art and how its development occurred.

Chapter 3

Immateriality and Abstract Painting

This chapter will highlight the socio-art historical conventions that underpin the connotations of materiality and immateriality. *Materiality/materials/matter* are most often intended and understood literally, as referring to tangible things that can be pointed to. They also connote *raw* materiality – that is materials prior to their having been given form. Materialist obsessions or materialism are usually ascribed negative connotations and associated with capitalist politics, but with exceptions. Marx’s socialist philosophy was materialist, however it was materialist in that it positioned the products of creation as directly meaning-making for their producer, arguing that the rupture of this link through capitalist mechanization and industrialization destroyed the meaningful connection between making and the product. Thus Marxist materialism is primarily concerned with things made and not *materials* prior to formation. And Marxist critique of material fetishism is about objects, not materials. Nonetheless, most often in our culture, materiality taken too far is either too basic, or too covetous: when materials are raw and unformed they are too basic, when materials are formed into objects that are consumed for status-oriented purposes they are too coveted. Historically, materiality has been conceived too narrowly, as either raw or formed – each with its host of issues and misconceptions – and either passive or anthropomorphized. They are conceived as latent and lying in wait of form or, once formed, their importance and power is likened to that of human agency through processes of anthropomorphizing. Chapter 5 discusses the philosophical and theoretical precedents for these different traditional compartmentalizations of matter and proposes a new understanding of materiality; this chapter will outline how conventional understandings of materiality and

immateriality have determined art historical writing, artistic intention, art reception and criticism in relation to abstract art. Whereas material has been understood as basic, raw, and tangible, *immateriality*, on the other hand, always points to that which is intangible or beyond the tangible – sometimes even connoting that which is *really* “real” and merely cloaked in the tangible (material). The word *immateriality* is by definition incapable of denoting anything specifically, has great allusive power, and is invariably connoted positively. The immaterial is tied to that which does not matter or that which is spiritual. The immaterial that is associated with the spiritual is beyond empirical measurement, but nonetheless ‘attainable’ in a non-material transcendent way. This abstruseness has not prevented its usage in art historical writing. But what does it mean? That depends on when and where it is used and to what it is referring. In the high modern period with which the Montreal Hard-Edge painters are associated, immateriality at its most rudimentary level means *not representational*. The expansive colour in Hard-Edge painting is recounted as being immaterial because it is not describing recognizable form and is thereby freed to signify beyond the material. The curator Paulette Gagnon writes,

The art of Claude Tousignant is unanimously seen as a space – a density, a world – that is all about colour. Every painting is colour. And since colour leads to a deeper understanding of the immaterial, of pure sensation, the works taken together explain painting.¹

For Gagnon, abstract, un-representational, and therefore unadulterated, colour leads to a deeper understanding of the immaterial, but what she means by “immaterial” and “pure sensation” *specifically* is left to the reader (or viewer, whichever the case may be) to conclude. It is an open signifier in this context and its lack of definition is possibly intended. The open-endedness of the constructed signification subtly establishes a framework that insists that the material nature of the artwork is stable, reliably present and also not what really matters. In contrast, what is

¹ Gagnon, Paulette. “Painting as Nothing But Sensation.” In Claude Tousignant. (Montreal: Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal, 2009). 192.

possible to experience *from* the materiality of the artwork (the immaterial) is on a higher plane, is infinite, and that which actually matters. References to the immaterial, when examined closely, always reference the material and undercut its significance and power.

The nature and pursuit of the immaterial was a preoccupation for a number of early practitioners of abstract art. From the historical vantage point of the twenty-first century it is possible to discern a multitude of threads leading toward the early beginnings of abstract art and its elevation to the status of high art in the early twentieth century. One of the strongest influences for many artists was an anti-materialist turn toward the spiritual.² Kandinsky believed that the spiritual could be accurately represented via abstraction, that the avant-garde artist was visionary, and that the spiritual operated in opposition to the “nightmare of the materialistic attitude.”³ Abstract paintings by Kandinsky and Mondrian alike were intended to induce communion with the spiritual via their colour and their (pure) plastic expression.⁴

The early beginnings of abstract art across Canada also demonstrated strong affinity with the spiritual,⁵ but the Montreal Automatiste movement of the 1940s and the Plasticien movement of the 1950s did not share this attraction. Attending to their own cultural concerns, the Automatistes positioned their abstract, Surrealist-inspired, painting as part of the antidote to the entrenched domination of the Catholic Church in Quebec. And while their 1948 manifesto,

² Donald Kuspit, “Concerning the Spiritual in Contemporary Art.” In *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*. Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Organized by Maurice Tuchman. New York: Abbeville Press, 1986. 313.

³ Wassily Kandinsky, “Concerning the Spiritual in Art (1911),” in *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, 87, 88.

⁴ Kandinsky, “Concerning the Spiritual in Art,” 86-94; Piet Mondrian, “Dialogue on the New Plastic”, 282-287, and “Neo-Plasticism: the General Principle of Plastic Equivalence”, 287-290.

⁵ Joyce Zemans, “Making Painting Real: Abstract and Non-objective Art in English Canada, c. 1915-61,” in *The Visual Art in Canada: The Twentieth Century*, Eds. Anne Whitelaw, Brian Foss, and Sandra Paikowsky, (Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 2010), 163.

Refus Global, calls for the embracing of “magic,” the kind of magic that they were appealing to was that emanating from the unconscious mind and was as such subject-oriented; this is opposite from the universally-oriented spirituality that Kandinsky and Mondrian were channeling into their abstraction. Likewise, while the Plasticiens derived many of their formal principles from Mondrian, they were not engaged with the universal in a spiritual way as he was, they were engaged with the notion of restructuring society in a more tangible architectural type of way. Maurice Tuchman, the organizer of the 1986 exhibition *The Spiritual in Art*, proposed that increased attention to formal concerns resulted in decreased appeals to the spiritual: “Intellectuals interested in modernist issues became more concerned with purely aesthetic issues.”⁶ And for the same exhibition Donald Kuspit observed, “abstract art is no longer understood as a mystical inner construction, transmitting inner meanings through the ‘quality of the whole’, available only when ‘the proper set of mind and feeling towards it’ have been achieved.”⁷ Curiously, their conclusions actually resonate more accurately with the Montreal abstract scene, to which they were not referring and possibly not aware of, than they do elsewhere. Many of the prominent American, Canadian and French practitioners of abstract painting were dealing with, and continued to deal with, *both* formal and spiritual questions well into the 1960s and 1970s; the two threads developed concurrently and rarely stray far from one another. Newman, Rothko, and Gottlieb in the United States, Lawren Harris, Otto Rogers, Jock Macdonald, and Brian Fisher in Canada and Yves Klein in France (to name only a handful of key players) were overtly channeling the spiritual with and through their abstract painting.⁸ But

⁶ Maurice Tuchman, “Hidden Meanings in Abstract Art,” in *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*, (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art), 18.

⁷ Kuspit, 313.

⁸ Newman asserted his perspective in a newspaper article in the mid-1940s and is quoted by Tuchman, “The present painter is concerned not with his own feelings or with the mystery of his own personality but with penetration into the world mystery. His imagination is therefore attempting to dig into metaphysical secrets....” in Tuchman, “Hidden Meanings in Abstract Art,” 49; For Newman, Rothko, Gottlieb and Klein see Tuchman, 49-50; For Harris

Molinari, Tousseignant, and Gaucher were not; they were solving formal perceptual problems and working very carefully with their materials and methodology to develop hypotheses left unresolved by Mondrian and Malevich.⁹ Nonetheless, their work continues to be related to the immaterial and this contributes to the prioritization of ideological concerns over material ones.

Ironically, questions of the immaterial can also be noticed in formalist art criticism, despite its insistence on medium-specificity. The exclusivity of the formalist critical framework became increasingly pared down – purified and essentialised – over the first half of the twentieth century peaking in the 1960s with Michael Fried and Rosalind Krauss whose formulations were so stringent they effectively backed formalism into the metaphorical corner. The art historian Joanna Drucker relates that, “Fried’s extremist rant took the terms of Greenberg’s line to a dead end from which the only escape would be radical revisionism and renunciation or formulaic adherence – the choice of the postpainterly abstractionists.”¹⁰ Abstract painting developed along many threads: some emphasized and exercised the formal, secular development, while others emphasized the spiritual, transcendent aspirations. And sometimes the spiritual is a primary concern, as in the painting of Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman, but this artistic concern is excluded (for the most part) from critical discourse – e.g. the writing of Clement Greenberg and Alfred Barr. However, even the empirical, more secular thread of abstract art’s development still routinely alludes to (or outright states) the potent power of the transcendent perceptual viewing experience. The abstract painting in this manufactured formulation of mattering strives to be

and MacDonald see Zemans, “Making Painting Real,” 166, 179; For Rogers and Fisher see Nasgaard, *Abstract Painting in Canada*, 223.

⁹ Note, this statement applies more to Molinari and Tousseignant than it does Gaucher; as discussed in Chapter 2, Gaucher was not engaged with art historical issues in the same way that Molinari and Tousseignant were, but he was very much engaged with formal issues.

¹⁰ Joanna Drucker, *Theorizing Modernism: Visual Art and The Critical Tradition*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 91.

materially, culturally, and referentially autonomous, but also transcendent. Its materiality is positioned as being capable of signaling that which is beyond, *and* it does this by being self-referential and by inducing particular perceptual experiences. These are the phenomenal gymnastics of the abstract art perceptual system. The materiality of these paintings matters in so far as it functions as the medium *through* which other experiences or understandings can be obtained. Greenberg's notion of medium specificity had very little to do with the materiality of painting, despite it consistently being understood and presented as an empirical methodology, and everything to do with separating and elevating painting from other artistic forms.

Textual references to the immaterial and the transcendent are sometimes just intended to evoke a feeling, possibly even a leftover conventional relic from early twentieth century abstract art theory. Gagnon's reference to the immaterial in relation to Tousignant's painting does not (necessarily) imply any relation whatsoever to an interest in spirituality on the part of the painter or his painting. Nonetheless, the legacy of the notion of the immaterial being related to the spiritual in discussions of abstract art remains. What else is immaterial if not the spiritual? But its textual presence does not always directly intend this; rather abstract art that is *purified from representation* becomes "immaterial". It does not literally of course, but because cultural objects are considered to be "material" things, the removal of objects/things from our art theoretically takes the art away from the material. This is where Gagnon is coming from: colour freed from qualifying material objects becomes a free signifier, thus signifying the immaterial. The only problem with this equation is that its positive feedback loop excludes discussions of the very present materiality of these paintings.

This chapter will elucidate how the idea of the immaterial in relation to abstract painting became ubiquitous from its early art historical/critical beginnings, why it lingers today, and how it has been restrictive. We need to pause and take notice of the pervasive notions of immateriality, purity, universality and the absolute as they were applied to abstract art and Montreal Hard-Edge painting because this convention of understanding materiality as merely in service to the immaterial has significantly conditioned our response and understanding of the Molinari, Tousignant, and Gaucher's large-scale, acrylic paintings.

The Spiritual and The Formal: The Development of Abstract Painting

Abstract painting developed along two interwoven threads: the spiritual and the formal. There was an empirical positivist thread linked to formalist painting vocabulary and viewing systems which conflated the phenomenological and ontological status of the painting; this thread begins with critics like Roger Fry and Clive Bell in the early 1900s and culminates with Krauss and Fried in the 1960s. And there is the spiritual thread, which posited abstract forms as 'universal visual forms' with the ability to transcend and signify outside of their "historical and aesthetic conditions of production and reception," into the realm of the spiritual, such as with the art of Kandinsky and Mondrian.¹¹ Sometimes these two aspects were seen to operate together and at other times they were cordoned off from one another. The history of abstract painting, however, is indelibly indebted to the philosophy of its early practitioners, namely Kandinsky and Mondrian, and their spiritual belief systems remained intrinsic to the continued belief in the avant-garde possibilities of abstract painting and its ability to speak to the universal well into the mid twentieth century. This is one of the main reasons why the Hard-Edge painting of Molinari, Tousignant, and Gaucher is often related to the immaterial, because their significance is

¹¹ Drucker, *Theorizing Modernism*, 63.

understood as being something greater than the painting itself – not necessarily the spiritual because that was assuredly not in line with what these painters were trying to express, but definitively not concerned with the materiality of their production and continued tangibility.

The elaboration of the formal viewing system began just after the mid-1800s and reached its greatest rigidity and prescriptiveness in the late 1960s. Critics and writers such as Émile Zola (1840-1902), Stéphane Mallarmé (1842- 1898), and Maurice Denis (1870-1943), were beginning to observe and document in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that artists like Gauguin and Matisse were increasingly drawing attention to the *way* they were painting as opposed to *what* they were painting. The critics were not engaged with how the paint was used and how this affected modes of making, they were struck by how the new painting styles were no longer concerned with representing subjects/objects, narratives, or three-dimensional space with any degree of accuracy. While Maurice Denis foreshadowed significant components of the formalist viewing system by emphasizing the expression of interiority and the planarity of the canvas, early formal criticism was not yet concerned with excluding the representational. Instead Denis advocated for the ‘*subjective transformation of nature*’ in the work of Gauguin, Cézanne, and Van Gogh.¹² The impulse to purify painting came later and, according to Drucker, operated “within the twin frames of a pseudoscientific vocabulary (mechanistic, technical, and supposedly empirical) and that of a mystical faith in the inherent and transcendent value of form.”¹³ The scientific, positivist bent operated to validate and normalize the supposed inherent transcendence of abstract painting’s formal system: they were using practice so closely that the emergent forms were unquestionably understood to provide a medium for the transcendent.

¹² Maurice Denis, “From Gauguin and Van Gogh to Classicism,” *L’Occident* (May 1909); *Art in Theory*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell Press, 1992), 50. Original emphasis.

¹³ Drucker, 64-65.

With the English writers, Roger Fry (1836-1944) and Clive Bell (1881-1964), modernist criticism begins to embrace art as an expressive formation whose plastic values *alone* are capable of communication. It was Roger Fry who explicitly prescribed formalist examination criteria and the necessary *autonomy* of aesthetic form from visual, linguistic, and literary referents. However, Fry was still not legislating against representational form, he was instead requiring that the form, whatever its composition, compel pure emotion. By translating pure sensation to pure emotion (via the formal elements) the artist communicates to the viewer his proposal for ‘aesthetic feeling’ which is “not to be *used* but to be regarded and enjoyed; and that this feeling is characteristic of the aesthetic judgment proper.”¹⁴ Fry is insisting that the purpose of art is purposelessness. If it were purposeful, we would feel compelled to action of some kind and would thereby be looking outside of the work of art for meaning. And this would effectively signal its impurity.

One chief aspect of order in a work of art is unity; unity of some kind is necessary for our restful contemplation of the work of art as a whole, since if it lacks unity we cannot contemplate it in its entirety, but we shall pass outside it to other things necessary to complete its unity.¹⁵

His insistence on unity and the ability to contemplate an artwork “in its entirety” is later echoed in Greenberg, who advocated “esthetic judgments should be immediate, intuitive, unbelievable, and involuntary,”¹⁶ and that the picture “compels us to feel and judge it in terms of its over-all unity to the exclusion of everything else.”¹⁷ This inheritance from Fry persisted until the very

¹⁴ Roger Fry, “An Essay in Aesthetics (1909)” in *Art in Theory*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell Press, 1992), 86. Emphasis added.

¹⁵ Fry, “An Essay in Aesthetics,” 84.

¹⁶ Clement Greenberg, “Complaints of an Art Critic (1967),” in *Collected Essays and Criticism*, Volume 4, ed. John O’Brian, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992), 265.

¹⁷ Clement Greenberg, “Abstract and Representational (1954),” in *Collected Essays and Criticism*, Volume 3, ed. John O’Brian, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992), 191.

end of high modernism and is problematic because the insistence of all-at-once unitary judgements undermines the becoming of paintings: they were not made all at once therefore they can not be understood all at once. And second, the self-contained or self-referential positive feedback loop that is beginning to be established here with Fry illustrates the problematic conflation of the painting's phenomenology with its ontology. If the painting *is* how it *appears*, its ontological completeness effectively subverts its materialization, and thus its materiality, as being part of what can or should be known about it. In other words, by treating form as a given and a painting as complete, materialization is always already an operation of the past and thus incapable of expressing anything new. The claimed ontological completeness of abstract painting sidelined materials into a merely supportive role and rendered plausible their immaterial status.

Another enduring inheritance originates with Clive Bell's notion of "significant form". The central problem of aesthetics, according to Bell, is determining what common quality peculiar to artworks provokes "aesthetic emotion".¹⁸ And his answer is "significant form". Significant form contains: "...lines and colours combined in a particular way, certain forms and relations of forms, [that] stir our aesthetic emotions... 'Significant Form' is the one quality common to all works of visual art."¹⁹ Excluded from Bell's aesthetic hypothesis is descriptive painting "because it is not their forms but the ideas or information suggested or conveyed by their forms that affect us."²⁰ We gather from Bell's conclusions that significant form will always be preclusive to

¹⁸ Clive Bell, "The Aesthetic Hypothesis (1914)" in *Art in Theory*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell Press, 1992), 113.

¹⁹ Bell, 113.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 114.

descriptive representation: “Formal significance loses itself in preoccupation with exact representation and ostentatious cunning.”²¹

Bell’s admonishment of representational form was distributed equally over the artist and the viewer: “Very often, however, representation is a sign of weakness in an artist. A painter too feeble to create forms that provoke more than a little aesthetic emotion will try to eke that little out by suggesting the emotions of life.”²² And in the spectator, “a tendency to seek, beyond form, the emotions of life is a sign of defective sensibility always.”²³ These statements illustrate that the formalist thread weaving through abstract painting had equally to do with how form appeared and how form should be received: its value and aesthetic importance was inherent. Bell, like Fry, was establishing a positivist, formalist feedback loop.

The various aspects of the burgeoning formalist system added together such that they excluded becoming, materialization and therefore materiality itself from the equation of what art could contain. Abstract art’s mattering was understood as being completely removed from its making, art’s history, and any recognizable content and as such became autonomous. The viewer was expected to understand formal properties as themselves mattering – the forms like a closed circuit system forever signaling themselves. Without referent or qualification, colour and form became dematerialized. And within this equation abstract art could plausibly become immaterial. The calculation seems rational from one perspective: colour, line, shape, space, etc. liberated from describing the limiting symbolism of our material environment are able to express solely themselves. The problem, however, is that this prescription only works if our notion of

²¹ Ibid.

²² Bell, 115.

²³ Ibid.

materiality stays securely and exclusively attached to things that are formed. When materiality is understood more broadly it is impossible to understand abstract paintings as anything less than overtly material entities – and this is a good thing. Far from undermining their potentially transcendental function, their materiality actualizes their powerful immanence.

The German art historian Wilhelm Worringer was the first to describe “the urge to abstraction” as characteristic of a superior and elevated psychological state in his 1906 university dissertation, *Abstraction and Empathy*.²⁴ No longer observing a tendency to emphasize painting technique over narrative content, like Zola, Mallarmé, and Denis, Worringer is making the larger historical argument claiming that the history of western representational art was just the history we wanted to see – the one we empathized with; however, the urge to abstraction has always been there and was the superior compulsion.²⁵ For Worringer, abstraction is pure, instinctual, authentic and transcendental.²⁶ Our *return* to the abstract in the early 1900s was, according to Worringer, an impulse achieved through reason, regard for pure instinct (that akin to the Primitive) *and* from a fear of space. He writes,

Suppression of representation of space was dictated by the urge to abstraction through the mere fact that it is precisely space which links things to one another, which imparts to them their relativity in the world-picture, and because space is the one thing it is impossible to individualise...all endeavour was therefore directed toward the single form free from space.²⁷

Worringer’s “fear of space” foreshadows Cubism’s fragmented and flattened space, Kandinsky’s wedding of abstract form to spiritual space, Greenberg’s decree of the flatness of the image plane

²⁴ The dissertation took as its case study the ethnographic collection of the Trocadéro Musuem (now the Musée de Quai Branly) in Paris, where he studied the primitive art collection - the same collection that Picasso claimed to have inspired his *Les Femmes d'Alger*. Hilton Kramer, “Introduction by Hilton Kramer,” in Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy*, (Chicago: Elephant Press, 1997), viii-ix.

²⁵ And there is therefore, according to Worringer, “a causal connection must therefore exist between primitive culture and the highest and purest regular art form.” Ibid, 17.

²⁶ Ibid, x.

²⁷ Ibid, 22.

being paramount, and Molinari's insistence that modern conceptions of space required new objects for perceptions of space (e.g. his paintings). Of course, the extant fact is that paintings take up space and materialize space and are therefore far from *free* of it, nonetheless what these art historians, painters and critics are talking about is the *pictorial space* and the point that it is no longer picturing Euclidian space. This freedom from space, and therefore representation, is another path through which abstract paintings theoretically become autonomous and immaterial.

Influenced by Worringer's binary history of psychological taste (abstraction *or* empathy) and theosophical ideology, Kandinsky likewise equates abstraction with superiority: he formulates his prescription for the spiritual in art as being representative of the highest form of man and the highest form of art.²⁸ If any one thing marks the history of abstraction, both its writing and its art's intentions, it is certainly its consistently lofty goals. Importantly, both Worringer and Kandinsky associate representational art with materialism and abstract art with anti-materialism. Worringer writes of abstract artists: "their most powerful urge was, so to speak, to wrest the object of the external world out of its natural context, out of the unending flux of being, to purify it of all its dependency on life...to approximate it to its absolute value,"²⁹ and Kandinsky avows, "they [the arts] turn away from the soulless content of modern life, toward materials and environments that give a free hand to the nonmaterial strivings of the thirsty soul."³⁰ For these two theorists, the importance of abstract art lies in what it is capable of connoting (not denoting) beyond its material existence: its value and success demand that it divorce itself from its base

²⁸ Kandinsky, "The Spiritual in Art (1911)," 86-94. According to Hilton Kramer, Kandinsky and artists of the Blaue Reiter were aware of Worringer's argument as early as 1908. Kramer, "Introduction by Hilton Kramer," in *Abstraction and Empathy*, vii.

²⁹ Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy*, 17.

³⁰ Kandinsky, "The Spiritual in Art (1911)," 91.

materiality and either commune with the spiritual or speak to the universal via transcendental maneuver.

With similar aspirations, but slightly different execution, Mondrian clarifies his theoretical position nearly ten years after Kandinsky. It is with abstraction as opposed to imitative representation, Mondrian explains, that we can “express what all things have in common instead of what sets them apart. Thus the *particular*, which diverts us from what is essential, disappears; only the universal remains.”³¹ His painting strives to unite us via its essential, universal form. Mondrian further asserts that the universal form he is elucidating cannot be understood by *reading* the *De Stijl* manifesto alone; the artworks themselves are the evidence, “the content of the New Plastic can be *seen* only in the *work itself*.”³² The artwork is evidencing through its form, the *essential* shapes of nature, and therein, the universal. “Painting has to be purely *plastic*, and in order to achieve this it must use plastic means that do not signify the individual.”³³ The “New Plastic expresses the *essential* of everything [including nature].”³⁴ Via essential form we access the universal, and thus the spiritual and the immaterial.

Mondrian’s Theosophical convictions are less overt than the insistent spirituality that is Kandinsky’s call to abstraction. Mondrian asserts that he attained the universal via the manipulation of plastic form, not prior. It is a subtle switch in the ordering of things, but a paramount shift in mattering. Regarding ideology Mondrian asserts that it was, “*through the*

³¹ Mondrian, “Dialogue on the New Plastic,” 284.

³² *Ibid*, 285.

³³ *Ibid*.

³⁴ *Ibid*.

work itself,” through the process of abstraction, that he came to exclude representation.³⁵ “The theories I just mentioned concerning these exclusions came afterward,” he explains.³⁶ This point is important because it counters the conventional assumption that art issues through idea.³⁷ Mondrian is asserting the opposite: that idea was found through making (manipulation of plastic form) and issued via form (e.g. through his art not his writing). Worringer and Kandinsky charted the reverse. For Worringer it was the artist who endeavored towards a higher consciousness that was able to channel the purity of abstract geometric form, “a purely instinctive creation...the urge to abstraction created this form for itself with elemental necessity,”³⁸ which echoes the Kantian insistence that the artist-genius channels the universal.³⁹ And for Kandinsky it was the artist in reception of spiritual intuition that channeled abstract form.⁴⁰ But Mondrian asserts that it was through the making and manipulation of plastic form that he was able to find universal equivalence.⁴¹

Despite this assertion of the importance of making, Mondrian’s spiritual position is resolutely theosophist: “because the obstacle of form has been destroyed, the new art affirms itself as *pure plastic*. The new spirit has found its plastic expression.”⁴² Mondrian intends form here as in relation to representational form. His approach is different from the agenda of Fry and Bell that is advancing the notion of “pure form.” These are sister concepts, but their subtle difference

³⁵ Ibid, 284. Original emphasis.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ This conventional assumption is addressed in detail in Chapter 5.

³⁸ Worringer, 19.

³⁹ Immanuel Kant, “Extracts From ‘Analytic of Aesthetic Judgment’ and ‘Dialectic of Aesthetic Judgment, *Critique of Judgment*,” in *The Continental Aesthetics Reader*, Second Edition, Edited by Clive Cazeaux, (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 20.

⁴⁰ Kandinsky, “The Cologne Lecture (1914),” in *Art in Theory*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), 94-98.

⁴¹ While not directly related to the argument here, this thread related to making is picked up with the discussion of materials in Chapter 4 and the theoretical materialist argument in Chapter 5.

⁴² Mondrian, “Neo-Plasticism: The General Principle of Plastic Equivalence,” 288.

highlights the experience of the practitioner. Mondrian's emphasis on pure plastic expression highlights the making of form, whereas Fry and Bell are emphasizing form as though its forming is foregone. This difference is likely the result of an artist versus a critic theorizing. The artist will always be aware of the making of form, whereas a critic comes to form when it has already been made. Mondrian foregrounds the role of art and its making as the true formulation of his theory – his words give form to the material conception after the fact. And yet, however materialist Mondrian's painting practice may have been, he still envisioned the mattering of his work to be that which was *beyond* the material. The universal essentials that his painting strived for were intended to transcend their own form. Mondrian makes clear the subtle difference between pure form and pure relation, the latter being what takes us in reverberation with the universal. "The coloured planes, as much by position and dimension as by the greater value given to order, plastically express only *relationships* and not forms. The New Plastic brings its relationship into *aesthetic equilibrium* and thereby expresses *the new harmony*."⁴³ Mondrian's painting is capable of taking us, its receivers, into equilibrium with the spiritual plane (the new harmony). Molinari and Tousseignant were interested in developing Mondrian's formal problems – vertical-horizontal tensions and elaborations of the dynamic plane – but they were not influenced by his spiritual inclinations. Despite this, the relation of abstract art to the immaterial revealed itself to be a built-in inheritance for the critics and historians of Hard-Edge painting.

Similar to Mondrian, Malevich asserted that abstract art was capable of defining a new reality, however, he, like Molinari and Tousseignant, intended the change to occur in the world around him as opposed to on the spiritual plane. Molinari engaged with the idealism of Malevich's colour assertions that maintained "philosophical penetration" was achieved through pure inter-relations

⁴³ Ibid, 289. Original emphasis.

of colour masses.⁴⁴ This is echoed in Molinari's assertion that "one can perceive the effects of certain colour-form interrelations."⁴⁵ Writing in Russia after the First World War, Malevich argued forcibly for a new world order and a new art. The two forms were mutually necessary and constituting. A communist and an idealist, Malevich claimed that "young forces... will create a world in their new image," and "form in new art" will create a "new world for their life."⁴⁶ His call to arms exclaims: "The creative construction of a new art has produced the Suprematism of the square."⁴⁷ Malevich insisted that the artist's will must be above merely aesthetic concerns in order to achieve philosophical penetration.⁴⁸ It is an argument rooted in the universal permanence of the subconscious versus the fallibility of time-based consciousness:

There will be substantial differences between these categories; the artistic category calls its constructions works of art, because their resolution is absolutely timelessly invariable, therefore, correctly gauged. As for the second category, the techno-industrial, the things in it cannot be gauged because their perfection changes, the thing is not thought through completely, and is therefore temporary...*If we accept as truth the definition that all works of art come from the actions of the subconscious center, we may state that the center of the subconscious gauges better than the conscious center.*⁴⁹

Regarding the materiality of art Malevich, despite being a Constructivist, continued to subscribe to the notion of absolute forms and essential forms as being the ultimate objective of the artist to shape.⁵⁰ Like with Worringer, Kant, and Kandinsky, the artist channels absolutes that are essential and beyond the temporality of everyday man-made things – the "techno-industrial".

⁴⁴ Kasimir Malevich, "Non-Objective Art and Suprematism (1919)," in *Art in Theory*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell Press, 1992), 291.

⁴⁵ Molinari, "Colour in the Creative Arts," 94.

⁴⁶ Kasimir Malevich, "The Question of Imitative Art (1920)," *Art in Theory*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell Press, 1992), 292, 294.

⁴⁷ Malevich, "The Question of Imitative Art (1920)," 297.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 291.

⁴⁹ Kasimir Malevich, *The World as Objectless*, (Basel: Kunstmuseum Basel, 2014), 159.

⁵⁰ Malevich, *The World as Objectless*, 156

The later paring down of the formalist viewing system by Clement Greenberg in the 1940s and 1950s and his insistence on medium-specificity would at first glance lead to the impression that the formalist viewing system took a material turn in the mid-twentieth century. That formalism in the late 1930s through 1960s is conventionally understood as being about the materials of painting more than at any other point in art's history, before or after, is because its program of medium specificity appeared to claim as much. Greenberg writes in 1939:

In turning his attention away from the subject matter of common experience, the poet or artist turns it in upon the medium of his own craft...aesthetic validity ...can only be found in the very processes or disciplines by which art and literature have already imitated the former. These themselves become the subject matter of art and literature.⁵¹

And he insists again in 1940 that,

Purity in art consists in the acceptance, willing acceptance, of the limitations of the medium of the specific art...Emphasize the medium and its difficulties, and at once the purely plastic, the proper, values of visual art come to the fore.⁵²

And later in 1960,

Each art had to determine, through the operations peculiar to itself, the effects peculiar to itself...It quickly emerged that the unique and proper area of competence of each art coincided with all that was unique to the nature of its medium.⁵³

Because of Greenberg's insistence that abstract art and formalism were about *medium* and the *operations* specific to medium they are often confused with having been concerned with questions of materiality and methodology, which they were not. The *medium* of abstract painting was the subject of abstract painting – not the materials or the making – and this is an important differentiation because these are two different things. *Medium* connotes the entire painting

⁵¹ Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch (1939)," in *Art in Theory*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell Press, 1992), 532.

⁵² Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoon (1940)," in *Art in Theory*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell Press, 1992), 558.

⁵³ Greenberg, "Modernist Painting (1960;1965)," in *Art in Theory*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell Press, 1992), 755.

system – the paint, the brush, the canvas, the solvents, etc., working together to *form* the whole that is the finished painting. Materials and materiality on the other hand brings up not only the signifying potential of specific types of paint, but also the contributive influence of the *raw materiality* (the messy side of making) and its continued materialization. *Medium* can also connote that which is an intermediary or a go between, and this meaning takes us to the other significant impulse in the development of abstract painting: the spiritual. The abstract painting of Kandinsky, for example, was not spiritual in itself, but it did function as a medium through which the spiritual could be obtained. That formalism is about materials is a sensible line of interpretation, but a nonetheless erroneous conclusion.⁵⁴

Furthermore, formalist criticism has been criticised unreservedly in post-modernist writing and art creation for having arbitrarily severed artworks from their personal (subjective), social, cultural, economic, political, and artistic even, contexts. Formalist critics are less commonly criticized for severing paintings from their own materiality by insisting on the autonomy of painting. The formulation of their stable object status theoretically (but not literally) precluded any form of material autonomy [e.g. once formed into the formalist painting the medium's form will remain a permanently stable signifier]. The *materials* of abstract painting were in service of form and the universal; they were not autonomous from this system. It was not intended or desired that the materiality of abstract painting operate in any way outside of its positive feedback loop – that is its own self-referentiality. And this is another reason why art historical writing frequently positions abstract painting alongside references to the immaterial. Whether abstract painting is intentionally spiritual or merely speaking to the structure of the universal, it is

⁵⁴ In fact it was painting's inherent flatness that Greenberg emphasized as the medium's greatest characteristic: "Flatness, two-dimensionality, was the only condition painting shared with no other art, and so Modernist painting oriented itself to flatness as it did to nothing else." "Modernist Painting (1961;1965)," 756.

still insistently transcendent and thereby always greater than its own material basis. The spiritual and the universal were rarely conceived as immanent to the artwork.

The early spiritual and formalist developments of abstract art can be seen here to have evolved in concert. Each facet of the writing and the art that cumulatively has become etched into the development of abstract art's history was unique and each instantiation privileged a form of the immaterial over the material. The Montreal Hard-Edge painters – and those who wrote about them – inherited this legacy of relating the abstract to the immaterial or of simply omitting the material in favour of discussions of completed form.

Molinari and Tousignant were well aware of abstract art's history and benefitted from the formal discoveries of Malevich, Mondrian, and Newman, but their painting was uniquely their own both formally and ideologically. The Hard-Edge painters did not see their painting as illustrative of any specific ideological or political theory, but their search for perfect order and form did resonate with a certain utopian idealism. Relating the importance of Montreal abstract art to the universal structuring of mankind Fernande Saint-Martin wrote in the catalogue for the 1959 *Art Abstrait* exhibition:

The autonomy of the formal world (i.e. non-figurative) will be defined less and less by the rejection of representation and more and more by the full possession of a body of data that will contribute to the development of a radically new and different art whose complexity and specificity our imagist minds cannot yet suspect. Truly abstract art has always assumed as its task and its value the creating of an awareness – slowly continuously, and surely – of the underlying structures of the profusion of Expressionist modes of formal projection.

...For my part, I am convinced that the present-day painting...will reveal within the framework of a new logic, a new psychology and a new geometry, the deepest dimensions of the new man.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Saint-Martin, *Art Abstrait*, np.

The formal developments of the Hard-Edge painters were unconcerned with the spiritual and/or political inclinations of Malevich, Mondrian, and Newman – they observed their formal successes and failures and continued their own experimentations with these in mind – but they did firmly believe that the structure of their paintings would incite the restructuring of a new reality and inspire a new understanding of reality.

The Montreal Context: Painting A New Spatial Reality

In the 1940s, the Montreal Automatistes took as their inspiration the Surrealist artist and writer André Breton and successfully translated his concept of automatic writing, which channeled unconscious expression, into the medium of painting. The leader of the Automatiste movement, Paul-Emile Borduas, drafted the *Refus Global* in 1948, which shouted for a social revolution to free the arts and all of society from the tyranny of religious domination. This document and the associated Automatiste movement was a precursor for the 1960s Quiet Revolution in Quebec. The resulting Automatiste painting was gestural, spontaneous, and expressive but not ‘spiritual’ in any way. The *Refus Global* begs, “Magic spoils, magically wrested from the unknown, lie ready for our use, collected by all true poets,” and later cries, “MAKE WAY FOR MAGIC! MAKE WAY FOR OBJECTIVE TRUTHS!”⁵⁶ But Borduas was not calling for embracing magic in connection with the spiritual, like Kandinsky and Mondrian, but for the “magic” of the spontaneous and automatic gesture that ran counter to the dogmatism of the Catholic Church and its institutions. If the Automatistes’ work could be associated with the immaterial it would be by being connected to the unconscious – to inner meaning and emotions, not the spiritual. And further countering associations with the immaterial, the Automatistes’ work was overtly material

⁵⁶ Paul-Emile Borduas, *Refus Global* Manifesto, (Montreal: Private publisher, Mirtha-Mythe, 1948), 9.

and tangibly present with its thick impasto of oil paint applied coarsely with palette knives – the subjectivity of the painters was laid bare through each splotch and swipe of paint.

The Plasticiens, and later the Hard-Edge painters were also not concerned with notions of the spiritual. The early Plasticiens defined themselves against the Automatistes formally and theoretically. They were not engaged with the unconscious or the automatic; they were solving their problems consciously and geometrically. And the art and ideology of Mondrian and Malevich, who each emphasized more explicitly the hands-on plastic manipulation of form as a means to channel the universal, are the primary images and ideas that the Hard-Edge painters, Molinari and Tousignant, took up thirty years later. However, when Molinari speaks of the universal, he is not speaking of essential universal forms that underlie everything; he is taking Mondrian's problematic a step further and engaging with the universal structure of space upon which everything is built or from which everything could be built. Molinari was demonstrating the new spatial reality, and also effecting a new spatial reality; his intentions were action oriented. The Hard-Edge painters were painting a new way of seeing with their art. It was a big aspiration, but it was not an immaterial one. Molinari writes:

The originality of the Canadian contribution was to give colour a new function and a new dimension, and then to define new spatial structures based not on opposing heterogeneous elements such as form and content but on serial, interrelational systems, which alone create a tenfold increase in the dynamic and expressive function of colour.⁵⁷

For Molinari, the tangible painting would formulate and demonstrate the possibilities for a restructuring of the new world. And, while Molinari states that he is more interested in the theoretical pursuits of Mondrian than the paintings he produced, there is no evidence that he was

⁵⁷ Molinari, "Réflexions sur la notion d'objet et de série," in *Guido Molinari: Écrits sur l'art (1954-1975)*, ed. Pierre Théberge, (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1976), 84-85.

also interested in his theosophical underpinnings.⁵⁸ It was with Mondrian's formal problematic that he was engaged: Molinari observed that Mondrian's vertical/horizontal tension and duality was the structural foundation for Euclidean space and therefore problematically maintained the potential for both figural space and a focal point.⁵⁹ Molinari adopted the vertical stripe with the intention of eliminating dualism and internal structural relations in his painting: he intended that his viewer's perception follow the rhythm of his color-form units – and not be drawn into a singular focus. Clarifying his problematic in relation to Malevich and Mondrian he writes,

To understand the meaning of my personal approach, it must be taken into account that it is based on a relation of the need for a progressive destruction of the object, already initiated by Impressionism, which preoccupied the Suprematism of Malevich in his "world without object", as well as Mondrian's Neoplasticism, which, however maintaining the Hegelian oppositions, did not eliminate any anthropomorphism.⁶⁰

Molinari's restructuring of colour in space that was posited as capable of creating a new spacial reality, Nasgaard explains, "found support in Malevich, who by 1919 had come to maintain that the 'philosophical' stage of Suprematism, 'based on the awareness of colour' had been realized."⁶¹ Like Malevich, Molinari was not concerned with philosophical idealism, he was deploying colour in space on a human (as opposed to spiritual) level. And like Mondrian, he would never eliminate anthropomorphism in order that he could achieve this goal. However, Molinari was not taking on Malevich's and Mondrian's problem, he was developing facets of their problem and fine-tuning it to his distinctly contemporary, non-spiritual (e.g eternal or essential) relationship with space.

⁵⁸ Molinari, "Statement on Mondrian (1965)," in *Guido Molinari: Écrits sur l'art (1954-1975)*, ed. Pierre Théberge, (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1976), 42.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Molinari, *Écrits*, XXII, 75.

⁶¹ Nasgaard, "Le théorticien du molinarisme," 109.

While the Hard-Edge painters aligned certain facets of their problematic to Malevich and Mondrian, they were definitively working in opposition to the tenets of Greenbergian modernism. The paramount deviation of Molinari's painting and theory from Greenbergian and New York formalism was his notion that perceptual duration was inherent to the understanding of his painting. With this Roald Nasgaard states: "Molinari is thus at odds with the prevailing formalist positions coming out of New York, which equated time and duration with theatre and were therefore anathema to the purported purity of modernist painting."⁶² This was not the kind of purity that Molinari paused to consider. The rhythm of the serial repetition of his colour-form units is insistently durational. The art historian Bernard Teyssède explains that:

This perceptual, all-encompassing reorganization involves the emergence of increasingly complex systems composed of interacting micro-systems, so that the element itself becomes a system of a series of events. The duration of perception and retention is an integral part of the work...⁶³

Durational viewing is a twist on the formalist viewing system. Molinari, Touseignant, and Gaucher never fathomed the possibility of perceiving their paintings 'all at once', as was insisted upon by Fry and later Greenberg. While each intended a slightly different viewing relationship to their paintings, they all engaged the viewer in embodied time and space and with the knowledge that each perceptual experience would be necessarily unique. The continuing sequential form of a Molinari painting referred back to itself, whereas a Touseignant interacted with its space creating a dialogue and drawing its viewer into its spatial relationships. Gaucher, different again, pushed the potential of scale further than his Hard-Edge cohort and compelled an experience that was immersive, fully embodied, and physical. Perception in each instance is unquestionably engaged with the materiality and materialization of these Hard-Edge paintings.

⁶² Ibid, 104.

⁶³ Bernard Teyssède, "Guido Molinari: The Outer Limit of Colour Field Painting," in *Molinari*, (Montreal: Guido Molinari Foundation, 2018), 60-61.

However, critical writing until now has tended to assume that the abstract painting was a fixed component in the perceptual system, this inherited from the legacy of the formalist viewing system established by the historians Bell and Fry and re-established and cemented by Barr and Greenberg, that conceived the abstract painting as being autonomous and finite as opposed to a co-performer in the perceptual system. The autonomous and finite object thus positioned betrays the material contribution and undermines the artwork's potential for materialization.

And despite the increasingly distinctive formal and theoretical differences that developed between Molinari and Tausiignant, they each believed that a painting should have a "structure that precludes closure through resolution."⁶⁴ Their paintings were perceptual events that would change with each instance of perception. Molinari contended "that the surface of his paintings depends precisely on 'the synthesis of the dynamics of time and the chromatics dynamics,' a condition of flux that he understood to be the true route to 'the unfolding of a new spatial reality'."⁶⁵ They were interested in changing the perception of space in real time – not in transcendental spaces, or spiritual spaces, or purified colours. For Molinari, colour had expressive power that only needed to be given the freedom to unleash. It did not need to be purified; it needed to be allowed to fully actualize.

While the material mattering of Hard-Edge paintings is not always textually undermined by their relation to the transcendental, or eradicated via insinuations of purity, they are consistently just not written about. This is possibly exacerbated by the fact that the artists themselves rarely talk about their materials or because many critics and art historians consider materials to be self-

⁶⁴ Nasgaard, "Le théoricien du molinarisme," 98.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 104.

evident, but it is unquestionably conditioned by Western Art History's consistent narrative that equates the abstract with notions of the immaterial. An additional contributing influence to the dematerialization of Hard-Edge painting was the authority of semiotic theory on criticism in Montreal. Fernande Saint-Martin, the art historian and early partner of Guido Molinari, focused her research on the semiotics of visual language.⁶⁶ Saint-Martin wrote the introductory text for the 1959 *Art Abstrait* exhibition and was known to have introduced Molinari to some of his early theoretical interests, such as Alfred Korzybski's biological philosophy of language.⁶⁷ With this introduction, "a new cultural horizon opened up for him," Teyssédre shares.⁶⁸ Saint-Martin insisted that painting did not need to be undermined by linguistic systems of communication – that the visual could itself signify. And while much later influential in the realm of post-structuralism with its desire to dethrone the supremacy of language, the development of Saint-Martin's theory would have likewise contributed to the dematerialization of Hard-Edge painting. The empiricist bias behind the structuring capability of closed linguistic systems to communicate is directly linked with the insistence that the self-contained interplay of formalist systems could be analyzed and meaning withdrawn. As Drucker explains,

The formalist character ascribed to the elements of the image was confused with the enunciation of these elements within a limited, finite system [ie – what they were and what they communicated was synonymous]: the sense that the image *was* its so-called *forms* was easily taken for granted, and then came to be reductively inscribed not only within the tradition of formalist criticism, but within modern art history generally as a basis for interpretation (and production) of works of art.⁶⁹

The parallel between formalist viewing systems and semiotic theory undermines the materiality of the artworks by fixing the formal elements as independent or inter-related signs that convey

⁶⁶ Which is also the title of her 1990 text. Fernande Saint-Martin, *The Semiotics of Visual Language*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990).

⁶⁷ Teyssédre, "Guido Molinari: The Outer Limit of Colour Field Painting," 37.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Drucker, 64.

meaning for interpretation. The signs of this system, despite having been initially “read” empirically, are effectively cut off from their materiality by being fixed and the assumption of their completeness and independence.

The [Im]materiality of Hard-Edge Painting

This chapter’s problematic stems from the observation that critics and art historians rarely acknowledge the materiality of Molinari, Tousignant and Gaucher’s Hard-Edge painting. And in a number of instances, writing directly relates Tousignant’s and Gaucher’s paintings to the immaterial. While this relation may be nothing more than a descriptive tool deployed to explain the unique perceptual experience of taking in (and being taken into) one of these large-scale paintings, the corollary is that the specific materiality of the work is not discussed. The omission does not preclude the fantastically executed materiality of the paintings, but it does preclude its understanding.

Campbell declares in 1989 that Gaucher has “once again achieved ... dematerializing spatiality of his current Pale paintings.”⁷⁰ And he further qualifies,

Gaucher has carried this immaterial space to its highest pitch thus far by pushing it further and, in the process, positing a virtual “dematerialization” of space across the breadth of the surface plane – a space that literally seems to be dematerializing as we observe it over time, as though it were really lifting off the phenomenal surface field and being indelibly impressed somewhere inside our eyelids.⁷¹

With incredible existential passages such as this it feels almost awkward to bring up the literal materiality of the acrylic paint - the mattifying agents, the masking tape, the rollers, etc. without feeling like the person pointing out the six cups of white sugar used in the chocolate cake

⁷⁰ Campbell, *The Asymmetric Vision*, 39.

⁷¹ Ibid.

everyone is in transcendent ecstasy over. And this is part of the problem. With paintings, just as with confections, it is considered bad form or at the very least an unnecessary detour to mention the contributing materials when the mattering, as is predominantly understood by our culture, is in the final form – i.e. what was done to the materials. This is the prevalent art historical convention throughout modernism.

Now critical writing could be taken as literal fact or it can be understood, as is the intention of Campbell above, to be an attempt to translate the feeling of perceiving into words. The painting *feels as though* it is dematerializing; however it is still fully intact and in good condition.

Nonetheless, Campbell's insistence that the space is immaterial precludes discussions of the skilled and very specifically executed materiality of the space. The omission does not prohibit the existence, but it does prevent its understanding. And that which is not perceived is not understood – in both art writing and art perception. Sometimes there is a focus on the immateriality of *space*, other times colour is dematerialized via comparisons with purity.

Regarding Gaucher's use of colour, Campbell refers to its common modernist equivalence with purity:

Gaucher's colours induce a curious elation, and we find ourselves thinking of associations with his progressions in nature, in music, in dance, in the very fabric of our lived-experience in the abstract painting and which would only vitiate them. In a painting like Brun-Rouge-Orange/Ochre-Jaune (1975), we are struck first, and we are left last, with the palpable and exceedingly *pure pleasure of colour itself*.⁷²

In Campbell's text, the colour is pure of representational function and pure of symbolic function, but it is not pure of its own constitutive materiality or phenomenal material presence in space.

But these latter details were painted out with the same brush. The documentation has much to do

⁷² Ibid, 65. Emphasis added.

with the ideology of the age, and the problematic of my argument is less a criticism of late modernist critical writing and more a re-designed rearview mirror pointing out a gap in documentation resulting from the *purity* blindspot of the modernist Zeitgeist.

The transcendental capability of Hard-Edge painting is regularly intimated in the critical texts chronicling artists. The push and pull of the vibrating colour interactions created in Tousignant's painting "conjures a third dimension – that of the space between the spectator and the world – and generates a visual field that, although its real focus is the centre, forces the gaze simultaneously up and down and side to side," Gagnon writes.⁷³ The theoretical third dimension giving access to the universal that is created upon viewing necessarily de-focalizes the materiality of the two dimensions suspended on the wall before us. The notion of the transcendental capability and intention is elucidated more explicitly here with Marc Lanctôt:

There is no ambiguity about how to approach the *Cepheides*. Although the effect of the sublime is accentuated by their often large scale, it is an effect inherent to all of Tousignant's monochromes – and *proof of his desire to transcend the materiality* of his works and avoid a simple minimalist reading of them. With the *Cepheides* the artist reduces painting not to its physical elements but rather to a perceptual experience centered on a sensation of temporality that is independent of cognitive distractions.⁷⁴

Here it is portrayed that the paintings create the feeling of entering a separate – and pure – dimension of time by transcending their own physicality and materiality. And while it is undeniable that the perceptual experience of Tousignant's Hard-Edge painting is incomparable to that of other painting, so also is his material-methodology. The insistent focus on the perceptual, ideological and transcendental qualities of these paintings also insistently decrees that the mere materials have been successfully outwitted. Implicit in these transcendental insistences are that

⁷³ Gagnon, 95

⁷⁴ Lanctôt, "The Elusive Monochrome of Claude Tousignant," 212. Emphasis added.

materiality is a problem that must be overcome in order to attain the mattering of higher dimensions.

However, the transcendental references are not unanimous. Bringing experience back into the area of the painting itself and instead of relating either colour or space to a third or fourth dimension, Campbell ties colour directly to space for Touseignant's paintings. "The monochromes have their own durational temporality, a specific temporality staked out by pure colour understood as space."⁷⁵ And furthermore, rather than transcendental, Touseignant's monochromes are positioned as immanent by Campbell: "Herein lies the principal paradox of Touseignant's work. His paintings are objects, but they are porous rather than opaque. They are open rather than closed. They achieve immanence in themselves."⁷⁶ And this is an important difference because the signification of immanence bonds mattering to the painting itself (and indirectly its materiality) rather than beyond the painting (and into the realm of the immaterial). In an appendix added to the third edition of *Abstraction and Empathy* in 1910, Wilhelm Worringer juxtaposes immanence and transcendence. In this essay Immanence is tied directly to "total anthropomorphism", all "classical feeling for art", and "empathy", and all of these attributes are negatively associated with earlier representational art forms that were overly reliant on an ideology preoccupied with fusing man with the world and responsible for organic forms of art that we could empathize with.⁷⁷ On the other hand, abstract art was, for Worringer, transcendental and as such superior form because,

⁷⁵ Campbell, *After Geometry*, 121.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 125.

⁷⁷ "In the field of the history of religions, this state is marked by religions which start from the principle of immanence and which, wearing the various colours of polytheism, pantheism or monism, regard the divine as being contained in the world and identical with it. At bottom, indeed, this conception of divine immanence is nothing other than total anthropomorphisation of the world. The unity of God and world is only another name for the unity of man and world. The parallel in the province of art history is not far to seek. The classical feeling for art has its

the soul knows here only *one* possibility of happiness, that of creating a world beyond appearance, an absolute, in which it may rest from the agony of the relative. Only where the deceptions of appearance and the efflorescent caprice of the organic have been silenced, does redemption wait.⁷⁸

Abstract, transcendental art was absolute (not relative), unconditional, independent (of all organic form and therefore signification), and necessary. This dichotomy that is mirrored between abstract and representational art with transcendent and immanent mattering is a now entrenched convention in our writing and understanding of abstract art. Worringer's prescription for the equation of the abstract with the transcendental has a long and enduring legacy in the formalist art criticism of the late modernist epoch. The presentation of Tounsignant's abstract painting as having immanent mattering therefore stands out as significant because this relation is one that is rarely drawn. Possibly this is because Campbell, who is close with Tounsignant, was attentive to the manner in which the artist talked about his painting methodology. For example, Tounsignant credits acrylic paint as catalyzing a structural breakthrough in Hard-Edge painting: "We were working directly with colours. For us it was a structural breakthrough."⁷⁹

Molinari, who was the most ideologically programmatic of the three artists – he wrote and lectured extensively – has the most consistent art criticism associated with him. Space and viewing were major tenets of Molinari's ideology from the very beginning and therefore influenced not only the way his paintings were understood but also the way they were written

basis in the same fusion of man and world, the same consciousness of unity, which is expressed in humanity's attribution of soul to all created things...The process of anthropomorphisation here becomes a process of empathy, i.e. a transference of man's own organic vitality onto all objects of the phenomenal world." Worringer, "Transcendence and Immanence in Art," in *Abstraction and Empathy*, 128.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 133. Original emphasis.

⁷⁹ White, "Two painters stage major exhibits."

about. Molinari states that: “A painting needs your presence. The experience of painting is essentially the experience of duration...”⁸⁰ and further explains that,

the space one experiences within a painting is never completely produced by the painting alone. It’s always fictive, assisted into being by the free associations the viewer inevitably brings to it. The experience unlocks your memory, which then always challenges your connotative processes.⁸¹

One could interpret a small degree of the transcendent into the extra-painting mattering brought to bear through the variance of interpretation, but that is not quite what Molinari intended.

Neither did he intend that they conveyed (or contained) immanence either. Anthropomorphism, however, was something he insisted upon. His paintings were not objects, they were artworks, and he intended them to address people on a human scale – for instance their bottom-top orientation mattered just as ours does. Molinari states: “Because while I’m working with a unified field, the field is still anthropomorphic.”⁸² The subjectivity of a statement like this is very much engaged with the immediacy of its material environment.

Molinari was not simply negatively motivated with eliminating representation of the figure-ground relationship, instead his painterly motivation was constructive: he was concerned with building new space. He would construct a new space with a new “object”. He would:

Make of the painting the place of energy events which condition a new spatiality and which express the new relation that we establish with the world. It is this *structural revolution* that I have always tried to make, first through graphic design and reversibility and then through “chromatic mutation” and the serialization of plastic events.⁸³

⁸⁰ Dault, “Guido Molinari, a home movie,”65.

⁸¹ Ibid, 65.

⁸² Ibid, 68.

⁸³ Molinari, *Écrits*, XXII, 76-77. Emphasis added. Note, Molinari’s use of the phrase ‘energy events’ was not related to any spiritual leanings. He meant the energy of the dynamic quality of his serial colour relations. A Molinari painting vibrates in front of you.

He is waging a structural revolution with his painting for the perceptual space of his fellow mankind. And a new perception of space requires a new depiction of space.

The reception and critical writing related to the Montreal Hard-Edge painters excluding material qualities is by no means an anomaly. And it would be a misrepresentation to present Canadian critical writing as particularly uninterested in the material conditions of making and the paintings' materializations. The documentation of abstract art in the United States is similarly material exclusive. A selective review of the significant abstract art exhibitions across the United States during the contemporaneous time period likewise bypasses mention of constituent materials and making and instead focuses on formal effects, colour purity, and transcendental spaces.

Looking back through modernist criticism and historiography from a materialist perspective it becomes conspicuously apparent that the literal materiality of abstract painting was not a preoccupation for these writers. It simply was not thought about in the self-critical way that medium was. While acrylic paint was advertised as the medium of the future and its infinite possibilities were trumpeted to artists throughout all art magazines, it still was not understood to be a truly equal contributing force alongside modernist painting ideology. The materiality of paint was understood as merely a tool. Why must colour freed from descriptive function also be immaterial? It is not, of course, but why was it so important for modernism to position it thus? Or just not attend to it. Why was the explicit materiality of acrylic paint so steadfastly ignored? It was because of the modernist preoccupation with purity of form and colour, and the inherited and largely influential history beginning with Greek culture, which posits materials as inactive

(and therefore non-contributing), which will be outlined in the final section. The impact of these conventions has produced a critical historiography that accounts for one side of the action, but was never strategically exclusive – the convention being that materials/materiality was excluded because it/they had always been. The critics, curators and historians that documented *Geometric Abstraction in America* (1962), *The Responsive Eye* (1965), *Color and Field* (1970), and later, *Color as Field: American Painting 1950-1975* (2008),⁸⁴ were not purposely excluding materiality from the mattering of the artworks, I believe they simply saw it as being secondary, if they saw it at all.

While it is arguably the way Tousignant and Molinari used acrylic paint that facilitated the respective inclusion of *L'Empêcheur de Tourner en Rond* (1964) and *Mutation: Vert et Rouge* (1964) in the exhibition *The Responsive Eye* (1965) at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and distinguished their contribution to the Perceptual Abstraction movement from similar, but ultimately quite different, American counterparts like Gene Davis, Morris Louis, or Tadasky, their medium-methodology is not addressed.⁸⁵ Each of the Canadian Hard-Edge paintings would have satisfied William Seitz's selection conditions for Perceptual Abstraction:

Dualistic symmetry (as well as the use of homogenous patterns and dynamic “target” arrangements) suggest the establishment of situations that activate or frustrate the mind's tendency to unify and tranquilize is a necessary condition of perceptual art. In certain cases similar elements are simply lined up across the surface, while in the canvases of Gene Davis or Guido Molinari, a focus is evaded by a progression of uniform color stripes that move rhythmically from one side to the other, surreptitiously slipping past the center, which Molinari calls “the point of no return”.⁸⁶

Molinari's *Mutation: Vert et Rouge* effectively eludes a central focal point and Tousignant's

L'Empêcheur de Tourner en Rond eludes all dualistic relations such as horizontal/vertical

⁸⁴ Only select exhibitions are discussed here.

⁸⁵ William C. Seitz, *The Responsive Eye*, (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1965), 8.

⁸⁶ Seitz, *The Responsive Eye*, 8.

tensions figure/ground relationship and left/right reading.⁸⁷ William Seitz further demarcates the selection criteria for *The Responsive Eye* when he explains that,

Stripped of conceptual association, habits, and references to previous experience, perceptual responses would appear to follow innate laws, limited though our understanding of them may be. The eye responds most directly when nonessentials such as freely modulated shape and tone, brush gestures and impasto are absent. These means muffle and distort the purely perceptual effects of lines, areas, and colours.⁸⁸

Molinari and Tousseignant's flat, uniform application of acrylic paint via the impersonal roller (and later, the spray gun) and their use of masking tape to abut fields of colour are methodologies that prevent the dreaded 'muffling' of perceptual effects that Seitz is selecting against. But aside from discussing pigment choice, Seitz does not mention the medium of the paintings included in the exhibition. The discussion of material and methodology is exhausted with this statement:

“first, the advent of abstract painting was essential to the full liberation of color as an autonomous means; second, extensive experimentation with modern pigments and such materials as colored papers was necessary before a perceptually functional art could develop.”⁸⁹ This is despite the fact that the wide range of both traditional and modern materials used by the painters in the exhibition effected significantly different eye responses. These include oil, enamel, acrylic, emulsion, plastic, aluminum, tempera, Plexiglas, polyester resin, Polyvinyl strips, and polyethylene. Seitz emphasizes that “it is clear how close to science and technology some of the “hardcore” optical works are, and they remind us at the same time how close to art are some of the images of science.”⁹⁰ This is a point that would be further emphasized with reflection by the curator on how the adoption of new materials brought into circulation through scientific advancement and the industrial revolution tethers their art to the socio-economics of modernity

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 7.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 19.

⁹⁰ Ibid, 43.

in yet another interesting way. It should be noted that neither Molinari nor Tousignant consider their paintings to be Op Art.⁹¹ Although, to be fair, neither considered themselves defined by any movement in particular.

Similarly, in the catalogue of the 1962 exhibition at the Whitney, *Geometric Abstraction in America*, John Gordon notes that some artists “lend elegance to new and ordinary materials,” but there is just one specific material reference and only in relation to sculpture.⁹² The catalogue essay for this exhibition equated geometric abstraction with *purely* abstract painting – painting containing geometric shapes as opposed to subjects - and cites intentions such as revealing the spiritual nature behind existence and the “search for ultimate reality”.⁹³ The text, like most catalogue texts, is concerned with ideology, development, influence and not materials or methodology. Concurrently there was a sister exhibition, *Geometric Abstraction in Canada* (1962), at the Camino Gallery in New York, in which Molinari and three Plasticiens, Goguen, Juneau, and Perciballi were featured, unfortunately without a catalogue essay. The exhibition was met with mixed reviews.⁹⁴

In the 1970 exhibition at the Albright-Knox Gallery in Buffalo, *Colour and Field 1890-1970*, organized by Priscilla Colt, in which only one Canadian, Jack Bush, was included, there is again very little mention of abstraction’s materiality. This is counterintuitive when it is arguably because of the *specific way* that Bush uses his paint that his painting *School Tie* (1965), a stained

⁹¹ Welsh, “Molinari and the Science of Colour and Line,” 6; Corbeil, *Claude Tousignant*, 15.

⁹² John Gordon, *Geometric Abstraction in America*, (New York: The Whitney Museum of American Art, 1962), 13.

⁹³ Gordon, *Geometric Abstraction in America*, 13.

⁹⁴ Nasgaard explains that, “Reception, however, was often mixed. Shows were simultaneously highly praised in one magazine, damned, if faintly so, in another. Reviews meant that attention was given to the shows, but they were generally written on the fly, Molinari’s work discussed in artistic contexts that were often not to his advantage and usually insensitive to the formal differences that he himself was taking pains to define.” Nasgaard, “Le théorticien du molinarisme,” 93.

oil into canvas, was included in the exhibition and the Montreal Hard-Edge painters were not. Bush stained his canvases and maintained bold figure-ground relationships in his abstractions, similar to the key post-painterly abstraction painters, Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland and Jules Olitsky. If anything, *Colour and Field* has a subtle opposition to material newness. Priscilla Colt writes of the painting “it is not particularly concerned with innovation per se, but rather may be said to preserve and renovate. It does not assert its modernity through technological wizardry – its originality had evolved easily and organically...”⁹⁵ The exhibition’s avoidance of elaboration regarding material newness is surprising given the impressive turnout of a variety of new mediums such as Duco, acrylic, enamel, Alkyd resin, and acrylic Day-glo. However, Colt does mention the influence of new methodology, such as dripping, staining and spraying and credits the unprecedented autonomy of colour to “the plastic paints in all their variety and flexibility.”⁹⁶ Plastic paint is given some credit, but specifically how it achieves new expression and how one material expresses itself differently from another is not addressed. Additionally Colt notes in brackets that “(texture has always had an important bearing on colour effects).”⁹⁷ Indeed, texture directly affects the appearance and perception of colour and would be one of the primary reasons why the stained oil canvases of Bush would be included in *Color and Field* and the opaque acrylic flatness of Montreal Hard-Edge painters would not.

Interestingly, later exhibitions that take up the topic of colour and Modernist painting such as *Color As Field: American Painting 1950-1975* (2007) retain the notion of colour achieving autonomy – from form, representation, and materiality. This autonomy is seen as reaching its greatest potential with the methodology of staining associated with Helen Frankenthaler, Morris

⁹⁵ Priscilla Colt, *Color and Field 1890-1970*, (Buffalo: Albright-Knox Gallery, 1970), 8.

⁹⁶ Colt, *Color and Field*, 12-13.

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 12.

Louis, Jules Olitski, and Kenneth Noland. In his catalogue essay for *Color As Field* Carl Belz reflects on the concentric circles of Kenneth Noland's painting,

Compositionally speaking, the pictures could be seen in an instant, one shot, dead center. Which in turn meant that the impulse behind them, colour expression – the singularly isolated variable on which their success or failure was staked in its entirety – could be unequivocally experienced in and of itself.⁹⁸

These artists were interested in articulating colour and detaching it from representation and form, and with that it also became convention to understand it as independent from material as well.

Karen Wilkin's catalogue essay for the same exhibition provides some nuance to this modernist insistence, and elucidates the odd paradox between what is real and what is written, but does not offer reasons for why or address how this has affected our understanding. Wilkin writes:

This emphasis on colour was usually allied with a strenuous avoidance of the materiality so crucial to gestural Abstract Expressionism. Touch could be so reduced that paint application in Color Field abstractions can seem, depending on our sympathies, either inexplicably magical or almost mechanical. Color can appear to have been breathed onto the surface or, when thinned down and soaked into the canvas, to have fused with it, the way dye fuses with fabric. The result is an ineffable, seemingly weightless expanse. Even though essentially all we are left to contemplate are the physical materials of painting (refined as they are), the result is an exquisitely rarefied type of abstraction in which material means are almost completely subservient to the visual. Any lingering vestiges of the painting's long history of depiction disappear, and we are faced with pure, eloquent, wordless seeing.⁹⁹

The paradox that Wilkin alludes to, but does not underscore, is that despite being left with only the material means of painting to contemplate, we still *see* them and therefore understand them as being “subservient to the visual.”¹⁰⁰ The literal expanses of the colour-stained canvases somehow transcend their own materiality and liberate colour from *everything*. However, Wilkin does mention the influence of new media on Color Field painting and credits it with influencing

⁹⁸ Carl Belz, “Field of Dreams,” in *Color as Field: American Painting 1950-1975*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), 90.

⁹⁹ Karen Wilkin, “Notes on Color Field Painting,” in *Color as Field: American Painting 1950-1975*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), 22.

¹⁰⁰ Wilkin, “Notes on Color Field Painting,” 22.

the vocabulary of the new aesthetic surfaces. One paragraph sums up the material influence on the Abstract Expressionist and Color Field movements. She writes,

It is worth noting that the Color Field painters, as for so many other predecessors throughout the history of Western art, technical developments were inextricably linked with aesthetic ones [...] there is a synergy between the invention of acrylic paint and the Color Field painters' exploration of the possibilities of large expanses of [...] unmodulated colour.¹⁰¹

The development of the language of colour-based abstraction was inextricably entwined with the changing capabilities of acrylic paint. And, as I will explain in Chapter 4 acrylic paint played (and continues to play) something greater than a synergistic role: its materiality is influential. However, Wilken is proposing oppositional ideas in these two passages. She draws attention to the paradox of materiality and modern art and how the qualities of new media somehow influenced aesthetics, constructed thinking, writing and the vocabulary of painting *and* transcended its own materiality. A material cannot be constructive and transcendent. The two affirmations are at odds with one another and further point to an inherent resistance to understanding and positioning materiality in an active and contributing role.

There are two reasons for this near complete bypassing of material discussions in high modernist abstract painting: first, late modern art historical writing and ideology privileged idea above material, and second, the entire history of our human existence has privileged idea above material. Additionally, it is possible that materials could also have been seen to be self-evident and discussions of them somewhat superfluous. However, as described at the beginning of this section, there is a socio-cultural-historical precedent, that reaches further back than the modernist

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 23,30.

art historical preoccupation with privileging the immaterial in relation to art making beginning with Greek culture.

Immateriality and Material Agency

Modernism's art cannot be reduced exclusively to a history of the development of abstraction, nor can the dematerialization of the abstract artwork be attributed solely to the legacy of formalist criticism or spiritualist preoccupations. The materiality of art had a complicated saga long before this. Formalist criticism highlights a specific instantiation of materiality's suppression, but by no means stands alone – the entire history of art creation could be described in terms of tensions between materiality and immateriality. Platonic philosophy equated higher thought with an abstinence from images, privileged intellect over the senses, and asserted that the deity could not be represented in material form.¹⁰² And the influence of Aristotle, as indicated earlier, has led to a deeply inscribed hylomorphic tradition that understands the essence of materials as being passive and awaiting form.¹⁰³ The perpetuation of these classical models that define the absolute, essential, and immaterial, as the highest of pursuits of humankind through religious institutions has been a strong contributing factor in their continued prevalence. There is a material/immaterial paradox that sustained modernity and continues to operate now. And the material/immaterial paradox is entwined with agency: the ascription of it and the control over it.

Religious belief systems tend to esteem immateriality above materiality, the anthropologist Daniel Miller reflects that, “there is an underlying principle to be found in most of the religions that dominate recorded history. Wisdom has been accredited to those who claim that materiality

¹⁰² Plato, “Hippias Major” and “Republic,” in *The Dialogues of Plato: 428/27 – 348/47 BCE*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, (Oxford and London: Oxford University Press, 1892).

¹⁰³ Aristotle, “Physics, Book II,” in *The Philosophy of Aristotle*, trans. J.L Creed and A.E. Wardman, (New York: New American Library, 1963).

represents the merely apparent behind which lies that which is real.”¹⁰⁴ And certainly the rarefication, exclusivity and worship achieved by or awarded to the fine art of our culture puts its operation within the realm of a *religion*. “Art-lovers...actually do worship images in most of the relevant senses, and explain away their de facto idolatry by rationalizing it as aesthetic awe,” Alfred Gell explains.¹⁰⁵ And Miller further proposes that, “the definition of humanity has often become almost synonymous with the position taken on the question of materiality.”¹⁰⁶ There have long existed tensions between the worship of the material itself and the worship of the idea behind what the material represents. And it is this tension that underscores every instance of material’s exclusion: material is routinely dismissed or overlooked purposely to get to the greater, more important thing that it signifies. For instance, between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries, Carolyn Walker Bynum observes that Christian materiality was constantly in an unresolvable paradox:

It is not a combination or synthesis of differing aspects, nor is it a violation of the integrity of opposing concerns through compromise. It is the simultaneous assertion and performance of opposing values.¹⁰⁷

This paradox resulted from an equal, but parallel belief in the inherent power of materials to transform and perform miracles, for instance the *Dauerwunder*.¹⁰⁸ And on the other hand, there was a fear that the misguided worship of these *very same* inherently powerful materials would divert piety from its rightful transcendent place. The materiality of Christian art, just like the materiality of Hard-Edge painting, was supposed to draw your attention to that which lay beyond the material. For Hard-Edge painting this was a new perception of space and for Christian

¹⁰⁴ Daniel Miller, “Materiality: An Introduction,” in *Materiality (Politics, History, and Culture)*, (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2005), 1.

¹⁰⁵ Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 97.

¹⁰⁶ Miller, “Materiality,” 1.

¹⁰⁷ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality*, (New York: Zone Books, 2011), 268.

¹⁰⁸ *Dauerwunder* are miracles of metamorphosis such as the Eucharist, the famous transformations of blood and body of Christ into wine and bread. Bynum, 17, 20.

worshippers this was the transcendent and all-reaching (but ultimately unknowable) spirit of God.¹⁰⁹ These two conflicting and incompatible understandings of materiality lived alongside one another in the Middle Ages and continue to do so now in many ways. However, there is a specific difference between the way that materiality is understood as being alive in the Middle Ages and the *metaphorical agency* that material culture theorists like Alfred Gell, Bruno Latour, and Arjun Appadurai are writing about in the material turn. A reaction to the discursive turn, the material turn looked to re-situate itself more tangibly with the phenomena of objects and things in relation to increasingly ephemeral intellectual property issues connected to technological development. Social and anthropological theorists began to study culturally produced objects and how these elements of material culture circulated through networks in the late 1980s. Arjun Appadurai wrote *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* in 1986.¹¹⁰ Thus, with Bynum's *Christian Materiality* in 2010 we are more accurately in a material re-turn (or late material turn), which contributes to the difference in material approach and understanding that her research underscores. Bynum's text draws our attention to the fact that art of the middle ages "grapples with and utilizes what it is made of in a way that underlines and hence interrogates that fact of materiality. Behind it is an understanding of matter as *by definition* that which changes."¹¹¹ And further she explains that their problematic was issuing from a completely different place: "one might say that to a modern theorist, the problem is to explain how things "talk"; to a medieval theorist, it was to shut them up."¹¹² And this difference is of particular significance here. Agency that is understood as actually being alive is not the same thing as agency that is *attributed* to objects because they are *like* human actors. This is an

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 19.

¹¹⁰ Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

¹¹¹ Ibid, 79. Original emphasis.

¹¹² Ibid, 283.

anthropomorphic agency and not the same thing as understanding that materiality is itself alive, not merely agentic within a cultural network or an index of agency as Latour and Gell have respectively postulated. The notion of agency in current materialist theory has very little to do with materials and everything to do with already made objects.¹¹³ And the materiality of Hard-Edge paintings is not advanced or understood differently if we understand them as anthropomorphic agents that operate in networks just like us. Instead, I propose that Hard-Edge paintings are themselves in a process of materialization, their mattering will be understood as continuously on the move, ceaselessly re-materializing, both self-materializing and contingent.¹¹⁴ Here Bynum's argument illustrates that our relationship with materiality is a long and complicated one; that we understand the autonomous power of materials, but have an equal and competing desire to deny its existence.

Bridging the material turn and re-turn, the anthropologist Tim Ingold is likewise critical of the trend of attributing agency to objects because the ascription is predicated on the notion that objects are immutable and only further supports the skewed power dynamic of subjects over objects. He describes his way of thinking about the process of making as *thinking through making* and explains that the actual way we come to know materials and things is from the inside.¹¹⁵ Materials "are how they behave when you work with them," not a conglomeration of fundamental properties.¹¹⁶ For this reason it is inaccurate to attribute agency to things because they are already alive. Ingold's 'artwork as creative entanglement' is an open structured knot

¹¹³ I address the problem with object studies cloaking themselves as material studies in detail in Chapter 5. "Material Culture Studies" by studying objects and things resolutely undermine materiality and materialization.

¹¹⁴ Again, this proposition is the topic of Chapter 5 and will be thoroughly elaborated.

¹¹⁵ Ingold, *Bringing Things to Life: Creative Entanglements in a World of Materials*, Lecture, (Manchester: University of Manchester, April, 2008), Accessed May 3, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VYT-7_qlURw

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

comprised of strings with no beginning or ends that trail off and become entangled with other things, is an experience of material that precludes both attributions of agency and notions of specificity.¹¹⁷

Molinari insisted that his paintings were anthropomorphic because their orientation, like humans, mattered and thus envisioned his paintings as having a type of subjectivity. Touseignant insisted that his artworks were objects, thus reinforcing our dichotomous subject position in relation to them. The materials are a problem in both of these scenarios because if they are understood as contributing this unseats our control over the making and perceptual experience. Molinari, Touseignant, and Gaucher acknowledged and desired that each perceptual experience was different, but only for the viewer, never because of the materiality. So while the material turn acknowledges the agency of objects/things, the fact that the agency is anthropomorphized draws the actual seat of action back to the subject: this type of agency is contingent upon being within a network of human actors. The anthropomorphizing action effectively mutes the materiality.

The discomfort of the early abstract painters with the relationship between art and materiality could be understood as merely a different instantiation from that which operated the paradox of Christian materiality that Bynum describes. A large part of the appeal or incentive behind the move toward abstraction at the beginning of the 1900s was a move away from the corruption of materiality. And further influential was the adoption of Platonic metaphysics by the early practitioners which equated the material environment as *merely* appearance and instead esteemed

¹¹⁷ Chapter 5 explores a detailed analysis of this theory.

eidetic reality – that belonging solely to the mind.¹¹⁸ Kandinsky, Malevich and Mondrian all voiced this motivation to various degrees. For Malevich the corruption was more tied to the corrupting political powers of representation, for Kandinsky it was overly consumable materialistic artworks of mimicry that he argued against, and for Mondrian materials were tools through which to attain universal, transcendent form. Kandinsky wrote: “In theosophy, vibration is the formative agent behind all material shapes, which are *but the manifestations of life concealed by matter.*”¹¹⁹ However, Bynum’s proposition of a material paradox is entirely different from a dichotomous one and this is why her work is interesting to look at here.

The anthropomorphizing action of material culture studies that name materials, but are actually about objects, operate through a similar maneuver that Greenberg’s formalism did. The formalism and medium specificity associated with Greenberg is often misinterpreted as a movement that championed the materiality of art through emphasizing paint and the flatness of canvas. However, as outlined earlier in this chapter, this was not the case. What defines formalism has much more to do with what it is not about than what it is about. It was not about figuration or the representation of nature in any respect, as such it was about paint. However, the paint was merely a vehicle for the attainment of higher thinking. Therefore, even art that claimed to be about the medium was not about the medium, it was still about idea. This is the dual result of materiality debasing the elevation of the artwork and the fear that this instills. The paradox is further exemplified with Miller’s observation that, “the more humanity reaches towards the conceptualization of the immaterial the more important the *specific form* of its

¹¹⁸ Mark Cheetham, *The Rhetoric of Purity: Essentialist Theory and the Advent of Abstract Painting*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 35.

¹¹⁹ Kandinsky cited by Tuchman in “Hidden Meanings in Abstract Art,” 35. Emphasis added.

materialization.”¹²⁰ After all, it is by following Kantian prescription that Greenberg’s formalism emerged: The fine art of the genius, for Kant, makes one think *more* than of what is directly contained in its ‘presentation’; it is the ability to both discover and express ideas in a presentation that is universally communicable and apprehensible despite having followed no rule and that in its originality reveals a new rule.¹²¹ In other words, the artwork is never about the materials, it is the original expression of transcendent idea. And the materials will perform the role of the medium through which transcendent idea (the immaterial) is obtained.

However, retaining Greenberg’s notion of medium specificity has a certain appeal: it is in the perceived security of the idea that the mattering of the medium could be attributed to something specific, something ultimately identifiable and knowable. But this is not what medium-specificity is about. Its legacy and breadth of theoretical application is indelibly tied to the Kantian transcendental philosophy. And with Ingold’s creative entanglements it is possible to see how a concept of specificity lands us short of appreciating the unboundedness of how things continue coming to be, how their agency is their own and how it exceeds and resists anthropomorphization.

Conclusion

This chapter interrogated the inter-relationship between the notion of immateriality and abstract painting that has shaped the perspective of abstract art’s historiography. A major contributing factor belongs to the essentialist tradition that insists that the things that we encounter have stable

¹²⁰ Miller, *Materiality*, 19. Emphasis added.

¹²¹ Kant, “Extracts From ‘Analytic of Aesthetic Judgment’ and ‘Dialectic of Aesthetic Judgment,’ *Critique of Judgment*,” 17.

thing boundaries and essential, persisting, and reliable characteristics.¹²² The problem with this is that assuming stability precludes the materialization and becoming which are fundamental to materiality – analogous to how Greenberg’s *all-at-onceness* precludes an understanding of making and duration. And alongside that, the stabilizing maneuver attempts to hold at bay a whole host of other issues that present themselves, such as the problem of art degrading. Possibly akin to the window in Bill Brown’s *Thing Theory* wherein it becomes dirty, stops working, and thereby transforms from object to thing: objects are *looked through* in our culture via processes of utilization and convention, but when they stop working we can no longer look through them because their odd thingness is asserted and we are forced to encounter them differently.¹²³ Is the abstract artwork of our art’s history narrowly avoiding becoming a broken thing by naming its medium the content but swiftly passing the true mattering through to the absolutes, essentials, universals, and spirituals – through to the immaterial? Possibly, but there are advantages to understanding their odd thingness *alongside* their high art status, because at the heart of the matter is that matter did not stop materializing despite our inattention. The importance of emphasizing and broadening our notion of materiality and destabilizing traditional notions of the finite, abstract and instantaneous artwork does not debase the artwork or reduce it to mere thing, rather it re-situates it as an agent in its own becoming and positions the mattering of Hard-Edge painting in the now. Acrylic paint was generative. And it still is. Artists believed that acrylic paint was the way of the future. They thought it was more stable and colourfast and its unique material properties allowed them large-scale evenness and multilayering potentiality that would have been impossible with oil or synthetic resins. The artist Otto Rogers, whose Baha’i spirituality is intrinsically tied to his art making is also one of the earliest Canadian adopters of

¹²² Aristotle, *Prior Analytics and Posterior Analytics*, Bk 1: Ch. 4, 73a – 73b, 20; Ch. 9, 75b, 40 – Ch. 10, 75a.

¹²³ Bill Brown, “Thing Theory,” *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 28, No. 1, Things. (Autumn, 2001). 4.

acrylic paint; he reflects that, "acrylic paint is very mysteriously wrapped into what is possible to make high art."¹²⁴ Looking *at* the materiality of abstract painting instead of *through* it to the supposed actual *meaning* of abstract art allows us to understand the unique history of its material constituents, its making, and its continued active materialization. The Hard-Edge paintings are not *just* examples of high modernist, avant-garde painting in Montreal, they matter now too.

¹²⁴ Rogers, Personal Communication, 18 April 2016.

Chapter 4

Modern Art Materials: The Break with Traditional Art Making

We are fettered by our love affair with individual liberty and this has defined our relationship with materials, objects, and our environment. Art materials have been ascribed a passive, inconsequential role because most philosophical and cultural constructs rely upon the assumption of the mind/matter, subject/object divide. These constructs position the subject and the mind in the seat of control over the material environment. The conservator, art historian and translator (notably of the Renaissance painter Cennino Cennini's *Il libro dell'arte*), Daniel Thompson Jr. writes:

We still set great store by individual liberty, and still resent any move which threatens to curtail it; but we have begun to recognize that our technical freedom is something of an illusion. We have begun to realize that canvases and paints and brushes with which the manufacturers supply us dictate our technical operations in no small degree; that mechanization may be as great a tyrant as tradition; and that the modern painter is really free, in point of technique, only to this extent, that he is allowed to choose his own fetters.¹

Written in 1936, Thompson's reflection is informed by his significant experience with material art history, however the 'material fettering' he easily concedes is not a perspective shared by the majority of art's historians. What Thompson's statement makes clear is that the freedom and control we think we have over materials and objects is an illusion. The reality is that the things that we have defined to be materials and objects are pushing back and defining us just as much. The action of this chapter is to pull matter and material in from the passive and basic roles they have traditionally been ascribed in order to better understand that making and intentionality are not linear or teleological processes and that materialization is not finite. Understanding the materialization of Hard-Edge painting from a material perspective brings to the fore the

¹ Daniel V. Thompson Jr., *The Practice of Tempera Painting*, (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1962 (originally published 1936)), 1.

magnitude of contingencies involved in the making of any artwork and this in turn helps us to understand that the process of materialization is never complete because the contingencies do not cease once the artwork has left the studio. If we can understand a seemingly object-stable Hard-Edge painting as object-fluid via its contingent relationships and narratives we will also come to understand our relationship with materiality more inclusively. Looking closely at the materials of Hard-Edge painting reveals that even the most socio-culturally, ideologically, and art historically entrenched “objects” of modernism were actually held in place by words and not by the basic fact of their static materiality or “object” status. And when we confront traditional assumptions about making we will find that the paintings do not stay put as well as they used to.

This chapter will argue and demonstrate that materials influence creation in no small way and will focus on the late modern period and the massive influx of new synthetic artist materials in the twentieth century. The intention is to build on the previous chapter, which understood the mechanism of material subversion as part of the dynamic of the modernist machine and focus instead on how that history was only one version of the story, and how the material contingency of artworks is a critical factor in their becoming and continued mattering. Technical studies are often conducted separately from art historical studies; even technical art history, which would seemingly unite the two fields, is far from a seamless collaboration. Technical art history takes as its focus the pigments used, the layering techniques employed, the type and quality of medium, the type of varnish, and whether components are original or later additions, and provides us with information on the methodology of an artist, the authenticity of the painting and sometimes the value dedicated to the commission.² For instance, some pigments, such as lapis

² Thomas J.S. Learner, “Modern Paints: Uncovering the Choices,” in *Modern Paints Uncovered*, (Los Angeles: The Getty Conservation Institute, 2007), 4.

lazuli, are extremely expensive indicating that their appearance in large quantities can give us insight into the importance of the painting and/or the wealth of the patron. In this manner we understand a connection between the socio-cultural history of art and the material history of art. We also come to understand artistic intention from a material perspective, for example via the materials that were selected and the way they were used. Nevertheless, technical art history remains a subject-driven account of history wherein the material evidence provides information on artistic or cultural intention. Conversely, in this chapter I am seeking to explore how material or methodological innovation occurred *during* making and *because of the character of materials*; and this must be identified through looking at materials used, materials available, art historical context, and artistic intention. The materiality of modern painting is somewhat different than the materiality of traditional painting because the modern artist is independent from the patron and the materials selected will not give us insight into the skill of the artist or the importance of the commission in the same way that earlier paintings will. Material experimentations in modern painting became symbolic of artists breaking with traditional structures of making and the academy of taste.

In its exploration of materials, this materials chapter will track a history of material introduction and corresponding creative innovation and hone in on the particular instance of acrylic paint and Hard-Edge painting with the intention of getting very close to the particular – the paint, the canvas, the tape, the rollers, the spray guns – in order that the larger theoretical argument of the following chapter has a thorough foundation. Chapter 2 noted the absence of material mention in the critical and art historical writing surrounding the Montreal Hard-Edge painters, Chapter 3 made propositions for the reason behind the notable material absence – it outlined the modernist

and larger socio-cultural conventions supporting an emphasis on symbolic and theoretical concerns and the suppression of material ‘supports’. And this chapter will go into the particular workings of oil paint, synthetic paint, and acrylic paint specifically to illustrate in greater detail the phenomenal qualities that new media made available to art creation and re-iterate the necessary and unique contribution of acrylic paint media to Hard-Edge abstraction in Montreal. The end of this chapter will situate the context of modern materials and their influence into the broader history of art materials and making will make the larger argument that materials have always influenced what is made. The three inter-related arguments of chapters 2, 3 and 4 inform the materialist and ontologically flat theoretical and philosophical arguments of Chapter 5. This perspective will demonstrate the continued material significance of the large-scale minimal paintings of Molinari, Tousignant, and Gaucher via their paintings’ own continued materialization and mattering. These paintings are not only an illustration of late modern Montreal-based abstraction, their continued materialization with and through their media and the constructed narratives of exhibition spaces means that their understanding now is always re-materializing. This chapter will considerably flesh out the influence of the quality, character, and availability of new media on the style of painting and in so doing will thoroughly divorce Hard-Edge abstraction from any vestige of the Greenbergian notion of medium specificity. As will be revealed through the focus on the qualities of new media entering the market, the height of Greenberg’s criticism that equated post painterly abstraction with explicit flatness, and thus staining, was heavily reliant on the physical capabilities of a certain kind of paint, Magna, and its ability to stain. Ironically, the critic did not intend his formulation to be as *material*-specific as it actually became. As outlined in Chapter 3, medium specificity, for Greenberg, had nothing to do with material and everything to do with defining and championing one art medium from another

– e.g painting above sculpture. Greenberg was critical of the Hard-Edge painters’ material-methodology because the layering they built on the surface of canvas took painting towards sculpture and thus ambiguity as opposed to specificity. Of course, as explained in Chapter 2, this is exactly what Tausen was interested in playing with. It is nonetheless amusing that Greenberg’s criticism became inadvertently *material*-specific, because the critic was firmly a Kantian idealist; it proves my point here that material-methodology contributes to idea just as much as the artist-genius. What we learn from the material-focused perspective of this chapter is the vulnerable contingency of things that are made and how this becoming and contingency is what characterizes the life of any artwork. Material-methodologies must be understood as active agents in an artwork’s becoming for the breadth of the contingencies to be appreciated fully.

Synthetic Paint Media and Artistic Use

Synthetic paint technology progressed slowly in the first few decades of the 1900s and demonstrated a multitude of advances and development of different types of polymers between 1930 and 1950. Synthetic polymer production was catalyzed by the war effort – a need for synthetic rubber during World War II pressured the development of latex – and was maintained by the burgeoning middle class consumer and a need for coated things such as cars and appliances.³ The artist paint market comprises merely a small fraction of synthetic polymer application.⁴ Development concerns hinged on performance, material choice, and production costs until the early 1970s when increased environmental regulations introduced production and

³ The Allies had to find a substitute for rubber in tires and other uses because the rubber plantations were under the control of Axis powers. This spurred the development of styrene-butadiene rubber. Stuart Croll, “Overview of Developments in the Paint Industry since 1930,” in *Modern Paints Uncovered*, (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 2006), 17, 24.

⁴ The production of artists paint cost more than ten times what the average house paint does in North America. Croll, 18.

emission controls on the industry.⁵ The art conservator Robert Lodge credits the Mexican mural painters, David Alfaro Siqueiros, Diego Rivera, José Gutierrez, and José Clemente Orozco with the earliest experimentation and application of modern synthetic media in the early 1930s.⁶ These artists needed paint that dried quickly, was inexpensive and would be suitable for outdoor use. Siqueiros' vigorous investigations into the potentials of synthetic media charged him with the name "Il Duco" by fellow artists in New York in the mid-1930s.⁷ Siqueiros considered synthetic media to be wrapped up with the potential of revolutionary art.⁸ As Janet Marontate has argued:

Siqueiros and his followers linked technical innovation to their vision of the emancipatory function of art. These painters endeavored to apply socialist ideals to their studio practices, notably with the appropriation of tools and materials used by workers in factories to create new art for the masses, art which belonged to the workers, the peasants and the dispossessed. Their early discourse about the new media portrays the use of these new materials as a socially conscious, political and aesthetic act to promote revolutionary change.⁹

The Mexican mural painters were seen as leaders of the avant-garde and as contributing a unique and authentically North American creative practice to the International art movement. Paintings by Diego Rivera were being exhibited in New York alongside the French cubists as early as 1916.¹⁰ New York and Canadian artists had not achieved this status yet and were influenced by Siqueiros' ideology and material-methodology – the two being intrinsically entwined for the mural painters.¹¹ Siqueiros' unique position that materials drive form is clearly stated here: "an

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Gutiérrez was also a paint maker and ran experimental workshops for testing techniques with new synthetic media called the *Taller* at the National Polytechnic Institute in Mexico City (1945-1968 under Gutiérrez). Janet Marontate, *Synthetic Media and Modern Painting*, Doctoral Dissertation, (Montreal: University of Montreal, 1996), 157-158; Lodge, "A History of Synthetic Media" 118.

⁷ Lodge, 118.

⁸ Ibid, 119.

⁹ Marontate, *Synthetic Media and Modern Painting*, 36.

¹⁰ Ibid, 37.

¹¹ Ibid, 38. See also, Christine Boyanowski, *The Artists' Mecca: Canadian Art and Mexico*, (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1992).

artist's material and tools determine the character of his work, whereas the academicians and the intellectual pseudo-academic and pseudo-classical snobs of Europe believe it is determined by the artist's sensibility."¹² After World War II, the New York and Canadian artistic avant-garde adopted some of the Mexican material-methodology, but did not absorb the ideological practice that synthetic media was wed to art's social meaning and purpose; they were more concerned with formal and expressive matters in art creation and thus what Siqueiros would have considered matters of "the artist's sensibility".

There are innumerable synthetic paint formulations that entered the market between 1920 and 1950 such as alkyd, epoxy, nitrocellulose, polyester, polyurethane, polyvinyl acetate (PVA), silicone resin, acrylic, and water-miscible oil and these can be generally divided into commercial paints (car and house) and artist paints.¹³ Of these the most commonly occurring in modern painting are of three principle classes: alkyd, PVA, and acrylic, and this is despite the fame of Duco, a nitrocellulose, and its place in the lore of modern art's history.¹⁴ In fact, material analysis of a number of Jackson Pollock's drip paintings reveals a far greater use of alkyd paints than the infamous car enamel.¹⁵ DuPont formulated Duco in the 1920s from a blend of nitrocellulose lacquers. Pollock, who is indelibly associated in our art's history as having pioneered experimentation with Duco¹⁶ was introduced to the medium in a workshop led by Siqueiros in New York City, 1936, entitled *Siqueiros Experimental Workshop – A Laboratory of Modern Techniques in Art*. Pollock did not use the medium in his painting until 1943 and it did

¹² Siqueiros quoted by Marontate, 47.

¹³ Learner, 5.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid, 10.

¹⁶ Siqueiros discovered Duco in 1933, made and marketed by Dupont, apparently "by accident" when he was looking for other materials in Montevideo, Argentina. Marontate, 59.

not become a key component of his distinctive drip technique until 1947.¹⁷ Morris Louis was also in attendance at the workshop. Another participant, Axel Horn, reflects that,

Jack and myself along with the others of our group became part of a workshop that Siqueiros started for the express purpose of experimentation with new technological developments in materials and tools. Paints including the then new nitro-cellulose lacquers and silicones, surfaces such as plywood and asbestos panels and paint applicators including airbrushes and spray guns, were some of the materials and techniques to be explored and applied. We were going to put out to pasture the “stick with hairs on its end” as Siqueiros called the brush.¹⁸

The freedom of expression and gestural abandon achieved through pouring, dripping, spraying and hurling the fast drying synthetic paint at image surfaces became associated with New York avant-garde painting in the 1940s and 1950s.¹⁹ The materials and techniques introduced by Siqueiros became incorporated into the avant-garde vocabulary of painting in New York and later Montreal, Toronto, and Regina, but the Marxist belief that the artist should be in touch with the contemporary materials of his time did not. Siqueiros’ more extremist views on making included his insistence that artists should “establish the fundamental premise that *art movements should always develop in accordance with the technological possibilities of their age.*”²⁰ He also argued that art needed to forge a bond with science: “For the first time in history, we shall find scientific truths which can be proved, either physically, chemically, or psychologically.”²¹ The participants in both his New York and California workshops took the material knowledge and incorporated it into their own notion of what it meant to be avant-garde and later became known for innovations with synthetic media, however they did not adopt the ideological and materialist implications of synthetic media, which were at the core of Siqueiros’ belief system and

¹⁷ Lodge, 119-120.

¹⁸ Horn quoted by Marontate, 61.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid, 66.

²¹ Ibid.

compelled his drive to proselytize.²² Had US-based artists adopted the full material-ideology of Siqueiros, the material contribution of synthetic paint may have been written into modern art's beginning in the 1940s.

While Duco might have been the most well-known modern paint media at the time, alkyd paints were and are far more ubiquitous. General Electric originally marketed their alkyd resin, Glyptol (initially created by GE in 1901), as an electrical insulator in 1926 and as a pigmented paint in 1930.²³ Alkyd paint is an oil-modified polyester paint.²⁴ Soybean oil is the more common modifier due to its lesser tendency to yellow with age. The reduced quantity of oil content in alkyd paints allows them to dry slightly faster. Complex and time-consuming oxidative polymerization reactions are still needed in order for the oil portion of the film to become cross-linked and thus 'dry'; however, because the alkyd component of the formulation is already cross-linked, fewer reactions are needed for film formation and drying time is significantly reduced.²⁵ The fast (relative to pure oil paint) drying time and film leveling capabilities of alkyd paint, in addition to its low cost and ready availability at hardware stores made it attractive to artists. Pablo Picasso, Ben Nicholson, Patrick Caulfield, Jackson Pollock and most famously Frank Stella are some of the better-known artists to have taken advantage of the properties of modern alkyd paints. Of his choice to use alkyd paint for the majority of his paintings completed in the 1960s, Caulfield explains, "The choice was an aesthetic decision. I wanted an impersonal surface, with something that had a more decorative quality than art was supposed to have."²⁶ The settling capability of alkyd is what achieved the "impersonal surface", and the glossy and smooth

²² Ibid, 68.

²³ Lodge, 120.

²⁴ Learner, 8.

²⁵ Learner, 8.

²⁶ Caulfield quoted by Learner, 9.

property of the medium is what would have achieved the “decorative quality”. David Lodge noted that “After 1935, commercial alkyd paints were so widely available that their use in artists’ work since then is perhaps more widespread than any of us have supposed.”²⁷ The artist Walter Darby Bannard, who used alkyd resin exclusively from 1956 to 1970 because of its range of colours and affordability, reflects that he and fellow artists in the 1950s “felt guilty” about giving up traditional materials and craftsmanship and jested about Pollock and “his bad choice of paint”.²⁸ There were also artists like Frank Stella “going down to Canal Street and buying what was cheapest. He bought bituminous roof paint for some of the black strip paintings.”²⁹ However, the relative high cost of the car enamel Duco and the Canadian versions Cilco and Cilux indicated that there was more behind the motivation to use synthetic paints than quantity and economy.³⁰ The novelty and the break with traditional painting production were also significant motivators.

Poly vinyl-acetate (PVA) is another very popular synthetic resin that was developed by Union Carbide in 1912 and marketed for commercial use in 1927.³¹ PVA had a reputation for being stable very early (1935) as opposed to Duco (alkyd resin), which was known to be quite brittle for artistic applications.³² The Montreal artist Henry Saxe shares that he and Jacques Hurtubise acquired a synthetic paint recipe from an assistant of Diego Rivera around 1962-1963, consisting of PVA, acetone, and di-ethylene glycol mono-ethyl ether (to slow down the evaporation

²⁷ Lodge, 121.

²⁸ Ibid, 122.

²⁹ Bitumen is known to crack quite badly when it dries. Ibid.

³⁰ Marion Barclay, “The Materials Used in Certain Canadian Abstract Paintings of the 1950s,” in *The Crisis of Abstraction in Canada: The 1950s*, (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1992), 211.

³¹ Lodge, 123.

³² Ibid, 123.

process).³³ They brazenly prepared 10 gallons of the medium in a single batch and in an enclosed room. Acetone is highly flammable. Saxe preferred the colour saturation of his PVA formula above what was available in acrylic at the time; it was also more durable and far less expensive.³⁴ The first known use of PVA as an artist's medium is in 1938 by the New York artists Cordray Simmons and Lue Osborne. Lue Osborne's forays with the synthetic resin were exhibited at *Delphic Studios*, New York, in 1939 and positively reviewed by *Art News* with the article entitled "A Successful Practitioner in a New Medium."³⁵ The article praises the painter:

The exhibition of pictures by Lue Osborne at the Delphic Studios has a two fold interest, for not only are her works charming and original, but they constitute the first one man show of canvases executed in a new medium: synthetic resins. The artist and her husband, Cordray Simmons, have worked together in an attempt to find material for painting which would be durable, clear and unaffected by light. Judging from the present showing, they have met with considerable success. A great variety of tone and texture are to be found in studies in which the application of the colours seems to have been unhampered by the technical limitation of oils, watercolour and tempera.³⁶

And the British artist Brigit Riley explained her choice to use primarily PVA mediums as being aesthetically driven: "I was trying to eliminate the suggestiveness of paint...I did not want to interfere with the experience of what could be seen. Personal handling, thick or thin paint applications: these are themselves statements and irrelevant to my purpose. My painting had to be devoid of such incidentals."³⁷ The synthetic PVA medium allowed Riley to divorce her paintings and her production from the history of assumptions and expectations that were indelibly entwined with the medium of oil paint. With PVA the artist could start fresh.

³³ Interview with Henry Saxe, Artist's Studio, Tamworth, Ontario, March 29, 2016. Note, Gaucher and Tousignant both report they were familiar with this method, but opted out because of the dangers of mixing the concoction. Marontate, 393, 399.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ D. B., "A Successful Practitioner in a New Medium: Lue Osborne," *Art News*, June 10, 1939, 17.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Riley quoted by Learner, 9.

The nomenclature “latex paint” generally applies to any synthetic resin emulsified in water (as opposed to oil or alkyd). “Latex” is thus a broad category of water-emulsified paints, but can be composed of a variety of synthetic resins such as styrene-butadiene (synthetic rubber), PVA, vinyl-acrylic copolymer emulsions and, since 1953, acrylic emulsions.³⁸ A large number of artists experimented with house paints since their introduction on the market and the characteristics of their paintings would be dependent on which type of synthetic resin the “latex” contained. Acrylic resin is the most commonly known synthetic paint media and was introduced to the United States market by Rohm and Hass in 1931.³⁹ The early resin formulations were soft and it was not until 1936 that the hard plastic that comprises the familiar brand Plexiglas, methyl methacrylate, was introduced.⁴⁰ The water emulsion formulation of acrylic resin, Rhoplex AC 33, was introduced in 1953 as indoor wall paint. An exterior acrylic emulsion was later introduced in 1956.

For artist paints, the term *acrylic* encompasses two very distinct types: solution-based (e.g. Magna) and emulsion (e.g. Liquitex, Aqua-tec, Golden, Chromatech). The solvent-based versus water-based acrylic paint formulations have completely different working properties and have been applied and adopted by artists in very different ways. The artist and paint maker Leonard Bocour began making artisanal oil paint in 1932 and the solvent-based acrylic paint, Magna, in 1949.⁴¹ Similar to how Duco is indelibly associated with Pollock’s technically-innovative drip paintings, Magna is forever correlated with the poured *Veil* paintings of Morris Louis. Magna

³⁸ The word ‘emulsion’ or the term ‘water-based’ indicates that the synthetic polymer is dispersed in water and will not separate from the solution, but it is not dissolved in the water. The synthetic polymers are held in solution by components known as surfactants. If emulsion is not specified with the early synthetic resins this means that they were only dissolvable in toxic chemicals, such as acetone. (Acetone is the solvent that is commonly used to remove nail polish).

³⁹ Lodge, 124.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid, 125.

was comprised of the acrylic resin Acryloid F-10 in the solvent Amsco F. The painter Alfred Leslie related that “Bocour saw the tremendous potential of his paint as a medium superior to oil and he would literally give quantities of it away, using us as guinea pigs, telling us that we can do this with it, or try that with it, actually, in a way, influencing the techniques of many painters.”⁴² Bocour Artist Colors marketed Magna as “the first new painting medium in 500 years;” in other words, since oil paint.⁴³ And the company was not exaggerating: there had been innovations in artist oil paint making, as will be discussed shortly, and there was a plethora of new synthetic media developed for the commercial market, but Magna was the first synthetic paint medium to be developed and marketed specifically to artists. Artists consistently used Magna during the 1950s and 1960s including Morris Louis, Mark Rothko, Robert Motherwell, Alfred Leslie, Barnett Newman, Philip Guston, Alex Katz, Raphael Soyer, Mel Stamos, Darby Bannard, and Roy Lichtenstein, however the medium never took off in the way that the water-based version of the polymer did.⁴⁴ The solvent-based system of Magna meant that the paint behaved much like an acrylic varnish, which meant that it could be readily re-dissolved with subsequent applications. Morris Louis used this characteristic to his utmost advantage in the creation of the *Veil* paintings that are comprised of numerous applications of heavily diluted and brightly coloured Magna paints poured down large-scale, (e.g. 260 x 360 cm) sheets of raw canvas. Of Louis’s *Veil* painting *VAV* (1960), the art conservator Thomas Learner observes: “The individual colours can still be seen along the top edge of the painting, although for most of the painted surface they are mixed together. The overall paint film is extremely thin, and is usually considered no more than a *stain*, even though it probably consists of *more than five paint*

⁴² Alfred Leslie quoted by Lodge. *Ibid*, 125.

⁴³ Learner, 5.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*.

applications.”⁴⁵ The retention of a thin and even stain-like appearance despite there being a minimum of five layers of paint on the canvas is a product of the capability of this medium to re-dissolve with each application resulting in a fluid mixing of colours and a re-staining into the raw canvas fibers. Oil paint will not behave this way because it does not dry quickly enough and has a different ‘body’ and water-based acrylic will not behave this way because it is not re-dissolvable after it has dried. With this technique Louis effectively discovered and exploited the maximum unique potential of Magna’s capability. The medium may not have experienced huge commercial success, but its behavioral capabilities are indelibly imprinted on the history of abstract Color Field painting and post painterly abstraction. Kenneth Noland comments that, “the advantage of Magna paint was that it could be thinned with turpentine and (as it was thinned) it held an intensity of hues. It did this [better] than either oil paint or the water soluble paint that was available at the time.”⁴⁶ And Roy Lichtenstein liked Magna’s “fast-drying nature and its ability to produce areas of flat and uniform colour.”⁴⁷ The smooth, large expanses of unmodulated fields of colour that came to mark an entire movement and distinguish a group of painters, Louis, Noland, Olitski (otherwise know as the Washington Color School) and a painting style, Color Field painting, from the previously dominant abstract expressionist style is the result of the solution-based acrylic paint, Magna.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Learner, 5. Emphasis added.

⁴⁶ Noland quoted by Learner, 6.

⁴⁷ Learner, 6.

⁴⁸ Although early Magna paint suited Louis's work well, the loose consistency of the paint caused Bocour to change the formula in 1958, giving the paint more body, reportedly by adding beeswax. This formulation change made the paint harder to disperse in solution, causing Louis to complain of being "none too happy with the present Magna since it doesn't particularly lend itself to my purposes." Therefore, in April of 1960, Bocour began to make a thinner form of Magna, reportedly without beeswax, specifically for Louis. Glenn Gates, Tatiana Ausemay and Susan Lake, “What Makes a Color Field? A Technical Examination of Magna Paint,” in *Modern Paints Uncovered*, (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 2006), 277-278.

Acrylic emulsion paints had the same influence on the methodology and expression of Hard-Edge painting in Montreal. However, unlike the group of artists associated with the Washington Color School and movements like Post-Painterly Abstraction and styles like Color Field, the Montreal Hard-Edge painters did not identify or associate as a group. Tousignant learned of acrylic paint from Molinari in 1958⁴⁹ and Gaucher adopted acrylic paint independently in 1964 and, as documented in chapter 2, each had their own independent evolution to Hard-Edge expression. Acrylic paint is a versatile medium capable of modeling three-dimensional space, rendering representational objects, and being modeled into various textures. But oil paint can do these things too and often better. Instead of arguing for a complete reversal – that the medium instead of artist, drove method and thus expression – I will point out that what the Montreal Hard-Edge painters did was harness the outside limit of the material capability of acrylic paint. Instead of forcing acrylic into the familiar expressive box of oil paint, they followed its different properties and these influenced their making and thus their idea. It is interesting to stop here and reflect on the influence of new media and Greenberg’s notorious single-mindedness on the equation between staining and avant-garde painting. As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, now understanding the history of material development it is clear that his prescription was based on the staining capability of Magna paint. But this material-specificity was never acknowledged. Water-based acrylic paints are not capable of staining canvases in the same way. Greenberg’s prescriptiveness on flatness and thus staining led to him and Molinari to having words at the 1962 Emma Lake workshop over the way paint should be used.⁵⁰ Nasgaard writes that, “Greenberg argued for as little pigment as possible on the painting, letting the canvas

⁴⁹ Marontate, 394.

⁵⁰ Nasgaard, *The Plasticiens and Beyond*, 74.

imbibe it,” whereas Molinari prepared the canvas and covered it as evenly as possible.⁵¹ Water-based acrylic paint, unlike solution-based Magna, does not lend itself to staining but it does allow for an unprecedented smooth, even, and layered application of paint – a quality and methodology that the Hard-Edge painters excelled at demonstrating. Molinari, Tousignant and Gaucher were building their artistic vocabulary with water-based acrylic, while Louis, Noland, and Olitski, built theirs with solution-based Magna; comparing the resulting paintings is akin to comparing apples and oranges – it makes little sense.

As cited in Chapter 2, Tousignant named acrylic paint as being “a structural breakthrough in painting.”⁵² He shared this in conversation with Michael White in 1973 in relation to his exhibitions at the Musée d’Art Contemporain and at Gallery B on Crescent Street, both in Montreal. Here Tousignant directly acknowledges that the oil medium hemmed his creative abilities and that the water-born quality of acrylic paint facilitated a structural breakthrough that allowed him to work *directly* with colour.⁵³ And notably, as early as 1964 acrylic paint was already considered *more durable* by artists and art historians alike. Andrew Hudson writes: “I don’t think it’s a coincidence that, concurrent with his new paintings, Molinari should be re-creating some of those earlier Duco paintings in a more durable acrylic medium.”⁵⁴ Having been advertised for the first time only ten years prior in late 1954 or early 1955, acrylic paint was

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² See Chapter 2, pages 41-42 for full quotation. White, “Two painters stage major exhibits.”

⁵³ Oil paint dries by the chemical reaction of oxidation, which is very slow. The chemical change in structure also causes a darkening of the pigments with drying and increased darkening with age. Conversely, acrylic paint dries by evaporation, which is an extremely fast process and results in very little colour change. This meant that artists could seemingly work ‘directly with colour’ as opposed to being held back by the disadvantageous qualities of the oil medium. However, technically all pigment is carried in a medium of some kind meaning that it is not actually possible to work *directly* with pigment. Unbound pigments are a fine, dry powder; it is the medium they are bound in (acrylic, oil, enamel, water, casein, etc.) that allows them to adhere to various surfaces.

⁵⁴ Hudson, “Phenomenon: Colour painting in Montreal,” 358-360.

relatively new on the market at this point.⁵⁵ And considering the verifiable durability of oil paint via the numerous centuries-old Renaissance paintings still in excellent condition, artists' and art historians' belief that acrylic paint was more durable in the span of ten years is a testament to the effectiveness of the marketing campaigns of paint manufacturing companies, the artists' faith in modern materials, and their desire to move beyond the confines of traditional methodologies entwined with oil media.⁵⁶

The history of water-based acrylic paint begins with Liquitex acrylic paint in 1954. And only four years later its capabilities contributed to a major change in creative expression in Montreal and the beginning of Hard-Edge painting. Permanent Pigments Inc., Cincinnati, Ohio, founded by Henry Levinson in 1933, marketed the first water emulsion acrylic media intended for artists in 1954 under the name Liquitex.⁵⁷ Levinson had received an acrylic emulsion sample from the German company Rohm and Haas in 1953 and after a year of experimentation, he introduced his artist line.⁵⁸ The early acrylic emulsions (1954-1963) were a liquid and sold in jars. In 1963 Levinson devised a way to thicken the emulsion and from there forward the paint was available in tubes.⁵⁹ Bocour's Aquatec (1963), Gutierrez's Politec (1956) (made in Mexico and distributed in the U.S.), Chromatech Acrylic (1979), and Golden Artist Colours (1980), acrylic emulsion formulations followed. Each was formulated slightly differently and trade secrets were held close. Once marketed in tubes the medium took off. For example, it is the most common

⁵⁵ There is not unanimous agreement on the precise date for the initial release of acrylic paint in the literature. Lodge, "A History of Synthetic Painting Media with Special Reference to Commercial Materials," 126.

⁵⁶ However, I acknowledge that Hudson's comment about greater durability was in relation to the car enamel medium and likely not considering the full history of oil paint's durability. Nonetheless, the fact that acrylic paint had acquired any status as durable in only ten years is noteworthy.

⁵⁷ Lodge, 126. Sources differ on this introduction date. Learner cites that the first acrylic emulsion artist paints were marketed in 1956, three years after Rohm and Haas produced the first pure acrylic emulsion, Rhoplex AC-33. Learner, 6. But Both Lodge and Marontate cite the first market date in late 1954 or early 1955. Marontate, 220.

⁵⁸ Lodge, 126.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

synthetic medium found in the Tate collection.⁶⁰ An early advertisement for Liquitex stated its qualities as “rapid drying, easy handling, versatility, exceptional durability, can paint on any material, completely permanent colors, thins with water and will not separate.”⁶¹ And despite being listed last, it is undeniably the water-born quality of acrylic emulsion paints that made for their popularity. The paint would dry almost instantly and the next layer could be applied immediately without concern for dissolving the layer beneath. This wet on dry mixing ability of acrylic media is one of the primary technical characteristics, along with fast drying, that the methodology of Molinari, Tousignant and Gaucher relied on: they would apply a number of thin layers of acrylic paint relying implicitly on the distinct colours of the layers to *inform* one another but not to muddy through mixing. And the success of their crisp abutted edges was contingent upon the integrity of the adjacent film to not bleed or blend.

Not all acrylic paints are created equal, however. There are technological and chemical gymnastics involved with getting two incompatible materials – acrylic polymer and water – in emulsion with one another. Every acrylic emulsion has a laundry list of ingredients and the quantity and quality of each is a closely guarded secret by each paint manufacturer. The polymer itself provides the characteristic base and the formula is what makes it a success, or failure. The ingredients include: surfactant, to disperse the hydrophobic acrylic polymer in water; antifoam, to stop excessive foaming of paint if stirred or shaken; thickeners, to improve handling of the paint by providing a more “buttery” consistency; freeze thaw agent, to prevent freezing of the formulation in cold environment (acrylic paint shatters like glass when frozen); coalescing solvent, to temporarily soften the polymer particles during film formation; pH buffer, to keep pH

⁶⁰ Learner, 6.

⁶¹ Ibid.

at an optimum level for all additives; biocides, to prevent mold growth; pigment dispersants, to disperse and reduce flocculation of finely ground pigments; wetting agent, to reduce surface tension so that it more easily spreads around pigments (especially organic ones).⁶² The operation of acrylic paints is a complicated system:

Acrylic emulsions are two-phase systems. They combine two entirely immiscible materials, with one dispersed as fine globules in the other. While still wet, fine globules of the softened acrylic resin (which is really surprisingly hard – like the final film) are evenly dispersed in water. The water, of course, makes the mixture fluid. As the water evaporates, capillary pressure exerts tremendous forces which draw the dispersed particles of acrylic resin into contact and deforms them into a continuous film. The completeness of the fusion depends on several factors, most notable temperature and humidity, which vary in artist's studios.⁶³

The quality and durability of the acrylic film formed on the surface of the painting substrate will depend on the specific acrylic polymer resin used and the type and quality of the emulsion formulation. Given the high degree of technical skill required to produce an artist emulsion paint it is understandable why trade secrets were held close and also why artists would notice a significant degree of variance between the different formulations. Gaucher commented that he was reluctant to switch brands because their colours would operate differently and his very technically precise manner of working could not accommodate these inconsistencies.⁶⁴

There was also an interesting shift towards a focus on the *quality* of synthetic media unintentionally initiated via the New Deal project funded by the American Government during the Great Depression, 1933-1939, to support out of work artists and get art into the public

⁶² Learner, 7.

⁶³ Lodge, 127.

⁶⁴ Marontate, 403-404.

sphere.⁶⁵ This turn to quality and testing protocols also led to conferences and workshops being held throughout Canada and significantly influenced the uptake and experimentation with commercial paint this side of the border. The New Deal project was motivated by the success of previously state-funded Mexican mural projects and had the incidental effect of “creating a demand for quality materials which far exceeded the supply,” and brought about surprising collaborations between industry, science, artists, art conservators and government administration.⁶⁶ Seeking a way to control and define projects outside of precarious subjective value judgments on artistic skill, New Deal administrators looked to materials standards as a method of controlling production in a more “objective” way. This forged partnerships such as that between the conservation scientist Rutherford Gettens, Frank Sterner, an administrator for one of the New Deal initiatives, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and the commercial paint supplier Henry Levinson (who was not yet producing acrylic emulsion paint at that time).⁶⁷ What emerged from these much-needed and unprecedented collaborations were thorough testing of artist paint materials and the establishment of standards for production. Artists, manufactures, and administration welcomed the new standards: it meant that the murals would be executed in durable materials and that suppliers meeting the standards would have a corner on the market.

The collaborative initiatives instigated by the New Deal project had the corollary benefit of creating a large base of materials knowledge and contributed to information on new materials being brought to Canada. Through harnessing the key players and new material information arising from the New Deal projects in the US, Kingston-based artist André Biéler played a

⁶⁵ For a detailed account of the New Deal Project see Marontate, “New Deal Art Projects: State Intervention and the Emergence of Technical Issues as a Means to Control Artistic Production,” in *Synthetic Media and Modern Painting*, 70-106.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 70-71.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*.

significant role in the dissemination of new materials and techniques across Canada through his organization of the Kingston Conference in 1941.⁶⁸ The National Gallery of Canada (NGC) jointly organized the conference with Queen's University and the Carnegie Corporation, and hosted a two and a half day workshop by Rutherford Gettens, Frank Sterner, and George Holt (of the painters' workshop in Boston) entitled "The Contemporary Interest in Methods and Materials in Painting."⁶⁹ Canadian artists were also privy to new materials development via the publications *Canadian Art*, *Art News*, *Arts*, and *American Art*. And of course, cross-pollination across the Canadian-US border by individual artists who would return with numerous new materials and techniques. Molinari reportedly picked up Duco when he visited New York in 1955,⁷⁰ and a number of artists would have been exposed to the working properties and benefits of several synthetic mediums through the Gutiérrez lectures and workshops held across Canada in 1956.⁷¹ Organized by Alan Jarvis, then-director of the NGC, the workshops were entitled "From Fresco to Plastics" and were held in Vancouver, Regina, Calgary, Winnipeg, Ottawa, Toronto and Montreal.⁷² Surveys estimate that thousands of artists, architects and students would have participated in these workshops, including B.C. Binning and Douglas Morton.⁷³ It is surprising to see the way in which materials and their properties and methodologies were enthusiastically disseminated and embraced on the one hand, but not afforded a key role in the criticism, curating or art historiography of the late modern period on the other. As was outlined at the end of the previous chapter: this is because the materials, while novel and providing new possibility, were still *understood* to be entirely in service to artistic idea.

⁶⁸ Barclay, 106.

⁶⁹ Barclay, 206.

⁷⁰ Gilles Dagneault, Personal Communication, Molinari Foundation, Hochelaga, Montreal, April 28, 2016.

⁷¹ Molinari or Tousignant attended or were aware of these workshops as far as I have been able to determine.

⁷² Barclay, 209.

⁷³ "Attendance reports sent to the National Gallery from Calgary indicate that several hundred (125-250) were at each of his talks there." Marontate, 157.

However, medium, methodology, and idea are always intertwined; they dialogue with one another as much as they dialogue with ideology and intention. This section has outlined that despite the way art history and criticism were written, the reality is that the novel capabilities of synthetic media at the beginning in the 1930s changed art style and production through contributing to idea. The durability, accessibility, and affordability of alkyd, PVA, Duco, and acrylic resins made for an increase in the outdoor mural campaigns of the Mexican mural artists and the spread of both their socialist propaganda and their material-methodology throughout the United States and Canada. The viscosity and fast drying capability of Duco and alkyd paints resulted in the dripping technique innovated by Pollock. Oil paint does not drip in lace-like threads like Duco and alkyd paints because it is far too viscous and dries too slowly. And the solvent-based liquidity and high chroma of Magna paints created for the distinctive staining and blended effects achieved by Louis with his *Veil* paintings, and the smooth unmodulated fields of colour achieved by the Washington Color school. Material in all of these instances motivated innovation. There were a multitude of other factors involved, but novel material properties are a critical ingredient in each example.

The Impact of Independent Colourman

It is not only new synthetic media that effected a change in artistic practice and a notion of onto-epistemological space – such as Molinari’s contention that his Hard-Edge paintings would effect a new understanding of space in his viewer and would thus change their world-view. Looking back through art history, it is fundamental to point out that artist materials had been motivating innovation long before synthetic media entered the market; paint media and its various

instantiations have been influencing artistic expression throughout time. From cave paintings executed with raw pigments and hide glues, through egg tempera, casein, blood, oil, fresco, gum Arabic, etc., the media in which the pigment is bound and the tools with which it is applied have always contributed to the way artworks have been created. A different representation of space is reflective of a different understanding of space and material concerns and influences cannot be separated from this. It is thus useful in order to emphasize my point to look at late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century paint developments to demonstrate how small changes, like the portability of paint media, can effect large-scale stylistic and socio-epistemological change. The advent of synthetic paint media is not alone in effecting dramatic change in both paint style and world-view. The Impressionist movement was made possible by the invention of portable paint media. And this new way of making paintings that was afforded with the portable media effected a *new way of seeing and understanding the world*. The travelling watercolour palette made possible by the hardened watercolour ‘cake’ marketed by Reeves, began spurring novel artistic expression since its introduction in 1776.⁷⁴ The artist H. Gluck reflects that, “the nature of an artist’s materials automatically sets appropriate limits to his use of them.”⁷⁵ Logically this makes sense, however the historiography of art is far more likely to credit innovation to artistic ingenuity and consign materials as passive participants. But the character and quality of materials play a far greater role in creation than is commonly credited. The relationship between artist and material underwent a significant overhaul during the 1600s and 1700s when the apprenticeship system began to wane and independent skilled colourmen became necessary. The first commercial artist colourman established in Britain was Reeves, founded by William Reeves

⁷⁴ H. Gluck, “The Dilemma of the Painter and Conservator in the Synthetic Age,” *The Museums Journal*, Volume 54, April 1954-March 1955, 150.

⁷⁵ Gluck, 149. “Gluck” was the desired moniker of Hannah Gluckstein who, dissatisfied with the poor quality of artist materials available in 1950, abandoned painting for ten year to focus on research and campaigning for higher paint manufacturing standards in Britain.

in 1766. The original colourmen were businessmen and chemists and introduced themselves into a market where they observed a sizable need: artists were having greater difficulty finding people to undertake the considerably time-consuming and skillful job of grinding and mixing their pigments.⁷⁶ This immediately resulted in three significant shifts in the relationship between the artist and their materials. First the artist was no longer in complete control of the constituents of their colour. Second, the portable watercolour cakes allowed for direct work out of doors for the first time. And third, the layperson could now for the first time dabble in art making. Previous to this the technically demanding and time consuming grinding and mixing of pigments had made painting inaccessible to anyone other than artist-craftsman and master painters. The owner/proprietor Reeves stated, “The new colours were not only used by the real artist who had hitherto prepared his own, but opened up a new field of painters, the amateur artist, to whom previously painting had been inaccessible.”⁷⁷

The colourman, Blackman, was established by George Blackman in 1784 and introduced oil colour in cakes in 1794. These colours likewise allowed portability and accessibility but now in the oil medium as well. However the cake format for oil paint was short-lived because they dried out too quickly and became unusable. Shortly afterwards Blackman introduced colours in bladders, which contained a larger proportion of oil and could be preserved for a longer period. And with the invention of the bladder, “the sketching box was born – the *plein air* school took the air. All landscape painting as we know it today stems from this innovation.”⁷⁸ Regarding the change in scale in the nature of artist and material, Gluck reflects that “It has been amusing to see to what lengths writers on art of the last two hundred years have gone to find every reason

⁷⁶ Ibid, 150.

⁷⁷ Reeves cited by Gluck, 151.

⁷⁸ Gluck, 152.

but this for the change in handling of paint and its summary use.”⁷⁹ And this is the same observation that is being made with this research – the convention of our subject-oriented ontological philosophical frameworks and focus on the artist as being the sole contributor to idea, material, and making leads to important material contributions to the history of art being de facto attributed to other things.

Gluck makes another observation and draws a conclusion concerning the relative simplicity of modern paint materials that is a key matter for consideration. The artist writes:

The average painter’s ignorance of his material had increased in direct ratio to the increase in facilities for getting everything ready made. Things that come easily to mankind are usually treated cavalierly. So soon as the painter was relieved of the laborious acquiring and preparation of his materials, he began to use his ready-made one more freely and with less care.

It is undeniable that the advent of commercial colourmen resulted in the protection and secrecy of paint formulas that in turn resulted in artists employment of inferior or incompatible products in certain instances, however it is not unanimously true that modern paint media was used with “less care”. What is observable is that paint was used differently with each innovation of the colourman. Sandby, Gainsborough, and Cozens (J.R.) each demonstrated a loosening in style and technique with watercolour cakes in 1766; likewise Girtten, Turner, and Constable with oil cakes and bladders in 1794.⁸⁰ Turner painted the first known oil studies directly from nature in 1806-1810, thus marking a shift in the location of art making as well.⁸¹ Artistic media has significantly contributed to artist idea throughout art’s history. What is novel about synthetic media is that its introduction coincided with abstraction and the development of art theory, and despite art moving away from representation, and thus a complete dearth of “content” to discuss,

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 151.

⁸¹ Ibid.

its writers *still* did not address how the material significantly influenced the changes in space, scale, and idea.

That said, while it is assuredly true that innovation in painting style would not have occurred in the same way were it not for the availability of new and novel materials, materials were not the only ingredient involved. New materials were a critical component alongside other socio-cultural, political, and art historical factors. In a savvy turn of phrase, the Canadian art curator Denise Leclerc conveys one of the predominant additional contributing factors motivating Hard-Edge painting, which was more commonly referred to as geometric painting in its earlier days:

During the second half of the 20th century, geometry, which was used to create the system of perspective that had served in painting since the Renaissance to develop a three-dimensional space, became the principal tool by which this space was deconstructed.⁸²

Geometry is what made for Euclidean space or perspectival space and allowed viewers to look into a three-dimensional world of painting. Beginning in the Renaissance, the materials used for this were oil paints.⁸³ The incredibly versatile blending, glazing, and slow-drying properties of oil paint lent itself well to accurate and luxurious historical stories and representations of the world around us. Modernism gradually began to flatten out space with the Cubist and de Stijl movements most vividly representing the flattened grid structure of painting. Terry Fenton explains that colour modeling and the materials of painting are directly related to the creation of illusory space.⁸⁴ Atmospheric colour is the name for the colour effects created by light and shadow, atmospheric colour is not the actual colour of things but the way colour appears in space

⁸² Leclerc, "Colour Speaks," 200-201.

⁸³ Of course the earliest perspectival Renaissance paintings were made with egg tempera and fresco paint. My point is not that perspectival space can only be modeled with oil paint, but that its slow drying qualities uniquely lend themselves to creating the illusion of depth and three-dimensionality.

⁸⁴ Fenton, *Appreciating Noland*, 18-19.

at a particular time of day. The material properties of oil paint, Fenton explains, were particularly adept at recreating atmospheric effects.

Oil paint emerged in response to a need. The new naturalism of Renaissance Flemish and Italian painters called for more comprehensive settings. Shallow depicted spaces – niches and anonymous gilded back-grounds – gradually gave way to larger and more comprehensive settings, to indoors and to ‘all outdoors.’ In both cases artists had to evoke a convincing space. Convincing space called for effects of atmosphere and light. Oil paint was an ideal material for rendering this space. Because it was greasy and slow-drying, it kept colour from ‘bleeding’ into adjacent areas yet allowed controlled blending. Oil could also be used as a translucent tint or glaze over and underpainting. Thus oil paint enabled atmospheric colour and enormously enhanced its power.⁸⁵

And likewise, acrylic paint facilitated the destruction of atmospheric space and geometry. James Campbell explains that Touseignant’s entire practice was informed by “his search for pure chroma,” that “has been a struggle to transcend geometry.”⁸⁶ And by this Campbell means Touseignant was trying to transcend a kind of closure akin to the end of painting. Campbell illuminates the nature of this struggle when he quotes Barnett Newman as saying, “It is precisely this death image, the grip of geometry, that has to be confronted.”⁸⁷ Emptied of all referential characteristics, geometry included, it was feared that painting devoid of content would come to its natural and final end. There is a direct link here between the transcendence of geometry, the emancipation of colour, and the physical properties and capabilities of acrylic paint. It is of course possible to model space with acrylic paint, a plethora of artists do this with great skill, however the technique of modeling space with acrylic is more akin to how artists had to model space with fresco painting – in layers or through mixing different colours to effect shade and tints, and depth and highlights. Because acrylic paint dries very quickly it does not allow for the wet-in-wet modeling of oil paint, nor does it lend itself to glazing – two features that enabled

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Campbell, *After Geometry*, 10.

⁸⁷ Barnett Newman quoted by Campbell in *After Geometry*, 11.

artists to create the illusion of great depth and three-dimensionality with relative facility in oil paint.

Chromatech Acrylic Paint and Montreal Hard-Edge

The materialization of Hard-Edge painting is best described as autopoietic, a term that I borrow from the anthropologist Tim Ingold and which emphasizes an automatic growing within. The materialization of Hard-Edge painting was not specifically willed and not definitively determined by any one thing; it instead emerged from a number of different dynamics coming together at once. It emerged from a backlash against traditional art figuration and narratives, groups of young artists experiencing post-war freedoms and driven to find new meaning for their production, art criticism that embraced the avant-garde and abstract art, and the industrial revolution driving expansion and decoration, which in turn drove paint, manufacture to new capabilities, greater quantities, and broader availability.

The enthusiasm that artists had for Duco reflected by the medium's success and inclusion in the art practice of Mexican, American and Canadian artists was carried over into acrylic emulsion when it became available. The Regina painter Otto Rogers shared that "acrylic paint is mysteriously wrapped into what is possible to make high art."⁸⁸ And more recently Rogers explained that the "technical finesse [of oil paint] became too restrictive; acrylic freed us from having to pay much attention to technique." Rogers was one of the earliest Canadian adopters of

⁸⁸ Rogers, Personal Communication, 18 April 2016.

acrylic paint in 1957 and his methodology was one that “liked to take things through rapid changes and acrylic allowed that rapidity.”⁸⁹

The unanimous appeal of acrylic paint was that it dried quickly, was colour-fast, and the paint remained stable.⁹⁰ Artists trusted the paint manufactures and were content to concern themselves with the business of making art and leave behind the more laborious technical and art historical concerns associated with the oil medium. Artists also welcomed the positive associations between synthetic mediums and avant-garde expression. The adoption of synthetic paint was by no means matched with a dispensation of technical interest or concern on the part of the artists, however they did trust that paint manufactures were producing quality products and that their guarantees could be relied upon.⁹¹ Molinari and Tousignant began using acrylic paint in 1958 and first exhibited acrylic paintings in 1959 and 1960 respectively.⁹² Both artists began with Liquitex. However, looking around the preserved studio of Molinari at the Molinari Foundation in Hochelaga, Montreal and the fully functioning studio of the still practicing artist, Tousignant, multiple brands of acrylic paint are visible; the original, Liquitex, is still present, there are also Golden Artist Colors from the upstate New York company started by Sam Golden in 1980, the nephew of Leonard Bocour (who produced Magna),⁹³ Chromatech acrylics, produced by

⁸⁹ Interestingly, while Rogers describes acrylic paint in this seemingly influential light, he denied that the medium had any power over his idea or methodology. Roger’s painting was deeply entwined with his Bahá’í faith and thus spiritual and idealist. He enthusiastically debated my materialist perspective, but was not swayed in the least. Personal communication with artist, Otto Rogers’ Studio, Prince Edward County, Ontario, 3 January 2019.

⁹⁰ Tousignant, 20 August 2016; Saxe, 29 March 2016; Rogers, 18 April 2016.

⁹¹ Both Rogers (18 April 2016) and Tousignant (20 August 2016) report this.

⁹² Tousignant, 20 August 2016.

⁹³ Leonard Bocour and Sam Golden were partners in Bocour Artist Colors from the late 1930s to 1972. Golden briefly retired after the paint makers dissolved the partnership in 1972 and then started Golden Artist Colors in 1980 with his son Mark who is still running the company. Whereas Bocour became wary about the quality and reliability of synthetic polymers later in his career, Golden felt that their versatility and speed infused them with infinite creative capability: “You could make acrylics behave as watercolour. You could make them behave as oil paint, you could make them be shiny you could make them be matte, you could make them be thin washes. It gives you a whole wide, wide area to work in. Not only that, but it extends your painting life by at least ten years because you

Michael Towe in Montreal beginning in 1979, and TriArt acrylic, a Kingston-based acrylic paint company started in 1994. It is evident from the studios of these two artists that they did not share the same reluctance to switch brands that Gaucher did.⁹⁴ However, far from being apathetic to the technology of acrylic paint, given the opportunity to influence paint manufacture when Michael Towe began producing paint in Montreal, each of the artists, Molinari, Tousignant, and particularly Gaucher, took full advantage of the occasion.

Towe produced a bespoke “darkest blue possible without being black” for Tousignant and Paynes Grey for Molinari, which he then shipped to La Rochelle, France for the artists in 1980.⁹⁵ Molinari, Tousignant, Christian Kiopini, Luc Béland, and Lucio de Heusch were sponsored by the Quebec government to attend a symposium on contemporary painting in Quebec organized by le Musée du Nouveau-Monde in La Rochelle, France. Towe sent acrylic paint for the entire Quebec contingent and the success of the shipment and quality of the product is what cemented the Montreal paint maker’s career.⁹⁶ Towe was the only acrylic paint making company in Montreal in the 1980s and 1990s and artists would come from all over Quebec to acquire his paint.⁹⁷ He would also deliver paint by the gallon to the door of artists’ studios in Montreal and for a few of his clients, such as Kenneth Noland and Elaine de Kooning, in New York.⁹⁸ He became friends with a number of his clients including Molinari, Tousignant and Gaucher. In

can finish a painting. You don’t have to wait for it to dry...so that the life of the artist, his painting life is extended...” Golden cited by Marontate, 136.

⁹⁴ A technical study by Kate Helwig and Marie-Chantale at the Canadian Conservation Institute in 2005 of the paints in Gaucher’s studio evidences the artist’s consistency with the Chromatech brand. Liquitex is also present; however, Chromatech shut down in late 1990s. Kate Helwig and Marie-Chantale Poisson, “A Study of Painting Materials for the Studio of Yves Gacher,” *J.CAC*, Volume, 29 (2005): 42-51.

⁹⁵ Michael Towe, Personal Communication, Paint-Maker’s Studio, Hochelaga, Montreal, 10 July 2015. .

⁹⁶ Ibid, 2015.

⁹⁷ Pellerin would travel from Quebec City to acquire Chromatech paints and he knew many artists who did the same. Pellerin, Personal Communication, Artist’s Studio, Montreal, 15 September 2016.

⁹⁸ See Jessica Veevers, “The Autopoiesis of Acrylic Paint and Monochrome Painting in Montreal,” in AIC-CAC Emergency Preparedness, Montreal Conference Post Print. (Washington DC: American Institute of Conservation, forthcoming), for a detailed account of Michael Towe’s history and Chromatech’s paint formulas.

operation from 1978 until 1999 Towe, like Leonard Bocour, came to paint-making via art-making. His methodology and outlook hark back to before the advent of the independent artist colourman – Towe considers himself an artist *and* a paintmaker, and his original impulse for making acrylic paint was to get inside the medium and understand its properties from a craftsman’s perspective. Wisely, because small batch acrylic paint manufacture is impossible (the manufacture method and laundry list of ingredients requires for acrylic paint to be made at certain minimum quantities – this is relative to traditional oil paint making which could be done in extremely small batches geared to the size and need of a specific painting), Towe canvassed Montreal painters and enquired after their interest in home-grown acrylic.⁹⁹ The endeavoring paint maker was given the *Field of Dreams* go ahead: if you build it they will come.

Towe’s artistic background gave him an inside understanding of performance prerequisites and high-quality standards necessary for artist paints. The Quebec artist, Christian Kiopini remarked that “everyone was using Chromatech, it was in the air,” and Guy Pellerin remembers fondly that “using Chromatech was like running a luxury car.”¹⁰⁰ Chromatech paints had a higher pigment load than other commercial acrylic paints and were capable of creating highly saturated surfaces – a key attribute the colour painters were looking for. Towe welcomed the opportunity to work with artists to achieve both a superior product and their painterly ambitions. His working relationship with Gaucher was particularly unique and constructive.

Towe, one of the few to have acquired knowledge of Gaucher’s working methodology describes it like this:

⁹⁹ Tousignant, 20 August 2016.

¹⁰⁰ Kiopini, 26 October 2015; Pellerin, 15 September 2016.

He might be looking for a particular red...he would start with the one that he had and then maybe add a layer of blue to push it back a little bit, and then maybe a layer of green and then an orangy-red on top of that and then keep going until he achieved the colour he was looking for. It was a complicated process because he had to maintain his surface texture. It wasn't just ultimate flatness. What it does is give you highlights and shadows and everything in-between. Some parts look darker, some brighter and some in the middle. It increases the richness of the colour. So it was very important that he could keep the weave of the canvas visible. The colour would die otherwise.¹⁰¹

With this methodological description, it is apparent how the wet-on-dry mixing quality/capability of acrylic paint was paramount for Gaucher's process and also how the specific nature of the acrylic medium made this methodology possible. Gaucher was a perfectionist with his materials. Marc Garneau, a student and later close friend of Gaucher's, shares that he would test all of his art making mediums and methods systematically and would invite representatives from companies such as Talens and Grumbacher to his studio to trial products thoroughly.¹⁰² And Marc Séguin, another student of Gaucher's, shares that the painter would "give kitchen recipes for mixing paint, the thickness of stretcher bars, and types of canvas material."¹⁰³ Gaucher had eyes like a hawk, Seguin affirms: "he would notice a flaw from across the room right away."¹⁰⁴ Imperfections were not tolerated. Gaucher sought Towe's assistance in the early 1990s to find a matte medium to add to his acrylic paint that would allow him to apply thinner layers while still achieving even coverage.¹⁰⁵ Matte paint layers have the corollary benefit of reducing the appearance of surface imperfections because they do not scatter light like shiny surfaces will. Towe developed a number of different formulas and delivered them to Gaucher's door for his trial. Minex 2 is the brand name of the feldspar material used in the successful matte medium. Towe described, "While there are finer Minex grades available Gaucher needed the coarseness of

¹⁰¹ Towe, 10 July 2015.

¹⁰² Garneau, 24 August 2017.

¹⁰³ Seguin, 28 September 2017.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ However, Gaucher had been using Chromatech acrylics since the beginning of the 1980s. Towe, 10 July 2015.

Minex 2 to hold his texture.”¹⁰⁶ And he describes the matte medium “as being white or very close to white and transparent and they would work by bending and scattering light in different ways depending on the surface roughness.”¹⁰⁷ Evidenced in this collaborative relationship between Towe and Gaucher is the influence of synthetic paint on artistic production and in this unique case, vice versa. “We had a good working relationship and it was beneficial to both of us,” Towe explains.¹⁰⁸ Tousignant also used the nephylene syenite (component of Minex 2) material to matte down the glossiness of some of his acrylic mediums. He was introduced to the material by Towe and describes that he would ‘scoop the material in with a soup spoon,’ adding approximately one spoonful per quart and then mixing the medium thoroughly with an electric hand mixer.¹⁰⁹ He commented that the surface of the painting was “more fragile” (it would mark easier), with the addition of the matting agent.¹¹⁰ We can gather here a difference in personality and approach between Gaucher and Tousignant, with Gaucher’s methodology being exceedingly meticulous and Tousignant’s being more matter of fact and expedient.¹¹¹ The endurance of their paintings attests to the fact that both methods were effective.

In the case of Michael Towe and Leonard Bocour, the artist-paint maker can be seen here to have a more determining perspective on the effect of materials on artistic process than that of the traditional artist and art historian. For instance, Bocour thought that his materials influenced making: “Part of my thesis is that materials influence form,” he stated when observing the radical

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Towe, 10 July 2015.

¹⁰⁹ Tousignant, 20 August 2016.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ In my two conversations with Tousignant at his studio in St. Henri I came to understand the artist’s working method to be primarily practical. He would just do it and if it worked, it worked.

shift in Morris Louis's process after adopting Magna.¹¹² Having begun his paint-making career as an aspiring artist Bocour would have understood how the properties of materials could influence creative process. In contrast Sam Golden and his son Mark, with whom he restarted making paint in 1980, were entrepreneurs and chemists: they saw their role as being strictly facilitative as opposed to influential or instrumental, and they understood the artist as being in control of material properties and expression.¹¹³ "Ultimately, the Goldens maintain that it is artists who decide what qualities they want in their materials. The paint makers have developed a clear sense of the limits of their role in art making."¹¹⁴ Henry Levinson of Liquitex paint was also a chemist and he approached paint making similarly to the Goldens. Because Levinson was aware that he did not have the inside understanding of the necessary properties for synthetic media he hired the artist Russell Woody in 1963 and together they wrote a book on painting with synthetic media which enhanced the authority of Liquitex acrylic and Levinson's paint making.¹¹⁵ However, Towe – an artist first – shared the perspective of Bocour: Towe conveyed that properties of the matte medium he formulated for Gaucher contributed to a development in the artist's process.¹¹⁶ As cited earlier in this chapter, the artist Gluck scoffed at the explanatory acrobatics involved in attributing significant changes in artistic expression to anything but materials.¹¹⁷ The history of new material influencing new expression has been detailed in this chapter, however my claim here does not align itself with that of Gluck: the influential role of materials does not trump the necessary role of creative process. There must be a meeting of both.

For instance, Marontate shares:

¹¹² Marontate, 130.

¹¹³ Ibid, 153.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 152.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 223-229. Russell Woody (with a technical note by Henry Levinson), *Painting with Synthetic Media*, (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1965).

¹¹⁶ Towe, 10 July 2015.

¹¹⁷ Gluck, 149.

[artist] techniques are not merely straightforward applications of the properties of new materials. In particular, Louis' techniques of pouring the paint onto huge canvases (at least by the standards of the period) betray a remarkable mastery of the medium, which transcend routine expectations of its handling. It is extremely difficult to maintain control over areas of saturation in such large canvases. *Bocour and Golden tried to imitate Louis' deceptively simple-looking technique and despite considerable effort, the paint makers were unable to duplicate the effects Louis achieved.*¹¹⁸

Tremendous skill and ingenuity are still required on the part of the artist: the new materialities will not express themselves but they will influence materialization. As will be elaborated in chapter 5, we are all of us, materials, humans, and environment combined, inside materialization; there is no immovable mover, as Aristotle postulated.¹¹⁹ But his is blatantly linear and teleological philosophical system. Art does not *begin* with materials and nor does it *begin* with artist-inspired ideas. It is always in a process of becoming, but its process is not causally linear – and *this* is why Bocour and Golden couldn't mimic a Louis painting. Not because they were not gifted with the same inspiration or technical skill (though this is a contributing factor), but because they were engaging with making in a linear way. I am not interested in locating the unmoved mover of Hard-Edge painting because the core of my argument is that there is not one. I am performing the simultaneous maneuver of elevating material influence and dethroning intentional determinism. As highlighted by Ingold's autopoiesis at the beginning of this section, a large field of forces made for the materialization of Hard-Edge painting; attempting to locate the 'originating force' is futile. However, paying closer attention to one of the primary overlooked contributors, the materials, sheds significant light on just how distributed making and materialization are.

¹¹⁸ Marontate, 132. Emphasis added.

¹¹⁹ Attempting to explain the motion of matter, Aristotle elaborated a causal system which finds its beginning and culmination with the "unmoved mover:" God. Aristotle, "Metaphysics," *The Philosophy of Aristotle*, trans., J.L. Creed and A.E Wardman, (New York: Penguin Books, 1963), Book XII, 7, 122-125.

For instance, the synthetic mediums were not alone in the manifestation of new making practices; their associated equipment compelled (or sometimes necessitated) new application methodology. The materiality of the tape became intrinsic to the aesthetic of Hard-Edge painting and its defining characteristic. It was particularly indispensable in the creation of Tousignant's *Accelerator* paintings of the late 1960s. Tousignant explains that he and Jacques Hurtubise "had a guy" that got them tape that was 1/8th of an inch.¹²⁰ Its narrowness allowed for tight concentric taping. He would paint the coloured bands with either a 3/4 inch brush or a 1/4 inch brush. Acrylic dries very quickly but he would still wait a day between layers and taping, he explains.¹²¹ With the proper planning he could complete one of the large Gong paintings in just two days. And demonstrating the speed with which he can operate a roll of masking tape, Tousignant executed a freehand circle in a matter of moments on the table before us with a roll of tape that had been lying in wait of his next project.¹²² The artist still paints every day and explains that ideas are not the problem, rather the time to realize them all.¹²³

Likewise, the adoption of the roller and the spray gun may have begun as an aesthetic decision (and theoretical position) to remove traces of the artist's painterly hand, but as the scale of the paintings increased, these methods would have become imperative. The only possible way in which to cover the canvas surface evenly and with minimal paint application is with a roller or a spray gun. Arguably it is not only the medium of acrylic paint that effected the change in scale of abstract painting that is now known as Montreal Hard-Edge, it is the combination of acrylic *applied with* roller or spray gun. As Sam Golden enthused, acrylic paint can do virtually

¹²⁰ Claude Tousignant, Personal communication, Artist's Studio, St. Henri, Montreal, 10 September 2016.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

anything, it just depends what you want and how you wield it.¹²⁴ Environment also played a catalyzing role; the artists were taking over old warehouses, churches and banks and therefore had the literal space to expand the scale and execution style of their paintings.

And it would not be the first time that the equipment of execution enacted a major breakthrough in painting in Quebec. The art historian François-Marc Gagnon recounts that Borduas' abandonment of the brush in favor of the palette knife finally effected the advance the artist had been seeking. Translation of his expressive and spontaneous style from the medium of gouache to oil paint had caused Borduas a temporary expressive setback in the mid-1940s. The slow drying characteristic of oil paint initially threw a curve ball into the artist's spontaneity because he was forced to stop and wait for it to dry and therefore had to *plan* his paintings. The adoption of the palette knife allowed the artist to circumvent the issue through affording a different application style that in turn led to Borduas' all-over paint application method and the genuine realization of the Automatiste method.¹²⁵ Interestingly, Jock Macdonald experienced a similar expressive setback when transitioning his automatic painting method from watercolour to oil paint, but he did not encounter his material breakthrough until his discovery of the synthetic acrylic solution, Lucite 44, in 1956.¹²⁶ Macdonald stated: "Lucite almost immediately solved the technical problems...the result is a gain in fluidity and quick drying."¹²⁷

¹²⁴ Marontate, 136.

¹²⁵ François-Marc Gagnon, "Style and Technique," in *Paul-Émile Borduas: Life and Work*, (Toronto: Art Canada Institute, 2014).

¹²⁶ Macdonald was introduced to Lucite 44 by Harold Town in 1956. Barclay, "The Materials Used in Certain Canadian Abstract Paintings of the 1950s," 210. See also Nasgaard, *Abstract Painting in Canada*, 112-115.

¹²⁷ Macdonald cited by Barclay, *Ibid.*

The unprecedented prominence of material innovation highlighted by the collaborative efforts of National Gallery of Canada curator, Denise Leclerc, and National Gallery of Canada conservator, Marion Barclay, for the 1992 *The Crisis of Abstraction in Canada* exhibition, remain unmatched to this day.¹²⁸ While Leclerc and Barclay do not argue, as I argue here, that materials influence innovation, their recognition of the innovative use of synthetic materials to the extent that they felt it necessary to document it in an exhibition catalogue is innovative in itself. Leclerc writes:

The precarious economic status of the majority of artists in the 1950s, although significant, does not entirely explain the extreme liberty they took in exploring, with a degree of impunity, the possible application in art of all kinds of commercial materials. More often than not, traditional artist's materials simply did not do justice to the new ideas that the artists wanted to express.¹²⁹

Canadian artists eagerly embraced the new products as they came on the market and made imaginative use of them. These new materials became essential components of their aesthetic and inseparable from it.¹³⁰

However, the art historical convention of positioning the artist as the sole agent of innovation prevails in most other ways. Leclerc clearly states that "The history of art is situated at the junction of material culture and intellectual culture," and while this statement could not be more true, the fact remains that the materials essay written by Barclay is focused on technical concerns and *follows* the exhibition catalogue as though an appendix to the main body of knowledge while Leclerc's essay is positioned as the primary exhibition text and is focused on traditional art historical concerns, such as art historical development and socio-political context. This minor criticism aside, what the exhibition achieved is unparalleled and there needs to be more of its kind to better facilitate an understanding of the influence of materiality on art making. Barclay's

¹²⁸ My research has not surfaced another exhibition that has looked at materials of making and done technical analysis in recognition of the tremendous influence of the materials on the expression of the artists involved.

¹²⁹ Leclerc, *The Crisis of Abstraction*, 36.

¹³⁰ *Ibid*, 37.

essay charts a period of strikingly successful material innovation in Canada and focuses on the synthetic material developments and their spread through artist circles – and Leclerc sets the stage explaining that the *Zeitgeist* of the 1950s art scene was essentially to innovate or die:¹³¹

Insofar as the criteria for judging a work could no longer include such normative concepts as harmony, beauty, or delight, the concept of innovation came to prevail. This was a direct consequence of the revolt against depersonalization and the enshrining of the creative act...Here, the concept of innovation is associated above all with that of spontaneity.¹³²

Modern materials catalyzed rapid innovation. Providing nuance and background to the complicated reception of abstract painting to the still largely conservative Quebec society

Leclerc explains that:

To understand the spirit of the time, one must realize that de Repentigny had to resort to trickery to circumvent *La Presse*'s rule prohibiting the reproduction of abstract works; a July 1953 issue of the daily featured a photograph of an artist (authorized, of course) – who just happened to be standing beside his abstract painting!¹³³

Artists understood that innovation was paramount in order to distinguish themselves as avant-garde, however the stakes were high. For instance, the poor reception of Tousignant's innovative Cilco and Cilux monochrome paintings in 1956, caused a major setback for the artist. He did not return to painting for some time and explains that, "The overall response to my show at L'Actuelle was so negative that it put me in a position of almost complete isolation...The emotional implications of such an approach seemed, at the time, truly a threat to one's sanity."¹³⁴ And Campbell qualifies that, "due to profound conservatism that still pervaded the Montreal art milieu, [Tousignant's] work was vilified for being too daring, too unprecedented, too unconventional."¹³⁵ The artists at the avant-garde walked a fine line between innovation and

¹³¹ Ibid, 38.

¹³² Jean Laude quoted by Leclerc, 38.

¹³³ Leclerc, 50.

¹³⁴ Tousignant quoted by Campbell in *After Geometry*, 56.

¹³⁵ Campbell, *After Geometry*, 56.

alienation, fortunately Tousignant was not deterred for long: “It says a lot about the artist’s iconoclastic and stubborn temperament that, in spite of all the negative feedback, he had enough faith in the work to continue in this vein,”¹³⁶ writes Campbell.

Conclusion

Socio-cultural constraints are fetters and enablers alongside material and ideological constraints. Each artwork we have materializes its unique contingency puzzle before us. What I have argued here is that material-methodology is an intrinsic part of the very complicated puzzle. By looking closely at the phenomenal contribution of material-methodology to idea, it becomes apparent that the materialization of an artwork could never reasonably be defined and encapsulated by subject-driven motivations alone – by teleological notions such as artistic intention or cultural movement. I have illustrated here that it is not only the novelty of modern media that has contributed to radical changes in ideology and practice, all media does this. Just like oil paint facilitated representational painting techniques in the Renaissance through its wet in wet layering capacity and glazing ability, the invention of the portable watercolour and oil paint palettes influenced *plein air* painting and the Impressionist movement. Similarly, the viscosity, fast drying and bulk availability of Duco and Alkyd mediums influenced Pollock’s dripping technique and the Abstract Expressionist movement, in the same way that the liquidity, solubility and high chroma influenced the pouring and staining technique of Louis’s *Veil* painting and the Color Field painting movement. Acrylic paint likewise influenced the painting methodology of Molinari, Tousignant and Gaucher and the Hard-Edge abstraction movement in Montreal.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

The material climate marked by rapid changes and mass availability of commercial media set an *innovate or die* modus operandi to the early years of the Hard-Edge painters. Materials were helping artists by driving new idea, methodology and expression and the Hard-Edge painters knew this. They may not credit this idea, but the evidence is their painting and their dedication to the water-based acrylic medium the second they set hands on it. The Montreal Hard-Edge painters exploited the full material possibilities and limitations of the acrylic medium – they pushed it to its greatest material possibility and it pushed them. They were working so directly with the material that its materialization was the conception. Understanding this is paramount for understanding the major theoretical argument of Chapter 5: ideas alone do not make or equate artworks. Ideas alone cannot define objects – not even seemingly stable ones like Hard-Edge paintings. Understanding just one material contingency better affords the larger, more important argument that I am trying to make here: the materialization of artworks is contingent and continues to be until they are gone.

Accepting material influence here, on the smaller scale with Hard-Edge painting, will help us understand that the paintings are not object stable: they are object-fluid and material-contingent. The notion of object stability is *only* possible if we accept that they are subject-defined. When we understand that they are not the determinations of concepts alone the object boundaries disintegrate, the subject-object divide becomes contrived. Hard-Edge paintings do not belong to ideas, they are only corralled by them. Chapter 5 will discuss how Hard-Edge painting is object-fluid, how this helps us to understand art's materialization, and how these paintings teach us materiality in a new way.

Chapter 5

A New Understanding of Materiality

I am interested in bringing materiality into the equation of Hard-Edge painting because this aspect of its materialization has mostly been written out of art history and we have a lot to learn and understand by investigating it closely. The material turn in socio-cultural, anthropological and art historical disciplines has begun to examine material culture in new ways and contemporary art has pushed this envelope, created a whole new vocabulary and set of paradigms for us to understand materiality including object-fluidity. This chapter examines the benefit of understanding Hard-Edge painting as object-fluid in the same way that contemporary art has demanded to be understood. Purposely, my research does not examine the evasive materiality of contemporary art or film; it looks at traditionally formatted paintings that are executed in a new synthetic media. This choice is strategic because I argue that the positivist decision-making processes that preface most art conservation (for traditional art that is) were problematic long before contemporary art materials held up their revelatory mirror. Studying the complicated intersection of materiality and mattering with Hard-Edge painting helps us to get inside the issues at stake more revealingly. This is because it is easy to acknowledge that experimental contemporary art medias are challenging traditional preservation protocols, but what is far less apparent is that the problem is not the art, it is the protocols. This is why looking at the materiality of Hard-Edge painting through a materialist theoretical framework is more informative. With examining Hard-Edge painting it is impossible to ignore that the problem is not that contemporary materials are out of control, the problem is that we still think we control the meaning and mattering of materials at all.

The previous chapters have demonstrated a marked historical lack of material consideration in relation to the mediums and methods of the Hard-Edge painters despite their considerable ingenuity (Chapter 2); the art historical, philosophical, and cultural structure which skews in favour of idealism— e.g., the reason why materials play second fiddle to the creative artist-genius in our cultural construct (Chapter 3); and the significant contribution that materials have made to the processes of art making with a focus on the development and impact of synthetic paint media (Chapter 4). This final chapter will argue that we need a broader, more inclusive approach to materiality in order to think about making, intentionality, object-stability, and agency in a more nuanced and dynamic way. Moreover, this chapter will demonstrate why traditional compartmentalization of seemingly finite and object-stable entities, such as Hard-Edge paintings, is a problem for our collecting institutions and that understanding these artworks more broadly will make us better art stewards. The assumption that aging and decay can be held at bay for some objects translates into institutional philosophies and practices that occlude materialization. The material fluidity and instability of contemporary art has pushed boundaries and demanded art conservators and historians alike to rethink notions of originality and authenticity. For instance, notions of originality and authenticity were often considered to be nearly synonymous and directly tied to the rarefied, original artwork in possession of its original materials (e.g., a master painting) – these qualities made it authentic. Were it a copy of an original it would no longer be authentic. Mediums such as photography and film have required that we divorce notions of authentic from original – the projected film can be authentic but its material basis can be a digital copy. The broadening of our perspective on notions of originality and authenticity has been catalyzed by boundary pushing art mediums that refuse to fit into traditional compartments and definitions. Film is only one example, ephemeral art challenges notions of

stability and longevity; performance art challenges notions of tangibility, re-production, originality, authenticity, etc. One of the paramount positive corollaries of new contemporary art mediums is that they have challenged boundaries and forced new collection and preservation practices and our art institutions are stronger and more inclusive for it.

This chapter will demonstrate that broadening the framework for *new* materialities is not enough; we also need to retro-apply what contemporary art has taught us about the nature of materiality to our *traditional* art – i.e. paintings, sculptures, and drawings. Our cultural attachment to originality made adjustment to the plurality of contemporary art difficult and the reason for this was the inflexibility of our previously accepted institutional frameworks that need art to remain stable for as long as possible because collection mandates were geared towards acquiring and preserving artworks as representative of an epoch. The artwork had to remain stable in order to properly represent its epoch for future generations. However, it is not satisfactory to have a new set of practices and understandings for contemporary art materialities, while retaining traditional perspectives, assumptions and expectations in relation to the materiality of traditional art. Contemporary art helped to point out the inadequacies of our material practices and now we have the opportunity to understand art history differently.

Taking the art of the Hard-Edge painters Molinari, Tousseignant, and Gaucher as instances of theoretically object-stable artworks, this chapter will problematize notions of hylomorphism, intentionality, authorship, onto-epistemic boundaries, object stability, and perception and propose new ways of understanding materiality and materialization that are more inclusive and more constructive.

Hylomorphism and Material Culture

Hylomorphism is the belief that materials are passive and lie in wait of form; that they are reliant on the human subject to provide them with shape and meaning. My research challenges this pervasive construct by arguing that acrylic paint contributed not only to the form of the Hard-Edge paintings but also to the idea of the paintings. Anthropological material culture studies are repositioning objects and things into agentic roles within their socio-cultural networks and with these studies we come to understand that things/objects are not passive, they are active participants in shaping meaning via their various networks.¹ Alfred Gell, Carl Knappet, Arjun Appadurai, and Daniel Miller, to name a few, explore how *things* come to effect an agency of their own, the very nature of things and objects, how things take on social lives, and how things become things through continuous processes of objectification. These perspectives have informed this research - particularly Miller's unique theorization of objectification that will be expanded upon shortly – barring one caveat: we cannot logically begin to appreciate the agency of things/objects while still assuming that materials are passive. Material culture studies, with the exception of Tim Ingold whose understanding of “making” is key to this chapter's argument, begin with materials that have *already* been formed by a human agent and as such do not effectively address *materials*, but instead *things*. We cannot assume that materials are passive while at the same time arguing that objects/things have agency. The prior held assumption undermines the latter by enforcing that the originating agency must come from the human

¹ See Gell, *Art and Agency*, and “The Technology of Enchantment and The Enchantment of Technology,” in *The Object Reader*, eds. Fiona Candlin and Raifonn Guins, (London and New You: Routledge, 2009); Carl Knappet, “The Neglected Networks of Material Agency: Artefacts, Pictures, and Texts” in *Material Agency: Towards a Non-Anthropocentric Approach*, eds. Carl Knappet and Lambros Malafouris, (New York: Springer, 2008), 139 – 154; Miller, “Materiality: An Introduction,” 1-50; Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in a Cultural Perspective*, (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1988).

subject (the maker). This dissertation has been structured to reveal this discrepancy and address it: I have looked at the influence of material, acrylic paint, *and* the materialization of the paintings themselves (what this chapter is doing). A dual attention is being addressed throughout: one, that the materials of making contributed to how and what was made, and two, that the thing made (the artwork) remains in a process of materialization until it dies.² It cannot be argued that Hard-Edge paintings have agency without also understanding the process through which they entered into existence. In order to understand making/becoming/materializing as inter-related and continually unfolding through and with times and spaces (or further, as I will argue later in this chapter with Karen Barad, that materialization *is* time-space), we must also understand “making” as an agency that has no distinct beginning or end and therefore we cannot logically “begin” with what is already made because this would be arbitrary. Additionally, materials, making, and artworks will not be attributed agency in an anthropomorphically driven metaphor for becoming. Materials/things/objects are not *like* humans, they are *alive* and influential on their own terms.

As previously mentioned in chapter 2, Tousignant “discovers” his colour via an elaborate and engaged mixing process not through preconceived idea.³ The way that the paint medium effects change cannot be described to be *like* human agency, nor is it lesser or greater, it is different and multifaceted. We could elect to understand materials as passive, but it would be with a blinkered acceptance of the idealist tradition and blatant denial of our integration within the material fabric of existence.

² “Death” for an artwork would equal the inability to be displayed or understood any longer due to extreme material decay.

³ See chapter 2, page 57 for full quotation. Campbell, *After Geometry*, 23.

Artistic Intention

The primacy of artistic intention as the sole progenitor of art making has been challenged overtly and playfully by Post Structuralist theory, Pop, and post modern art. These criticisms confront the teleological drive of modernism/formalism, but none of them truly confront their own subject position. Who is the author of the artwork and what entails authorship? Post modern practices destabilized notions of single-person authorship and undermined the physicality of making as a necessary component of authorship. With Michel Foucault, for instance, the “author” is merely the restraining mechanism that managed to momentarily collect the ideas flowing through them into a bounded thing-vessel of sorts; the ideas are not new and nor do they belong to the artist, they’ve only been given an alternative formation.⁴ And artists like Andy Warhol upended the necessity of authorial integrity rendering the realization of idea as merely perfunctory. Warhol had studio assistants, the Warhol Superstars, who would execute his work under his supervision at the *Factory*, the name by which he called his art studio.⁵ With these two examples we have the idea of an artist who is little more than a channel for art to realize itself and/or the notion of idea directly equating realization. There is very little discussion of the gritty *becoming* or *materializing* of art in either of these critiques of intention. These perspectives on authorship offer an alternate standpoint, but through omitting the method-making-materializing involved in art production of any kind their critique is limited, whereas I argue that becoming and materializing are inextricably a part of art making of any kind and challenge intentionality on another level. Artistic intentionality is deeply entwined with material intentionality and the two unfold together. Even in the case of Warhol, material and idea unfold together: his art was a

⁴ Foucault, Michel. ‘What Is an Author?’ In *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*. Edited by Josué V. Harari. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), 141–160.

⁵ Guy Trebay and Ruth La Ferla, “Tales from the Warhol Factory,” *The New York Times*, 12 November 2018; Jonathon Jones, “My 15 Minutes,” *The Guardian*, Tuesday, 12 February 2002.

subversive commentary on the rarefication of fine art craft and the singular fine art object, and the plurality of the print medium and simplicity of the print design was intrinsic to his intention. Material cannot be separated from idea; they always unfold together and inform mattering together. As made explicitly clear in the previous chapter, Montreal Hard-Edge painting as we know it, would not exist without acrylic paint.

One of the primary limitations with the notion of intentionality is that its premise derives from the dualist (idealist) philosophical tradition, from the Cartesian mind/matter, subject/object divide. For Descartes, cognition – what we understand – happens within the contours of the mind and is therefore subject-based, and perception – what we come to know – happens *on* things *outside* of the mind and is therefore object-oriented. Descartes wrote,

Now no more useful inquiry can be proposed than that which seeks to determine the nature and the scope of human knowledge... we first of all divide the whole problem relative to it into two parts; for it ought either to relate to us who are capable of knowledge, or to the things themselves which can be known; and these two factors we discuss separately.⁶

Within the dualist construct, intentionality is purely cognitive – i.e. that deriving purely from the mind. However, intentionality can be expanded, and this has been demonstrated by philosophy and behavioural science in recent years. The philosopher Mark Rowlands proposes that cognition and perception are in fact indivisible faculties and with this claim subverts the subject/object, mind/matter divides that have predominantly furnished modern world thinking and practices. For Rowlands, our way of “knowing” the world is via “intentional directedness”, which is how we come to know/perceive things – it is the *active* process of revealing and disclosing of things/information/experiences, and it is transcendental. This means that the “how” of perceiving/knowing is possible only through *the conditions of possibility* that underlie or

⁶ René Descartes, *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, trans. Elizabeth S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), Vol. I., 26-27.

create the experience of an intention. In relation to artistic intention what is important about Rowlands' intentional directedness is that it is not a determining mechanism, nor can intentionality be located in the objects of our perception/cognition. As an enquiring and/or making subject we direct our intention towards things, but the inherent transcendentalism of knowing/perceiving is such that intentionality is located in the transcendent object, not the object itself. Rowlands writes:

Similarly, it is to experience in its transcendental role that we shall have to turn if we want to understand the intentionality of experience. The intentionality of experience is commonly understood as the directing of that experience toward its intentional object. If this is correct, focusing on those intentional objects themselves is not going to enable us to understand intentional directedness toward them. To understand this, we need to understand what it is that permits these objects to appear to subjects as the intentional objects of their experiential acts. The distinction between empirical and transcendental concepts of experience mirrors the distinction between sense as object of thought and sense as determinant of the reference of thought.⁷

Very simplistically, intentional directedness is *how* we came to know things, but because the process is transcendental, the '*how*' is not known to us. Processes of making art each have particular methodologies and most artists approach their making with an intention that relates to both material-methodologies (with what and how they are going to make their art) and the finished product (what they want the artwork to look like or do). So if the *way* that we perceive/know things is inherently transcendental, i.e. that the processes through which we come to know things are necessarily unknown to us, then it could be reasoned that not all of the intentional directedness that would be required by an artist during the making of an artwork would be available for description. The way that the artist came to know something new about the materials would not be directly intended by them, but instead disclosed to them through the

⁷ Mark Rowlands, *The New Science of the Mind: From Extended Mind to Embodied Phenomenology*, (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2010), 173.

revealing activity of making.⁸ However, it would also be constitutive – the materiality of the brush or roller interacting with the materiality of the paint and the canvas in turn interacting with the intentional directedness of the making artist would constitute, if Rowlands’ theory is correct, a knowing that is made through the body and through the environment (i.e. not solely known or caused by the mind). The making process would effectively constitute the artist as much as the artist constitutes a new artwork. What would be known about the cognitive constitution of that intentional directedness by the making artist would be deeply internalized and would have to be retroactively constructed from the content of the memory of the making experience and the made object itself. This is why the traditional assumption that artistic intention determines the making of the artwork is deeply flawed.

For instance, as cited in Chapter 2,⁹ Gaucher finds and solves his problematic not through preliminary design but through alternating his making process between large-scale and small-scale. For Gaucher, structure and colour were phenomenally entwined and were found and adapted through processes of making. He would “tune” paintings during making in relation to the colour dynamics beginning to express themselves.¹⁰

Additionally, Rowlands’ notion of intentionality as a “travelling through” contributes to further understanding one of this chapter’s primary claims: that intentionality is intertwined with and through the artist’s ideas, the process of making, and the material forces. And these components continue to be intertwined, the multiple intentionalities that exist, after the making is complete.

Molinari, Tousignant and Gaucher understood this implicitly when it came to the perception of

⁸ See Rowlands, “Chapter 7- Intentionality as Revealing Activity,” 163-186, for a detailed discussion.

⁹ See Chapter 2, page 57.

¹⁰ Campbell, *The Asymmetric Vision*, 73.

their paintings – they understood and intended their paintings would be perceptually constructed with each viewing, in each space. In 1995, just before a forty-year retrospective at the Musée d’art contemporain de Montreal, Molinari, as though encountering one of his *Quantifiers* from the late 1970s for the first time reflected, “You can see how our experiences of a structural event – like this painting – are changed and redefined by the reservoir of experience to which we are always adding. We are always getting richer. The painting is always getting richer.”¹¹ For Molinari, the perception of his paintings would never be fixed; he did not intend a set meaning. Molinari asserted that, “the space one experiences within a painting is never completely produced by the painting alone. It’s always fictive, assisted into being by the free associations the viewer inevitably brings to it. The experience unlocks your memory, which then always challenges your connotative processes.”¹² Likewise, Tousignant’s work with monochromes in diptych relation was a purposeful arrangement that desired to pull the viewer into a theoretical third space. Campbell writes: “As we stand before such a work, our perception of bilateral symmetry is heightened through the sheer hegemony of a chromatic space that seems to weigh on the body.”¹³ Tousignant’s monochromes demand embodied perception, and the tripartite relationship constructed with each viewing and viewer will be necessarily different. And Gaucher echoes the necessity of embodied perception when he explains:

When you stand in front of a small picture, you look at it visually; if you stand in front of a larger piece, you have a different experience altogether: a physical experience. It is through the body that we feel its colours’ contradictions, its juxtapositions with other ones, and not only visually.¹⁴

These painters understood that what was perceived by each viewer would necessarily change with each viewing – that the materialization of their paintings was contingent. Rowlands

¹¹ Dault, “Guido Molinari, a home movie,” 65.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Campbell, *Claude Tousignant: Monochromes*, 70.

¹⁴ Gaucher, “From Webern to the Hommages À Webern,” 213.

explains that his notion of intentional directedness has an important implication: “as directness towards objects, intentional acts are also, necessarily a *travelling-through* of their material realizations.” And what he means by this he explains with the example of a blind person’s cane.

“The cane can be both an *object* of awareness and a *vehicle* of awareness. But when the blind person uses the cane, it functions as a vehicle, not an object, of awareness. The cane is not something of which the blind person is aware; it is something *with* which he is aware.

Phenomenologically, the consciousness of the blind person passes all the way through the cane to the world.”¹⁵ And in this very same respect, the painter’s consciousness passes through the roller or paint brush, through the medium of the paint, through the canvas and into the world of their making. In this way the materials can be understood to materialize and to constitute making – in a *travelling-through* with the making. The materials of art making constitute making in the same way that the world takes shape for the blind person via the cane.

The primary criticism directed against distributed agency – the understanding that intention is not solely subject-driven – is the problem of ownership. If cause and effect are both fluid, intertwined and interrelated, then who or what is responsible? Both Rowlands and the philosopher Jane Bennett address these concerns with profitable examples. Rowlands addresses problems of ownership with regard to cognitive processes. He explains that, “Anything that was to count as a cognitive process must be owned by a cognitive subject.”¹⁶ Concerns surrounding ownership of cognitive processes transfer to concerns about ownership of artistic intentionality. If the materials are part of the extended cognitive processes involved in the perception and knowing of making, then does their materiality *own* a portion of the painting’s materialization?

¹⁵ Rowlands, *The New Science of the Mind*, 197.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 215.

Rowlands explains that his model of intentional directedness bypasses issues of ownership. “A cognitive process belongs to me if it discloses the world to *me*.”¹⁷ So the vehicles of making would have causal influence in that the artistic intention would be *travelling through* them, but the realization and the knowing through making would still be the artist’s (as opposed to someone else’s). To make his point Rowlands succinctly proposes: “Here is a thought; to whom does it [the thought] belong? Is a question that, in normal circumstances, makes no sense.”¹⁸ When we have a thought about the world, the thought necessarily belongs to us, however what constituted the thought is not solely brain processes but also bodily and environment processes in some instances. Art making is an instance where bodily and environmental processes constitute perception, cognition, and intention. The intention for the understanding of the artwork belongs to the artist, but the artwork does not belong to the artist’s idea.

The philosopher and political theorist, Jane Bennett, addresses ownership in relation to cause-effect relationships and the issue surrounding responsibility when we accept our onto-epistemology as itself an assemblage. Her proposition is that a greater attentiveness to material vitalism (a term she borrows from Deleuze and Guattari) will foster more responsible environmental and political stewardship.¹⁹

We are...*an array of bodies*, many different kinds of them in a nested set of microbiomes. If more people marked this fact more of the time, if we were more attentive to the indispensable foreignness that we are, would we continue to produce and consume in the same violently reckless ways?²⁰

Her insinuation that a greater appreciation for our inherent compositional connectedness could lead to more sustainable practices is interesting because it is predicated on self-interest. In a

¹⁷ Ibid, 216.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, xii.

²⁰ Ibid, 113.

reflexive maneuver, Bennett is theorizing that were we to understand ourselves as part of everything else – an array of bodies – then we would feel responsible for processes that were previously understood to be external and therefore unrelated to our beingness. Instead of the notion of assemblage creating apathy, with Bennett, it instills greater responsibility. Furthermore, she writes:

The capacity to detect the presence of impersonal affect requires that one is caught up in it. One needs, at least for a while, to suspend suspicion and adopt open-ended comportment. If we think we already know what is out there, we will almost surely miss much of it.²¹

Bennett's description of being "caught up in" the "impersonal affect" echoes Ingold's notion of making, that of an autopoietic entanglement of matter, and also Barad's notion of "intra-relation," which emphasizes the within-ness of connections rather than the inbetween-ness of connections. How do we notice what we are inside of? What are we making and what is in turn making us? Bennett insists that the way to notice is to comport yourself such that vital materialism can make itself noticed. Her 2013 Lecture at Concordia University entitled, "Impersonal Sympathy", discussed Walt Whitman's poem *Leaves of Grass* which she described as being related to her theory of vibrant matter.²² She emphasized a passage that described the relationship between postures and politics/ethics. The after-lecture rumbling consisted of a certain amount of mystification over the relevant relationship between materiality and Whitman's poetic views on politics. Her point was simple, as I understand it: posture, or comportment, is a doing, it is not a passive thing, and it therefore has an ethic and a politic. Adopting open-ended comportment is a necessary first step. This notion of comportment is important because it is intra-related with her notion of the impure self. That is, "...a conception

²¹ Ibid, xv.

²² Bennett, "Impersonal Sympathy," Public Lecture, Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies in Society and Culture Lecture Series, Concordia University, 22 March 2013.

of self...as itself an impure, human-nonhuman assemblage.”²³ A conception of self as a human-nonhuman assemblage helps us to consider notions of artistic intentionalism more broadly. If we understand the self as composite, it follows that artworks previously understood as issuing from conception alone will be better understood as issuing from an assemblage and entering another assemblage. With Bennett, a conception of self as a human-nonhuman assemblage unseats conceptual intentionalism, but it does not prevent responsibility and strategic action.

We can also understand some of the prevailing conventional assumptions about artistic intentionality through the perspective of its reversal. Following intention backwards from its supposed final result through to its *originating* idea underlines the teleological linearity artistic intentionality is often afforded. Traditional art conservation methodology is predicated upon this paradigm: one that methodically follows the tangible back through its various forms of indexicality to arrive at an originating intention. For instance, traditional conservation methodology theoretically allows us to look at a Master painting and read artistic intention into the quality of palette, material, and technique: the painting has the material components and appearance that it does because the artist intentionally constructed it that way. It seems almost obvious to think about paintings, and perhaps all art making, in this way. However there is a problem with reading intention in this way. First, it is premised on the assumption that there is in fact a reliably linear relationship between ideas and formed objects; second, it again enforces hylomorphism through denying any form of *material* intention/agency. Contemporary art forms have made prescient the fallibility of the linear *intention = artwork* construct, but with more traditional art forms, including Hard-Edge painting, the problem with this form of teleological

²³ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, xvii.

thinking is less clear. With regard to installation art, the art conservator Vivian Van Saaz observes:

‘artist intention’ is not simply derived from the artist or the artwork, [...], but is *produced* instead [...] it is *done* in the knowledge and documentation practices. This implies that rather than being a facilitator or ‘passive custodian’, the curator or conservator of contemporary art can be considered interpreter, mediator, or even co-producer of what is designated as ‘the artist’s’ intention.²⁴

Van Saaz describes two documentation procedures at two different museums of different artworks, but by the same artist. Both works are installations. The first museum commissions their work and sets an agreement with the artist that once it was installed she was not allowed to change any aspect of the work. When the installation was taken down museum staff retained and documented every facet of the installation so as to reproduce it verbatim in the future. Van Saaz explains that “[t]his kind of documentation presupposes that an artwork should ‘freeze’ in its original state.”²⁵ Further, she explains that this type of documentation is concerned with the *outcome* of artistic working practices instead of the working practices themselves.²⁶ At another museum the practice proceeded quite differently. The institution wanted to avoid fixation and was concerned primarily with defining which parts of the installation were “unique and therefore irreplaceable, and which [were] not.”²⁷ The methodology was to set up a number of different instantiations of the installation in coordination with the artist and document for each one where uniqueness occurred. In this way the Museum was preserving variability through a documented interest in the artist’s working practices.²⁸ The two approaches, finding intention in the exact reproduction and finding intention in successive variable, demonstrated for Van Saaz that “what

²⁴ Vivian Van Saaz, *Installation Art and the Museum: Presentation and Conservation of Changing Artworks*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013), 115.

²⁵ Van Saaz, *Installation Art and the Museum*, 129.

²⁶ *Ibid.* Emphasis added.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 132.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 135.

is in conservation literature and practice commonly referred to as ‘intention’ [...] is actually done in practices and in processes in which different actors are involved.”²⁹

Van Saaz’s emphasis on processes and practices as the doing of authenticity and artistic intention, as opposed to understanding these things as fixed, is particularly informative for my argument. The intentionality that is understood about an artwork or read into it will affect the practices of curating, criticism, conservation and historiography that surround it. And likewise, the practices will in turn affect the way in which the intentionality is understood/produced. Our practices thus far have stabilized the Hard-Edge paintings as idealist (the direct product of an artistic intention) and object-stable. They can be understood differently however and this will affect the practices that surround them. For instance, if we understand their becoming as the materialization of a multitude of contributing forces, it precludes the idealist tradition of linear intentionality constructs and hylomorphism and produces an artwork that is agentic and unfixed.

Intention and Hylomorphism

Material and idea unfold together. Form is not the direct image of idea. Above I argued that within material culture studies there is a methodological flaw in beginning with made objects instead of materials. Echoing this problematic, the anthropologist Tim Ingold observes that objects and materials are interacted with differently. Objects inspire a more reserved clinical-type analysis while materials inspire an all-senses-in tactile-type experience.³⁰ He asks what would happen if we were to think of objects in terms of their materials, and answers: “by treating these erstwhile objects as materials we rescue them from the cul-de-sac into which they had been

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture*, 18.

cast and restore them to the currents of life.”³¹ It is a similar restorative action that will be achieved here for Hard-Edge painting. By looking more closely at their coarse materiality *in conjunction* with their materialization we will understand their mattering differently and rescue them from their culturally inscribed “cul de sac” of assumptions that posit materials as passive and lying in wait of form and objects, once made, as reliably stable signifiers. Made things move through life via their materials and via the currents of life, which drag and pull at the materials and form the characterization of the materialization.³² As such, materials are not passive and objects are not stable as traditional notions of artistic intention and hylomorphism would have us understand.

Making should be understood as an activity of growth. With Tim Ingold we acquire the most profitable proposition for a process of making that understands and enfolds notions of material influence and continued materialization: “the generation of things should be understood as a process of morphogenesis in which form is ever emergent rather than given in advance.”³³ The variability of matter lies in that it is always in flux and can only ever be followed (as opposed to wielded into form).³⁴ How materials and things come to matter is directly related to their doing within a practice. For instance, the alchemist qualifies material by what they do whereas the chemist will qualify materials by what they are: for the alchemist, salt is that which dissolves in water and for the chemist, salt is sodium chloride.³⁵ Both of these things are true of salt, however the mattering of their materiality will be understood and experienced differently depending on the practice of it. We can draw generalizations about the nature of materiality

³¹ Ibid, 19.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid, 21, 25.

³⁴ Ibid, 25.

³⁵ Ibid, 28-29.

based on the experience of one practice but with the understanding that different practices will materialize different expressions and matterings. We can follow the materials but the answers acquired will depend on the questions posed.

Despite its shortcomings, the hylomorphic model remains deeply entrenched in our cultural understandings and assumptions around the making of *cultural things/objects*. However, the entrenched attachment we show to this model is not one that we extend to the becoming of *organic form*. Organic form is culturally inscribed and understood as *happening within* as opposed to man-made form, which is understood as being *imposed* from the outside.³⁶ This categorical distinction between our understandings of the becoming of man-made form versus organic form is revealing. Ingold writes: “the properties of the material are directly implicated in the form-generating process. The distinction between form and matter, upon which the entire philosophy of hylomorphism rests, is therefore unsustainable.”³⁷ For instance, with regard to weaving a basket, Ingold proposes that if we were instead to think of ‘making as a modality of weaving’, rather than the opposite (weaving as a modality of making), the distinction between artifacts and living things become less clear. The weaving of the basket, Ingold reveals, unfolds via a ‘play of forces’ that the weaver is a part of (as opposed to applying his ideas from without).³⁸ He likens the “play of forces” between the woven fibers and the maker’s hands and body to the “morphogenetic field”. Borrowed from developmental biology the term means: “...the total system of relations set up by virtue of the presence of the developing organism in its

³⁶ Tim Ingold, “On Weaving a Basket,” in *The Object Reader*, eds. Fiona Candlin and Raiford Guins, (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 80.

³⁷ Ingold, *Making*, 45.

³⁸ Ingold, “On Weaving a Basket,” 83.

environment.”³⁹ And just as it would be an oversight to understand artistic intention as being synonymous with the physical artwork, within the morphogenetic field it would be a mistake to think of the genetic structure of an organism as akin to an internal blueprint or design, “the role of genes in the morphogenetic process is not to specify the form, even incompletely, but to set parameters ...within which it unfolds.”⁴⁰ Taking the metaphor into Hard-Edge painting, the artist’s studio understood as the morphogenetic field creates certain fetters on making, artistic intention, artist, medium, materials, methodology, light, space, scale, time, etc.; all are parameters that weave in and through one another during making and the outcome is much more akin to our culturally inscribed understanding of *organism* than it is of *artifact*. Bringing organism and artifact together, Ingold writes:

We could describe that growth as a process of autopoiesis, that is, the self-transformation over time of the system of relations within which an organism or artifact comes into being. Since the artisan is involved in the same system as the material with which he works, so his activity does not transform that system but is – like the growth of plants and animals – part and parcel of the system’s transformation of itself. Through this autopoietic process, the temporal rhythms of life are gradually built into the structural properties of things...⁴¹

Deploying Ingold’s notions of making as a modality of weaving, the morphogenetic field of forces, and autopoiesis, destabilize both the incomplete notion that form issues from idea alone and that objects are stable, finite, contained things. Understanding art making as generative process that happens from within as opposed to from without blurs the culturally erected boundaries between the interiors and exteriors of things and requires us to question why and how *thing boundaries* were previously assumed. Assumed boundaries must be thoroughly and routinely interrogated and never assumed to be inherent. This is important because in practices such conservation, curating, art criticism and art historical writing, we need boundaries: at some

³⁹ Ibid, 86.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid, 87.

point in time a thing must be defined because a thing must be conserved, argued or narrated. It is impossible to conserve, argue, narrate what has not been identified and defined. It is equally important, however, to acknowledge that the thing boundaries we identify are not inherent, they are momentary stabilizations; they are cultural constructions. Understanding this makes us smarter art stewards. Ingold writes, “The vitality of a work of art, then, lies in its materials, and it is precisely because no work is ever truly ‘finished’ (except in the eyes of curators and purchasers, who require it to be so) that it remains alive.”⁴²

Intention and Object-Stability

Artistic intention and the tangible artwork are not synonymous. Through the process of making, ideas take new shape and materials form new ideas. The artwork formed is therefore the production of an interchange and this exchange is one that the artwork continues independent of its artist and their intention. Intention can inform an artwork, but it cannot stabilise an artwork.

The iterative plurality of thing-boundary production and the fixing and un-fixing of our artworks is productive to theorize alongside Van Saaz’s discussion of singularity and multiplicity as defining the artwork. Problematizing the communicative turn in late twentieth century philosophy, Van Saaz contends that there is an issue with art conservation putting too much emphasis on the different perspectives that people can have on an artwork because this framework omits the tangible material components of the work itself.⁴³ A similar issue exists with the emphasis on perception in relation to Hard-Edge painting: different perspectives are afforded and encouraged from the viewing subject but the artwork itself is assumed to remain

⁴² Ingold, *Making*, 96.

⁴³ Van Saaz, 80.

stable throughout all of its readings. Van Saaze introduces Annemarie Mol's theory as a possible way into and through this difficulty. Mol is a philosopher of medicine and has observed that "...objects handled in practice tend to differ from one practice to another; they are not singular by nature. Rather their singularity is an achievement."⁴⁴ Mol takes the example of atherosclerosis, and undertakes 'an empirical philosophical exploration', looking at the different *doings* of the disease in practice.⁴⁵ When Mol talks about the many different forms and interpretations of atherosclerosis she says that attending to the practices in which atherosclerosis is enacted, under the microscope, in the consulting room, in the epidemiology department, makes us realize that *reality* is varied and multiple.⁴⁶ The problem then is how to coordinate the variation and multiplicity. It is the same for art materialities: How do we coordinate the different enactments and how do we attend to the materiality amidst all of the perspectives that act to omit this part of the artwork's nature by privileging subject-oriented meanings. The material reality of contemporary artworks is a different material reality from that of traditional artworks, but very much like all artworks, their reality is fragmented and brought into the singular, not through some essential nature that is intrinsic, but instead through practices. It is through practices that the singularity of Hard-Edge paintings are achieved. Essence is an idea, not a fact. For the painting conservator, the material and the method of Hard-Edge painting is foregrounded. These paintings are composed of a specific kind of acrylic paint, and different kinds of acrylic, such as Liquitex, Golden and Chromatech (and the brand matters because this will cue the type of aging that can be expected); they are most commonly painted on thick cotton canvas and often stretched bespoke for the artist (meaning the stretcher and stretching are of high quality); the paint is applied evenly and in multiple layers, with crisp lines achieved by masking tape dividing

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 81.

the coloured areas. The stretchers are large-scale and in the case of Gaucher whose scale increased to span the entire length of gallery walls near the end of his career, designed to fold so they could be moved in and out of rooms. They age well if they are handled carefully and poorly if they are not. For the art historian, these paintings are not understood through their materials first they are understood in their art historical and cultural context as late modern, influenced by Mondrian and Malevich's geometric style and Pollock and Newman's large-scale and all-over style, and firmly oriented against Automatiste and Expressionist painting movements. For the curator looking to narrate them in relation to other artists, as an oeuvre, or in relation to their institutions' motivations, what is emphasized about the Hard-Edge paintings will necessarily change depending on the (his)story they want to convey. How Hard-Edge paintings are defined depends on how they are practiced and their "essence" will always depend on the perspective taken. They may look like self-contained declarative statements, but their objectness is actually fluid and merely held in place by the disciplinary apparatus that is defining them.

From another perspective, looking critically at the notions of species and essentialism in *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze concludes that species cannot be adequately ontologically understood to have essences as the Aristotelian tradition maintains. They cannot be understood for their general qualities (similarities, essences), they must instead be understood for their differences, their heterogeneity, because this is what ensures their repetition (survival).⁴⁷ And following this, repetition cannot be understood in the *form* of a representation, this is merely the exterior face of repetition that disguises its dynamism and singularity. Instead *repetition*

⁴⁷ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) 30-35, 50.

explains representation.⁴⁸ Repetition, “strictly defined [is] difference without a concept.”⁴⁹

Deleuze uses the example of the repetition of a decorative motif, something like a cornice:

A figure is reproduced, while the concept remains absolutely identical... However, this is not how artists proceed in reality. They do not juxtapose instances of the figure, but rather each time combine an element of one instance with another element of a following instance. They introduce disequilibrium into the dynamic process of construction, an instability, dissymmetry or gap of some kind which disappears only in the overall effect.⁵⁰

This understanding of repetition is useful for two reasons: first it precludes the notion of hylomorphism and second it insists that repetition is dynamic, that it does more than follow a schema and that it is necessarily greater than a concept.⁵¹ Looking at Deleuze’s postulation in relationship to Hard-Edge paintings gives us insight into the subtlety of their dynamic form.

Molinari, Tousignant, and Gaucher share many material and methodological similarities, however their paintings look very different. Their paintings protrude into space and affect perception and understanding quite uniquely from one another and this is in part because of the dynamic process of construction inherent to all making and because of the paintings’ continued materialization of time-space, which will always resist singularity.

Probing the nature of *difference*, Deleuze criticizes assumptions surrounding its definition, which sometimes conflate its assumed action with its assumed effect – e.g. that the process of differentiation is one and the same thing as the resulting difference between things. His critique is primarily pointed at Aristotle’s collapsing of difference’s capacity to differentiate by claiming that difference is recognizable in genus and also determines genus; he also takes issue with

⁴⁸ Deleuze, *Difference*, 19.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 24.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 19.

⁵¹ This is why representation cannot be traced back to repetition, because you will never get the same thing. Ibid, 26.

Hegel's dialectic that assumes opposition in order for synthesis to occur.⁵² Instead, Deleuze's notion of difference is not concerned with differences from or between things because this presupposes individuation, this difference is independent of relation and the driving force of being – and further, is supported by the contention that being is pre-individual.

The fruitful components of Deleuze's notion of difference in relation to Hard-Edge painting resisting singularity and object-stability is this: it is not concerned with dividing things up into categories but instead emphasizes inherent process. Difference here conceived leads to differentiation, not *differentiation*. "Whereas differentiation determines the virtual content of the Idea as problem, differentiation expresses the actualization of this virtual⁵³ and the constitution of solutions (by local integrations)."⁵⁴ The artist in the throes of making is differentiating, not *differentiating*. Their idea, its actualization, and the representation are unequal and odd. "[T]he Idea *is precisely real without being actual, differentiated without being differentiated, and complete without being entire*."⁵⁵ This Deleuzian clarification of "Idea" is important because it does not attempt to reduce the contribution of Idea, but clarifies its scope and limitation. Artistic intention is likewise limited in scope.

Deleuze's theory of actualization further teases out possibilities that will help us understand the relationships between idea, making and artwork. Just like making, actualization results in a represented object with a quality and an extensivity. Actualization for Deleuze is the result of the

⁵² Ibid, 42-52.

⁵³ [sic]

⁵⁴ Ibid, 211.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 214. Original emphasis.

differentiation of the idea.⁵⁶ “Actual terms [code] never resemble the singularities [individuations/phenomena] they incarnate. In this sense, actualization of differentiation is always a genuine creation.”⁵⁷ Deleuze’s example is the body and its organs within: the body and its organs are actualized via differentiation of parts (idea, code, DNA...), in a peculiar spatio-temporal morphogenetic field that is always unique – this field is what makes creation “genuine”.⁵⁸ What is important here is that it is not the idea/code/DNA that fully determines the organism that is created, but instead the way in which the code reciprocally interacts *within* and is differentiated/actualized *within* its own unique spatio-temporal morphogenetic field of forces. It is the same for the creation of artworks: the artist has an idea, but the idea is not the artwork, it must first be actualized and this actualization is what makes the artwork what it is, *not* the idea alone. Further, the actualization is a contingent assemblage, and as such some parts can be traded out and the actualization will continue to be, and other parts of the assemblage are necessary for continued life. For instance with Hard-Edge painting, one roller could be traded for another, but acrylic paint could not be traded for oil paint. Acrylic paint was/is a critical component in the differentiation of the assemblage. The medium consistency of the three Hard-Edge painters after their discovery/adoption of acrylic paint testifies to this. And this consistency of medium and methodology are why Molinari, Tousignant and Gaucher are important to look at together and also why their paintings continue to be incredibly successful: they are materially steady (they age well), and their mattering continues to materialize new meaning.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 211.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 212.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 214, 215.

The notions of contingency and autonomy, which are embedded in Deleuze's concepts of actualisation are valuable instruments with which to emphasize two complementary facts: First an artwork is contingent because its making is a process of differentiation, not realization of an idea; second, it is autonomous both in the sense that it is real and in the sense that it is much more than an idea belonging to the mind of an artist. This being such, the actualisation, or artwork, will affect and be affected by changing of time-space-materialization, because autonomy does not end contingency, in fact it insists upon it. With Deleuze we understand that strength is in difference, not essence, and that an autonomous object is not a stable object but instead a contingent one: its very autonomy is what allows it the ability to act and be acted upon. Therefore strength is also in contingency not stasis. This is what it means to be a materialist, to understand the inherent autonomy and contingency of our materiality.

Object-Stability and Onto-Epistemology

Knowing and being are inter-dependent. Or perhaps better stated, following philosopher Karen Barad's nomenclature, they are intra-dependent, because they are not external to one another in any faculty. What we know enacts physical change with who we are. Artworks enact knowledge and effect change on and through their perceivers, and we in turn enact change with them. The very autonomy of artworks means that they are contingent and always in process of materialization and accordingly, because the nature of knowing and the nature of being cannot be separated, the way that artworks materialize will effect new knowledge across time and therefore many physical manifestations of being. This is true of any thing.

For Daniel Miller we become who we are because of and through processes of objectification.

We do not begin with objects and subjects, they do not exist a priori, *we create these categories and boundaries through practices*; and they in turn create us. Drawing from Hegel, Miller also insists that there can be no fundamental separation between humanity and materiality:

As we create law, we understand ourselves as people with rights and limitations. As we create art we may see ourselves as a genius, or as unsophisticated. We cannot know who we are, or become what we are, except by looking in a material mirror, which is the historical world created by those who lived before us and confronts us as material culture, and that continues to evolve through us.⁵⁹

Like Deleuze's postulation of processes of actualization, Miller's practices of objectification are theorizations through which to understand the nature of object fluidity and onto-epistemology, however the word itself is difficult to wrestle from the negative connotations tied to our poor cultural record of the de-subjectification of women and object fetishism. Furthermore, Deleuze would insist that objectification is indelibly, and problematically, inscribed by an oppositional, dialectical, framework that is implicitly underwritten by dichotomous epistemology. And dichotomous frameworks are something this argument is concerned with dissolving. These points are important to clarify, but what is different about Miller's presentation of objectification is that he is advancing the idea as solely a culturally functioning process: subjects and objects are convenient/conventional ways of thinking about things, but they are only ever momentary stabilizations through which to understand, describe, and communicate things. In following, the thing that is being described, measured, critiqued, curated, narrated, historicized can never be separated from the person/institution/culture doing it. This does not mean, as clarified above in relation to Deleuze, that the objects that are stabilized via objectification do not have autonomy and contribute to their description, measurement, critique, curation, narration, or historicization – they absolutely do – it means that any moment of stabilization must always be understood to be a

⁵⁹ Miller, "Materiality: An Introduction," 6.

product of a unique process and a *truth* only in so far as that process of stabilization extends. We learn new things about ourselves and what we subject to processes of objectification every time we engage with the world around us – just as we are learning new things about the acrylic materiality and object fluidity of Hard-Edge paintings here. Miller writes that, “in objectification all we have is a process in time by which the very act of creating form creates consciousness or capacity such as skill and thereby *transforms both form and the self-consciousness of that which has consciousness*, or the capacity of that which now has skill.”⁶⁰ Through understanding/perceiving something we come into relation with it in a new way, this relationship inscribes a different consciousness, which also inscribes our ontology in a new way. We are onto-epistemologically fluid just as objects and things are. The scale of Hard-Edge painting insists in many instances that we, in the process of perception, become object to their field or figure to their ground. We have come to experience many of these paintings in an immersive kind of way. Particularly in the case of the monolithic scale and softly pale, but still crisp, *Pale Paintings* of Gaucher’s later period, *J. G./Ps.*(1989), **Figure 8**, we get the sense that we could walk into them or that they wrap around us. In these instances we become object in relation to the subject of the painting and it is a momentary arrangement/performance/practice/process. Gaucher’s Hard-Edge paintings subject us to objectification and this is part of the powerful experience of viewing his work. The materiality of the painting contributes to this – the impenetrable surface of the acrylic paint intensifies the planarity and lack of figure/ground relationship. It is because the paintings are void of any figure/ground relationship that we are able to become figure. The materiality and object fluidity of Hard-Edge are intra-related and largely part of what makes them powerful and relevant today.

⁶⁰ Ibid. Emphasis added.

Critical of positivism and institutional science's preoccupation and belief in objective truth, Miller observes that, "in our society science routinely ignores the evidence for the hybrid character of practice, and strives to enhance its own status, by a form of self-representation that renders it unequivocally objective and determined."⁶¹ Likewise preoccupied with making a kind of objective truth from subjective experience, the Hard-Edge painters saw their paintings as having the ability to communicate universally — but we know rationally that despite the concern with engaging the universal, these paintings are not in fact universal. Hard-Edge painting and abstract art in general can be some of the more inaccessible art in our institutions for individuals whose reference frameworks are not steeped in art historical development. Looking for recognizable content many traditional art viewers will not access the *meaning* of Hard-Edge painting. Molinari's smooth stripes are deeply, culturally encoded and avant-garde only in the specific context of Montreal, New York, and the Western art making practices of the second half of the 20th century. However, this is not to undermine the importance of his paintings and their specific objectification in relation to him and the epoch of their period – they are and were objective truth within *a* context, within *a* stabilization, but they cannot be held there or constrained by this. Just as science is blind to the hybrid character of its practice, so too is art history. The objectivity that the Hard-Edge painters may have achieved in their personal expression cannot be extended to the status of universal objective truth, because there are multiple competing co-materializations of Hard-Edge painting that cannot be essentialised in that way. This latter distributed mattering does not undermine the artist's personal objective achievement or make it any less meaningful or significant in its specific context.

The notion of objectification as conceived by Miller has an ultimate utilitarian function. Despite

⁶¹ Ibid, 8.

its process enacting only ephemeral duality, the convention it affords within normative communication facilitates our ability to keep talking and writing about things and people. Miller argues:

While it is possible to thereby transcend the vulgarity of our dualistic apprehension of the world through engaging with it only at the heightened and abstract levels given us in philosophy, I would argue that this can never fully constitute an anthropological approach to materiality.⁶²

And this could also be true for art history. The structure of most languages and the conventions of communication make it difficult to convey ideas effectively in a culture where ‘common sense’ dictates a necessary distinction between objects, things and subjects. However, the study of art history will still benefit from looking critically at how these accepted boundaries have predicated and determined specific understandings of art that are too narrow. These categories represent a basic position and are a comfortable place from where to begin idea, but they do not stand up well to sustained interrogation. When looked at closely for answers or for any kind of consistency or solidity that can be relied on, they disintegrate before us. The proposition of my argument that insists that the intentionality and agency of art is distributed, should ideally avoid the nomenclature of *subject* and *object*. But because this terminology is deeply ingrained in our culture and certain connotations of phrases such as *object study* in relation to art history lead to strategic understandings of the type of study that is being done, the terminology of subject and object *could* continue to be used with careful consideration of the contingent considerations. However, with Barad’s proposition we move definitively away from dualist reference systems, and as such closer to a theoretical and practical framework through which to understand the materialization of Hard-Edge painting. Barad’s argument for an agential realist ontology complements Miller’s notion of stabilization via objectification when she proposes that agential

⁶² Ibid, 10.

intra-actions perform boundaries.⁶³ Her language is less familiar, but more precise for our purposes here.

Words and their connotations are powerful. While the convention of subject/object may help us access ideas more quickly, it can also act to facilitate metaphysical assumptions such as the idea that the world is composed of space within which objects and things sit and can be moved about – as though space is pre-existing and objects decorate it and that we, as subjects, are within the same space, but distinct from the objects. Instead, this argument is emphasizing, as Barad articulates it, that, “[p]henomena are *constitutive* of reality. Reality is not composed of things-in-themselves or things-behind-phenomena but “things”-in-phenomena.”⁶⁴ This being the case also compels us to understand that intra-actions and localized determinations of boundaries are not happening in time and space but are instead *the materialization of time-space*. Hard-Edge paintings are not decorating space, they contribute to the materialization of our space. Our perception of them becomes a co-materialization of space. Addressing the nature of representation broadly – just as Deleuze’s theorization of actualization did – Barad asserts that things become determinate and meaningful with the “agential cut [that] enacts local resolutions within the phenomena of the inherent ontological indeterminacy.”⁶⁵ Sidestepping the language of dualism, Barad prioritizes verbs such as *performance* as opposed to nouns such as subject and object. Barad’s notion of “performative agential resolutions” provides the “condition for the possibility of objectivity.”⁶⁶ Phrased this way, the condition for the possibility of objectivity emphasizes the performance of a perspective as opposed to an essential ontology of an object or

⁶³ Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity,” 815.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 817.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 815. Emphasis added.

a subject, which the notion of objectification can lead to. For instance, do Hard-Edge paintings elicit a transcendent experience? When describing the experience of Gaucher's paintings, the art historian Jean-Jacques Nattiez would have us believe so, writing: "[Gaucher's] perpetual play of shapes has no other purpose than to reveal the reality of being which transcends its purely material manifestations."⁶⁷ However, were these paintings encountered in an ally behind a dumpster in another culture, there would probably not be a transcendence of material manifestation. But when they are encountered in their anticipated context on a clean white wall and in dialogue with only the gallery space and the viewer, it is entirely possible that these viewing conditions support or compel transcendent experience. The museum space and context is precisely the kind of boundary-delineating performance or agential cut that Barad is arguing provides the possibility for objectivity. Within these material-discursive conditions we can make statements and predictions that will remain reliably *true* based on the assumption of that continued condition, which can reasonably be counted on – such as how the artwork will age. The experience and understanding of the artwork is thus deeply culturally and contingently inscribed. The painting itself and the materiality that comprises it are not themselves reliably and consistently transcendent, instead stabilizations perform boundaries within which we can talk about things objectively and experience things with relative consistency, but outside of those boundaries that specific instantiation of objectivity dissolves.

This contingency can be further understood from another perspective with Barad's description of the determining character of the measuring device. The above-mentioned white-walled space of

⁶⁷ Jean-Jacques Nattiez, "Webern/Gaucher: The Jolt," in *Yves Gaucher*, (Montreal: Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, 2004), 205.

the gallery is one such device. Barad explains that the scientific experimental apparatuses are not passive measuring devices but are instead "...constituted through particular practices that are perpetually open to rearrangements, rearticulations, and other reworkings."⁶⁸ Art history, like science, has conventions for evaluation that constitute an outcome. For instance, within the particular epoch of high modern art production, artists, art historians, and art institutions understood and emphasized Hard-Edge paintings as stable objects upon which many different perspectives could be taken. New understandings of semiotic and post-structuralist theory contributed to the emphasis on multiple perspectives. But the negative corollary was the unacknowledged assumption that the artwork will hold still. The discipline of art history, the museum institution and the cultural conditions are themselves measuring apparatuses that intra-act with artists and artworks all of which are co-constituting one another. The space contingency of installation art in particular can be more readily seen to have intra-acted with the apparatus of the museum practice to have completely altered our understanding of finite and permanent artworks. The contingency of Hard-Edge painting is less obvious. How they are a specific materialization of time-space is subtler because the convention of subject/object seems to underwrite the essence of their ontology. However, what is being exposed here is that our relationship to material culture is learned and reproduced: it compels normative behavior and expectation. What we know and are – our onto-epistemology – affects what we understand things (artworks) to be. A Hard-Edge painting will not signify the same way if it is decontextualized, in large part because the behaviors that surround it are environmentally and therefore contingently coded within the art historical texts, art criticisms, and gallery spaces of high modern art. This coding has previously inscribed them as ontologically stable when in fact we have been disregarding overt evidence that they are not. For one, Molinari and Tousignant

⁶⁸ Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity," 817.

routinely remade artworks that were damaged or whose materials had degraded. Gaucher may have as well, but there is not the same evidence of this in the literature. For instance, both Molinari and Tousignant repainted a large number of their automobile enamel paintings from the late 1950s in the more stable medium of acrylic paint. Molinari repainted *Angle Noir* in 1967 and dated it 1956-1967 on the verso. The fact that both artists repainted their paintings was not hidden, but neither was this phenomenon given much attention for the material ephemerality and object fluidity that it attested to. These artists were very specific about the surface quality of their paintings because they were adamantly divorcing their content from figure/ground reference systems that were the hallmark of painting until the early 1900s. For this reason a scuff, crack, abrasion or stain on the surface could become *figure* to the otherwise smooth uninterrupted *ground* of their paintings' surface. The instantiation of a flaw materializing the ephemerality of idea is significant to ponder. In order to retain the integrity of intention, the painters gave little thought to foregoing the originality of material, making, and time-materialization. The quality of the surface – the visual materiality of the idea – was more important than the original materiality of the idea. This attests to the onto-epistemology of the paintings being far more fragile than previously inscribed in our art historiography. The Hard-Edge paintings are not reliably stable objects and their materialization of time will affect our perception of them. What we understand from one of the automobile enamel paintings will be quite different from what we understand from a later acrylic iteration. And furthermore, while the re-paints would technically be a copy and the original could conceivably be considered a score or formula, the artists were/are concerned with authorial artistic integrity. Unlike Andy Warhol, for the Hard-Edge painters it matters who paints the painting. Their practice of re-making further indicates a closer relationship with the materials of painting than the artists ever

themselves described. It also precludes re-painting as a possible conservation methodology.

This said, the type of acrylic paint and the meticulous method of application used by the Hard-Edge painters has contributed to the paintings aging very well. The primary issues that have surfaced are handling related: because the paintings are very large they are somewhat unwieldy to move around, store, and display, contributing to scuffs along the edges from handling.

However, when imperfections in the surface plane do arise they are more catastrophic than with other traditional paintings. This is for two reasons: first, as described above, they are more disruptive, and second, they are nearly impossible to correct without entirely repainting the artwork. Traditional paintings can be *spot corrected* relatively easily, Hard-Edge paintings can not. One of Gaucher's large-scale vertical band paintings, *Two Blues, Two Greys*, 1976, was on display at the Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal for a number of years with a large circular stain in the top right quadrant. In this instance the stain, despite theoretically creating an undesired figure/ground relationship, did not function to detract from the painting's understanding. Indeed our *eye* is capable of filling in and/or omitting details that are not integral to perception.⁶⁹

Gestalt theory is based on this ability to *correct* missing passages and is one of the core philosophies underpinning philosopher/conservator Cesari Brandi's influential theory of conservation developed in the mid nineteenth century. *Teoria del Restauro* was published in Rome in 1963 and developed primarily between 1940 and 1950. It is considered to be a foundational conservation theory for many art conservators because it brought together theories of aesthetics, hermeneutics, Gestalt philosophy, and considered together the concepts of aesthetic

⁶⁹ *Eye* is used here out of convention, but should be understood within the context of my argument to be both embodied and environmentally situated.

integrity with historicity through proposing a discipline of practice.⁷⁰ Brandi created an inpainting method called *tratteggio* that was designed to fill in missing areas so that unity of an image could be restored, but that was still recognizable to the naked eye. From a regular viewing distance the fresco or painting would appear unified, but if examined closely the inpainting would still be visible.⁷¹ If our *eye* can fill in large areas of lacunae in expansive fourteenth century fresco paintings it can also omit a stain in a high modern Hard-Edge painting in order to restore theoretical integrity or unity. It is possible that Gaucher would have elected to re-paint this painting were he still alive and this option entertained, but it is far from necessary (nor would the Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal be likely to consider this an option). The stain is also evidence of the painting's materialization of time and its continued active contribution to how it is conceived and perceived. How the painting qualifies its perception in the future will depend on how we interpret and navigate the different materialities now. If the stain is corrected, one history is retained while another is erased (or concealed). Either way, it is undeniable that these paintings are first, object and material fluid, and second active participants in our and their onto-epistemology.

Onto-Epistemology and Perception

Perception was of paramount importance for Molinari, Tousignant, and Gaucher. As described at the beginning of this chapter, they each envisioned that their artworks would effect a new perception of space and desired that each perceptual experience be unique. However, perception does not only uniquely affect each psychological experience, it also effects onto-epistemological change. Through coming to perceive and understand things we think differently and we act

⁷⁰ Thus avoiding issues surrounding authenticity and authorship. Cesare Brandi, *Theory of Restoration*, (Rome: Istituto Centrale per il Restauro, 1977).

⁷¹ Brandi, *Theory of Restoration*, 50.

differently. However, perception is more often conceived too narrowly. Perception is commonly misunderstood to be initiated by the eyes and processed by the mind. What we perceive is thought to be subjective and what we do with what we see/perceive may be conceptually unique, but the thing itself that we see/perceive is stable but never quite accessible (because of the subjectivity of perception). If we look more closely with the embodied conception of vision that philosopher Alva Noë has put forth, perception is proven to be far more physical, objective, and external. His philosophy of perception disassembles the mind/body divide erected by modernist theorists and is a critical step towards understanding the intersection of materiality and mattering in modern and contemporary art. He relates the act of perception to the act of painting:

It is not pictures *as* objects of perception that can teach us about perceiving; rather, it is *making pictures* – that is, the skillful construction of pictures – that can illuminate experience, or rather the making or *enacting* of experience. Picture making, like experience itself, is an activity. It is at once an activity of careful *looking to* the world, and an activity of reflection of *what you see* and *what you had to do to see* [...] The painter attends to the world *not* as a domain of facts and properties...but rather, to the world as a domain of perceptual activity.⁷²

According to Noë it is from the painter that we can learn about phenomenology because “to engage in phenomenology is, if the enactive view is right, to study the way in which perceptual experience – mere experience, if you like – acquires world-presenting content”.⁷³ Or more simply, like the painter, we perceive by doing. And if our body has to perform to enact understanding it will necessarily absorb knowing into its bodily fabric. The materials of making become threaded into the matter of understanding.

⁷² Noë, *Action in Perception*, 178-79. Original emphasis.

⁷³ *Ibid*, 179.

Noë contends that *sensori-motor skills are conceptual*, or at the very least proto-conceptual,⁷⁴ meaning that our cognitive access to the content of experience is constituted at least with, but possibly by our sensori-motor knowledge.⁷⁵ Noë writes, “by calling sensorimotor skill ‘knowledge,’ I am signaling that we should be open to the possibility that thought and experience are, in important ways, continuous.”⁷⁶ Noë’s enactive approach insists that perception and sensorimotor activity are not only linked, but also further, that sensorimotor activity is constitutive. Similarly, this argument begins from the knowledge that making does not come from ideas but from a physical interaction with materials and ideas. The physicality of the *process* of working with materials is constitutive of the idea-thing that is made. And secondly, that perception is a physically constitutive activity, and not solely the activity of the mind.

Importantly, the enactive approach counters the idea that the senses have their own objects. If we understand sensori-motor skills as being constitutive of perception, then the foundation for Greenberg’s claim that Modernist painting was about colour and flatness and therefore appealed to visuality alone is undermined. Noë’s enactive account resituates the eye back into the body and in this way severs the hierarchical eye-mind connection initiated by Kant and supported by Greenberg. Noë is not saying that colour can be perceived through the modalities of touch or hearing, but that the way things look “depends, in complicated but systematic ways, on one’s movement [...] the senses are modes of awareness of one and the same environment as mediated by different patterns of sensorimotor contingency”.⁷⁷

What differentiates the senses, on the enactive approach, is that they are each modes of awareness, in the first instance, of different structured *appearance* states [...]

⁷⁴ Ibid, 183.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 120.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 118. [sic]

⁷⁷ Ibid, 109.

Because of the laws governing the relation between the environment and the several appearance spaces are different, there will be features of the environment (e.g., colour) not available to all the senses [...] We must not overdo the significance of the fact that it is in this way possible to individuate the senses by reference to their distinctive objects. For at the ground of our encounter with these different objects – appearances in one modality or another – is sensorimotor skill.⁷⁸

Supporting his claim that the senses do not have their own unadulterated specific objects, Noë provides an account of enactive colour experience. Noë states that, “colours are always coloured *things* and change their appearance as colour-critical conditions change”.⁷⁹ His rather complicated argument is this:

To perceive something as red is to perceive it as thus acting on and capable of acting on its visible environment [...] This account of what it is to *be* a particular red is thus coordinated with our account of what it is to *experience something as* this shade of red. You experience it as this shade of red when you *understand* the way its appearance changes as colour-critical conditions change, and you are able to experience its (merely) apparent colour in *these conditions*, say, when you are able to see the thing as though looking such as to enable you to differentiate it in ways that correspond to its aspect profile.⁸⁰

This argument reconciles the appearance/reality contrast. Because here all colours are implicitly understood to have aspect profiles, or sensorimotor profiles, we can experience a colour to be brown and know it to be objectively red without conflict because the *brown* we perceive is a part of the *red* aspect profile that we are simultaneously perceiving.⁸¹ His account discharges Greenberg’s contentious *all-at-onceness* claim with regard to Modern art. Colour, rather, is experienced as standing in determinate relations to other colour and its thing: “our experience of colours is shaped by our implicit grasp on their positions in colour space”.⁸²

⁷⁸ Ibid, 107.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 141.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 143.

⁸¹ Ibid, 144.

⁸² Ibid, 137.

Embodied action-thought is the undoing of the mind/body duality. Noë conceives the mind in the body and the body in the world without any clear distinction between the three.

It is a mistake to locate the important distinction in kinds of knowledge as a distinction between thought (the objectual, the world as a domain of reference) and perception (the experience, the world as mediating action.) Rather, the crucial nearby distinction ought to be drawn *within* perceptual experience; it is the distinction between [the] factual and perspectival dimensions of content [...] Experience itself [...] cannot be easily placed in one or the other of these categories [practical or theoretical]. Indeed, it encompasses both. Experience, I have argued, is *thoughtful activity*.⁸³

With Noë we understand that perception is embodied and that our states of knowing and being, our onto-epistemology are intra-connected. We come to know Hard-Edge painting in an embodied way; our perception of the planes of colour, be they Molinari's crisp vertical arrangements, Touseignant's monochromes, or Gaucher's abutted horizontal compositions are contingent based on aspect profiles constituted with the perceiving body. We cannot come to know them in any other way.

Likewise, our earlier discussion with Rowlands exemplified that not only is perception embodied, but also environmentally constituted, meaning that Hard-Edge paintings actively constitute perception as they materialize. They are autonomous, they are knowable, and they are dynamic; they are not static, stable, or passive to our perception.

Conclusion

This chapter demonstrated that making is medium and material-contingent and that the hylomorphic model, which has underwritten many assumptions regarding the way materials are formed and the way artistic intentions are actualized, is deeply flawed. I have interrogated the

⁸³ Ibid, 205.

notion of object-stability and established that objects are in fact fluid, that they materialize time-space, and that perception/cognition is an onto-epistemic contingent performance that is continuously stabilizing boundaries and enacting agentic cuts with the things that it measures, evaluates, narrates, critiques, etc. I have demonstrated that Hard-Edge paintings are object fluid as much as other more obviously ephemeral art forms, such as time-based media and performance art through their reproducibility damage-susceptibility. And most importantly, this last chapter has shown how thinking Hard-Edge paintings alongside different theorists and philosophers is productive for understanding their materiality and materialization of time in a more nuanced way. These paintings are not *only* examples of avant-garde, high modern, geometric, perception-dynamic art, because their continued materialization takes them beyond the limitations of a specific epoch and asserts relevance now.

Karen Barad's insistence on the notion of intra-action instead of interaction makes prescient the internal connectedness of action and time-space as being itself material and in materialization; Tim Ingold's notion of entanglements, autopoiesis, and the morphogenetic field of becoming draws clear parallel between the becoming of organic form and cultural materials; Deleuze's theorization of actualization insists that objects/things can never be distilled down to essence, that instead difference is where their autonomy and contingency resides; Bennett's intra-connection of comportment and the human-non-human assemblage and how this will lead to greater responsibility and strategic action within our environment; Rowland's extended mind demonstrates that the environment constitutes perception and cognition (and therefore so do Hard-Edge paintings), Noë's enacted, embodied mind, refutes traditional notions that perception is eyesight and mind-based, and Miller's conception of processes of objectification describe the

ever-constant establishment of objects and subjects precluding their pre-existence as categories. These authors are all looking for vocabulary to illustrate that our sensory and bodily perception and cognition are fluidly and intrinsically contingent with our material environment. They are describing that our environment materializes onto-epistemology and what this means for Hard-Edge painting is that it will continue materializing new knowledge, new art history and what has been achieved here with regard to its relationship with acrylic paint media is just one iteration.

The way that we interact with and understand materiality is no small matter. I argue here that the understanding that I am proposing will enable us to better take care of our artistic heritage. It will. However, our relationship with materiality also defines us. Emphasized here is the fact that things, objects, facts, ideas, theories, materials, etc., are all performed, enacted, achieved, practiced. They are reliable within a specific performative framework, but they (in the all-inclusive sense of they) cannot be expected to stay there. To understand Hard-Edge painting as always in a process of materializing and becoming is the only path to saying anything reliably permanent about them. Miller writes, “the centrality of materiality to the way we understand ourselves may equally emerge from topics as diverse as love or science and associated beliefs such as the epistemology of positivism.”⁸⁴

This research has looked at Hard-Edge painting from a new perspective prioritizing material-method-making-materializing-mattering as being intra-twined and ever fluidly evolving. What we conceive of as essence or integrity in relation to these artworks is subject to change, this is what we can count on and look forward to. And understanding their materiality from this perspective gives us new perception on the impact of acrylic paint, the nature of their making,

⁸⁴ Miller, “Materiality,” 1-2.

the quality/character of their presence, and insight into why and how their relative simplicity is still powerful to stand in front of.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

The value of examining Molinari, Tousignant, and Gaucher together and in relation to their unique use of acrylic paint is that it has facilitated the understanding that Hard-Edge paintings are not stable, finite artworks, despite appearing to be. They are object-fluid. And within the larger scope of materiality in general I have demonstrated that the contingent role of acrylic paint in the becoming of the large-scale paintings supports my argument that the Hard-Edge paintings are always in a state of materialization. The fact that these paintings are important representations of late modern abstraction is unquestionable; however, their continued impact *now* is in large part due to the critical contribution of acrylic paint within the large contingency apparatus of their epoch. And this is true of all art making. The close examination of acrylic paint and Hard-Edge painting furnishes the understanding that all artworks are in a state of continued becoming. When something as seemingly stable as a Hard-Edge painting can demonstrate its ability to materialize new onto-epistemology, we can extrapolate that all artworks are capable of this. The material-method-idea of artworks needs to be understood intra-relationally because this will prevent the automatic privileging of subject-oriented accounts. What the artist and the context of making contribute to the narrative of an artwork is critical, but they are not the only factors. Understanding the contribution of materiality as I have presented it here helps us to understand mattering in a way that is extensive with our environment and this will make us better art stewards. Instead of making decisions from the outside of the art object by assuming a certain degree of object-stability and therefore subject-dependence, in this

materialist approach we understand artworks from the *inside* and ourselves as contingent with them. Any action that is taken with this knowledge will thus effect a new co-materialization.

Chapter 2, “Molinari, Tousignant, Gaucher: Montreal Hard-Edge Painting”, charts the development of the three artists from the mid-1950s through to the 1990s and draws attention to their instrumental adoption of acrylic paint. Molinari and Tousignant began using acrylic paint in 1958 and Gaucher in 1965. The relationship that developed between each artist and their paint media was remarkably unique for its medium-consistency: once they discovered acrylic they did not dabble with other paint media after the fact.¹ This kind of consistency is not seen with other contemporary abstract painters across Canada or with their American counterparts. What the Hard-Edge painters communicated with acrylic paint is exceptional, but it was not reflected in the writing by the critics, curators, or art historians who wrote about them. This leaves a substantial and curious gap in the documentation of Hard-Edge painting that I begin to account for in Chapter 3. Only one part of their mattering – the theoretical and ideational – was inscribed into art history and this is because of dualist constructs that privilege “mind” above “matter”. These dichotomously entrenched constructs are problematic because they assert and perpetuate a not-so-subtle power dynamic – the idea matters, and materiality does not.

Chapter 3, “The Immateriality of Hard-Edge Painting”, looks carefully at the development of abstract painting in the modern period and demonstrates that it progressed along two intertwined ideational threads, the spiritual and the formal. And both the spiritual aspirations and the formalist theorizations were driven by anti-materialism and purity, which operated to sever

¹ Although, each artist worked with other artistic forms from time to time. Tousignant was interested in the line between painting and sculpture and both Molinari and Gaucher worked with print media at certain times throughout their careers.

painting from its basic materiality. The spiritual inclinations of abstract painting expression, notably those of Kandinsky and Mondrian, intended the painting to operate as a medium through which the spiritual and/or universal could be obtained/experienced. And the formalist thread in its quest for purity from the other arts, from Euclidean space, and from representational form, effectively cut abstract painting off from its own material basis by insisting on its finite and independent formal structure. The mattering of abstract painting in its early development consistently tied its meaning to notions of the immaterial and this convention, I argue, was inherited by people who wrote about the Hard-Edge painters and contributed the prioritization of ideological concerns. Further contributing to the scarcity of material discussions is the possibility that the critics, curators, and historians of abstract painting understood the materials and methodology of painting to be self-evident and thus unimportant influencers to the overall mattering of the artworks. Dualistic theoretical frameworks that accept subject/object and mind/matter dualist relationships support this type of assumption. An accepted or assumed ontological and epistemological distinction between mind and matter furnished the understanding that subjects are active and materials are passive and thus that the materials of art-making are not active contributors but instead passive receivers of form. Art history written with this assumption has privileged mattering and intention from a subject-oriented position. However, materials are not passive and lying in wait of form, they are instrumental in the creation of form, idea and new understanding and this is demonstrated in chapter 4 where I discuss the influence of new media on art creation in the modern period.

Chapter 4, “Modern Art Materials: The Break with Traditional Art Making”, examines the massive influx of new materials in the modern industrial period, beginning with the dried

watercolour palette, which could be taken outdoors and was the technical precursor for the Impressionist movement. The development of the independent Colourman in the late eighteenth century meant that artists were not making their own paint media for the first time and this opened up the practice of painting to new potential: *plein air* painting being the paramount example. Later industrial developments introduced a broad array of new and novel synthetic paint media that were eagerly adopted and experimented with by the Mexican muralist painters, and later American and Canadian avant-garde (abstract) painters wanting to push the boundaries of painting expression and break free of the limitations that were imposed by traditional painting materials and methodologies. Chapter 4 demonstrates how new media, time and time again, contributed to new idea and new expression: the materiality of house paint contributed to and facilitated the famous dripping methodology of Jackson Pollock, a style that is now indelibly the archetype of the Abstract Expressionist movement; the liquidity, bright chroma, and re-dissolvability of the solvent-based Magna acrylic paint made possible the staining method of Morris Louis - the signature method of the American Color Field painting movement; and the fast-drying, water-dispersed acrylic paint that was first introduced by Liquitex in the mid-1950s, with its ability to be applied evenly, consistently, and over incredibly large expanses with roller or spray gun, is what influenced and enabled Hard-Edge painting in Montreal. Paint materials are active contributors to form, idea, and materialization. Understanding materiality and making in an operational role is pivotal to my larger theoretical argument that Hard-Edge paintings are not finite demonstrations of an epoch but actively materialize time and understanding now. All of the components of the apparatus that produced each Hard-Edge painting played a pivotal role; none are passive or neutral or plausibly subservient. To understand making in any other way is to accept and perpetuate the authority of the creative artist-genius despite clear evidence

demonstrating the flaw in that convenient traditional art historical narrative. Hard-Edge paintings were championed for their artistic ideology and their ability to evoke perceptual experience and as a result their materiality was effectively omitted from art history because of the power dynamic of mind/matter relations.

In Chapter 5, “A New Understanding of Materiality”, I presented how Hard-Edge painting is able to compel perception and understanding that is both embodied and extended *and* that this is evidence that the paintings are actively materializing their own mattering. The material fluidity of Hard-Edge paintings is surprising because they have traditionally been understood as stable and finite objects that can be perceived differently by different viewers but cannot be conceived as actively participating in and influencing their own perception. However, their materiality, as I have revealed it, defies the possibility of subject/object, mind/matter, subject-oriented, dichotomous frameworks, and allows us to begin thinking about how these frameworks have underserved our collection institutions and our art’s historiography. The continued material experimentation that characterizes a large majority of Post-Modern art practices has challenged institutions to stretch their previous notions of what is finite, authentic, and original. These more overtly time-based, ephemeral, and contingent materialities have insisted on new, more fluid frameworks that disregard boundaries and embrace change as the only reliable feature. I have argued here, beginning with Hard-Edge painting, that all art will benefit from this.

There is a false security achieved by containing, delimiting, and essentialising materiality. It is a strategy designed to hold materials at bay through separating, othering, and conceiving them as passive. And the operation that subverts materiality is not a neutral one. By considering Hard-

Edge painting and materialist theory together we come to acknowledge that even artworks that seem like intractable statements change their mind. They are moving; they have moved. They have been repainted, reproduced, and conserved. They live in and out of storage and their edges are routinely chipped and worn down by regular handling. They are placed in different spaces and they narrate different stories. And each time their materiality changes. They are fragile at the same time that they are large-scale and affirmative. I, with them, have achieved a performative stabilization here via the mattering of their acrylic paint. Opening up the contingent apparatus of making and mattering from the inside with us – art historians, art critics, and art conservators – as material partners the becoming of art will furnish the potential to understand the inherent agency of Hard-Edge painting in other stabilizations that were not addressed here. Prior to now, their fixed stability was assumed to such a degree that the criticism and historiography of Hard-Edge painting only considered their subject-oriented meanings.

With regard to conservation, for instance, different subject-oriented belief systems could lead to polarized preservation practices. Let them die or repaint them all; it matters only to the culture that is holding an idea about its origin story and how it wants to retain and perpetuate memory. The history of acrylic paint media is a relatively short one. The “master paintings” that we have in our collections are in oil. We know that oil paint lasts a long time through the evidence of that fact. Acrylic paint – plastic polymer paint - could have that same endurance. Or it might not. The most important thing to understand is that we do not control making, therefore we do not control any kind of continued endurance. And it is important to write this about acrylic paint as opposed to more obviously fluid and ephemeral materialities like film, or Jell-O, or bubble gum – materialities that contemporary art has taken full advantage of – because the argument would

not be understood in the same way. Acrylic paint is unique in that it materializes a *seemingly* stable materiality. “Preservation” can mean many different things and is practiced according to its discipline and/or culture. A practice affects materialization from within and often operates with assumptions that it may not even be aware of. If we hold on to the art intention as paramount we only hold on to one fraction of the artwork and we perpetuate the hegemony of the artist-genius. When we hold on to the artwork as being part of a particular movement, we hold on to a historical teleology that we are invested in retaining: we are holding on to a story that we want to be told based on a belief system that we want to maintain. If we repaint or change the viewing space, we are re-contextualizing, retaining, or renewing the artwork, etc., and we change our story at the same time. When we hold onto notions of “material culture” being synonymous with object/thing culture we perpetuate the dualist system. It is paramount that we understand the assumptions that our practices are based on and interrogate them.

Hard-Edge painting is a means to a philosophical end – and that philosophical end can be extrapolated to any number of things. *In theory*, different artworks could have advanced an argument that examines materiality and mattering, but the context of the production of these paintings attests to a particularly political and gendered statement that lays the groundwork for future research. When there is a duality such as mind/matter, or a dialectic such as the processes of objectification that I addressed and critiqued in Chapter 5, there is a power dynamic and this is both gendered and political. To continue to inscribe Hard-Edge painting in the way its mattering was traditionally inscribed would be to continue privileging dichotomous norms that are problematic foundations for our institutional frameworks. Museums, galleries, art history, and art conservation are institutions with the power to perpetuate and frame memory and knowledge.

What we privilege equals what we count as mattering, and this is not a neutral activity. The work that I have done here has contributed to Canadian art historical scholarship by examining and pointing out how one facet of dichotomous thinking wrote out of our history an entire critical component of Hard-Edge painting, and begins to correct for institutionalized power relationships. Blindness to the mattering of materiality is a malignancy in institutional practice. These Hard-Edge paintings that are statements of universal space and colour dynamics were made by ambitious, avant-garde, and competitive white men. The materiality of their paintings was side-lined because the artists did not acknowledge it and because the people that wrote about them were steeped in a cultural history that championed hylomorphism and the creative artist-genius, believing the artists when they said they were in control of their making. Our institutions still privilege subject-centered narratives.

Furthermore, Hard-Edge paintings are particularly instructive to materialist theory because of their problematic investment in the notion of the “universal subject”. One of the objectives of post-modern theory has been to challenge the idea of the universal subject, which is fraught with power dynamics. Molinari, Tousignant, and Gaucher were not thinking of the universal subject in gendered terms; however, we recognize at this point in post-modern culture that what was actually considered to be a “universal subject” was a male, euro-centric subject. The traditional worldview of mind/matter, subject/object duality also supports male/female hierarchical structures and thus the exclusion of the materiality and mattering from Hard-Edge painting is deeply problematic. Examining Hard-Edge paintings in relation to materialist theory problematizes the basic assumptions of *universal* and thus the inadvertent power-relations that underscore the mattering of these paintings. Examining and elevating the materiality of Hard-

Edge painting begins to address the assumed innocuousness of dichotomous thinking and sets a foundation for further scholarship. The politics of mind/matter subject/object relationships have guided the preservation of our artworks and the way they are inscribed into our history. Thus far, the way these artworks were made, written about, and documented were not intentionally reinscribing power dynamics; they were themselves subject to the normalization of institutionalized dichotomies of power.

This research contributes to the Canadian canon of academia by engaging with critical and theoretical writing in the present and reveals that materiality is not neutral and neither are the politics that underscore and perpetuate these traditional assumptions. Other art/material relationships could have advanced my argument for materiality and mattering in the way that I have done here, but none quite so surprising as Hard-Edge painting and acrylic paint. The unique materiality and contingent materialization of Hard-Edge painting, as I have examined it here, addresses the problematic assertion of authority that operated and continues to operate through notions of hylomorphic making, subject-dependent meaning, and finite completeness. Materialist frameworks are therefore instrumental for understanding and engaging with all of the art in our institutions and the ethos of the cultural fabric itself.

I have been considering what a *materialist* art historical canon might look like, and if such a thing could exist without defying the disciplinary dissolution that materialist philosophy compels. Within the development of abstract art in Canada this research could be understood as the beginning of a new canon – indeed the material-methodology of Molinari's, Tousseignant's, and Gaucher's Hard-Edge paintings compelled me to examine them together and exclusively.

When we begin to look more closely at material-methodologies as equal contributors to the mattering of art will new groupings emerge? Will new artworks enter the history of art that were previously overlooked? I do not know the answer to this yet, but I expect that a materialist theoretical practice will affect the art historical canon in ways that we cannot predict. However, I also suspect that *intentionally* endeavoring to build a materialist canon would be contrived. The possibility of a different history of art will have to emerge through practices that actively conceptualize and engage with matter as a dynamic agent of research.

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Appendix A: Figures

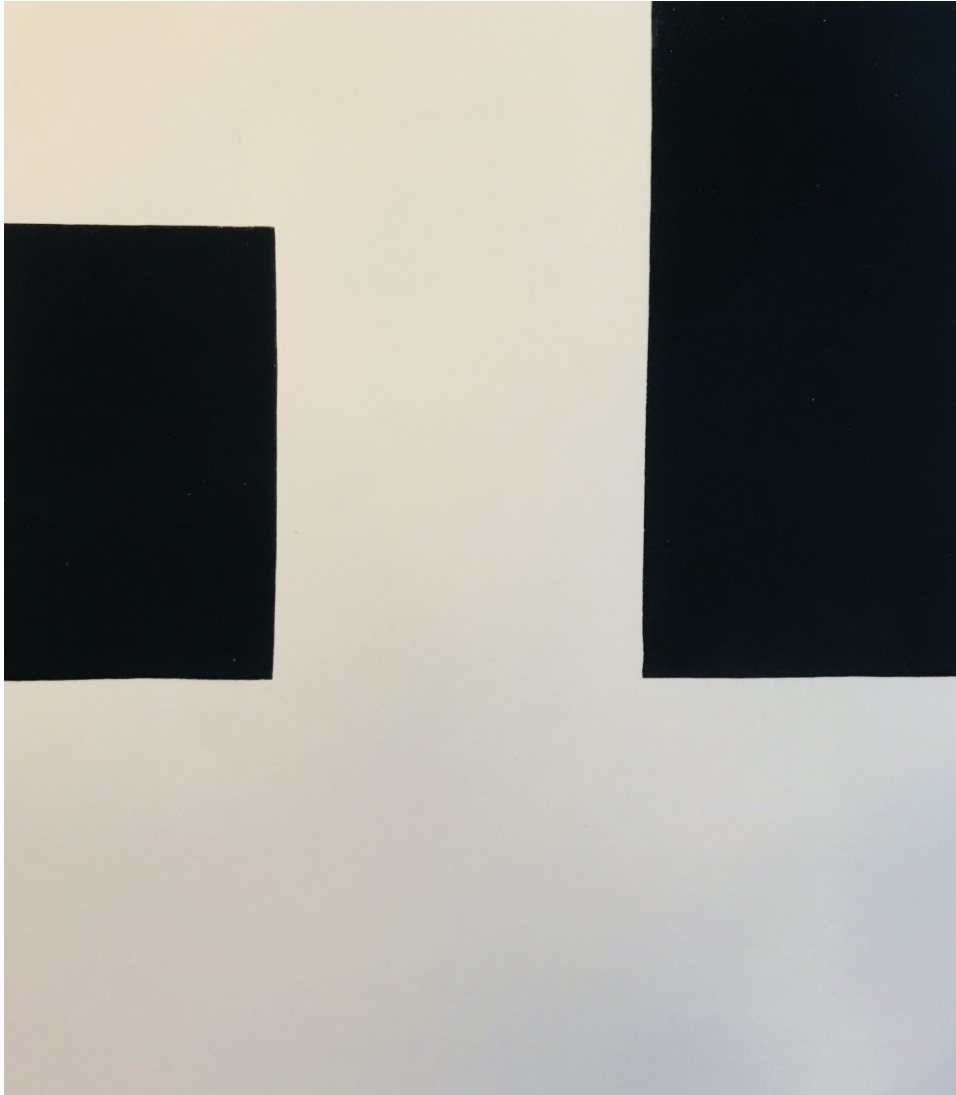


Figure 1. Guido Molinari, *Blanc totalisant*, 1956, Duco on canvas, 127x115cm. Fondation Guido Molinari.

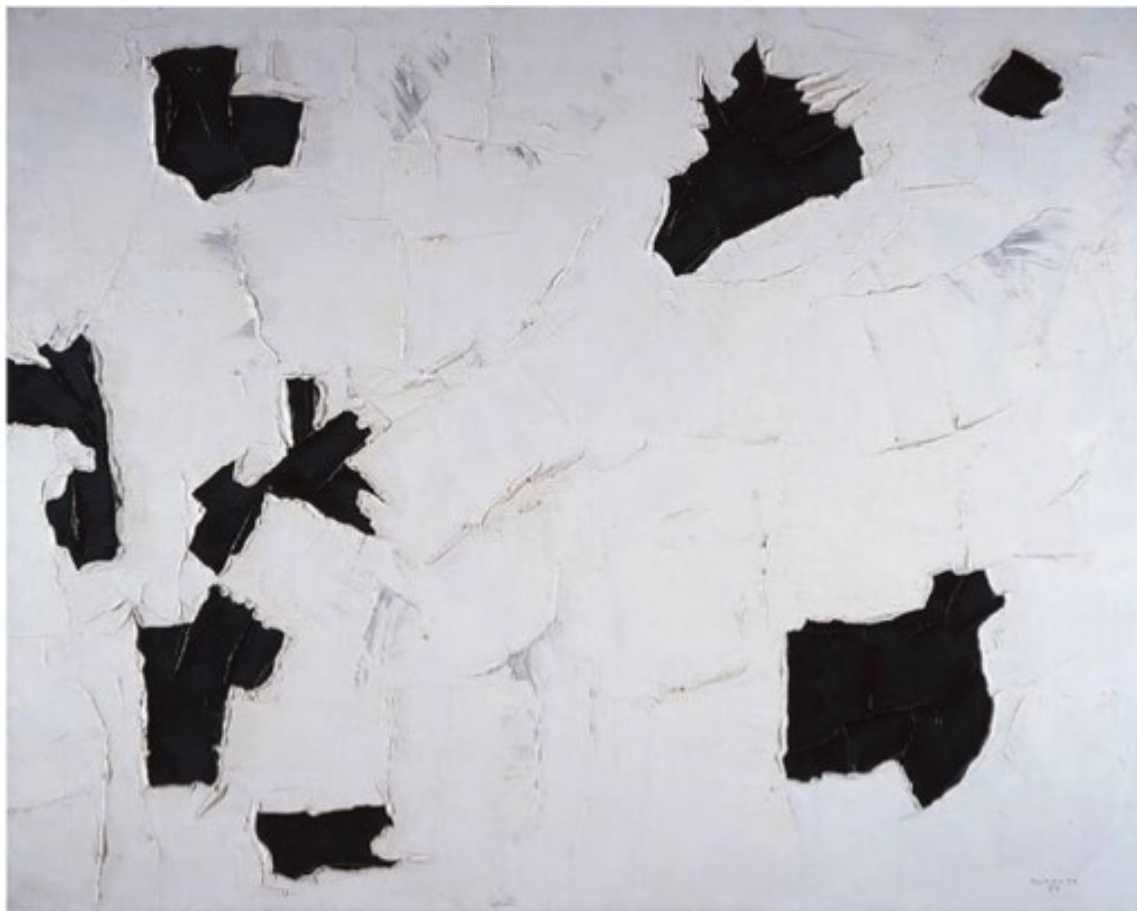


Figure 2. Paul-Émile Borduas, *3+4+1*, 1956, oil on canvas, 199.8 x 250cm. Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal.



Figure 3. Guido Molinari, *Mutation vert-rouge*, 1964, acrylic on canvas, 200.5 x 244cm.
Fondation Guido Molinari.

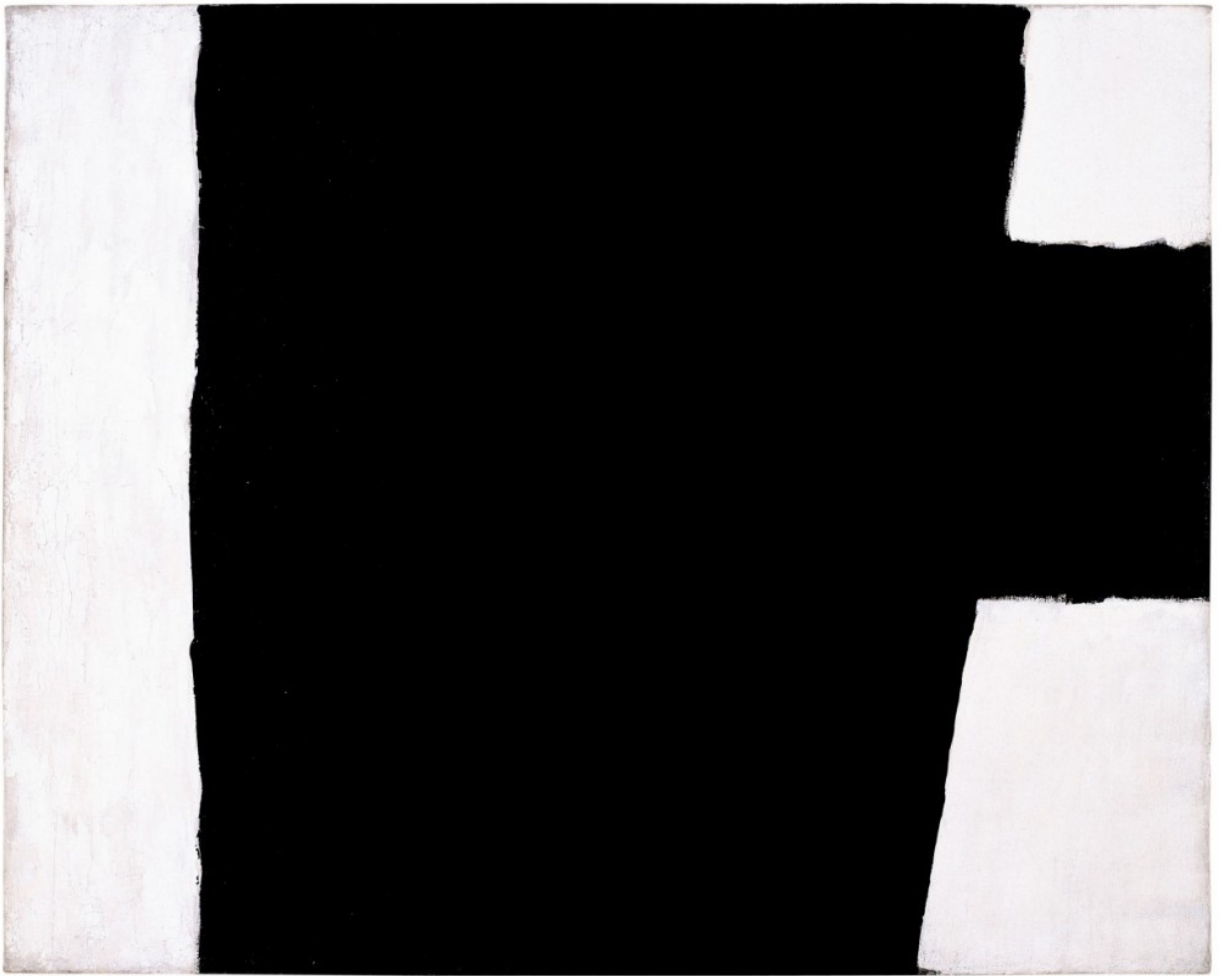


Figure 4. Guido Molinari, *Abstraction*, 1955, duco on canvas, 120.7 x 150.1 cm. Fondation Guido Molinari.

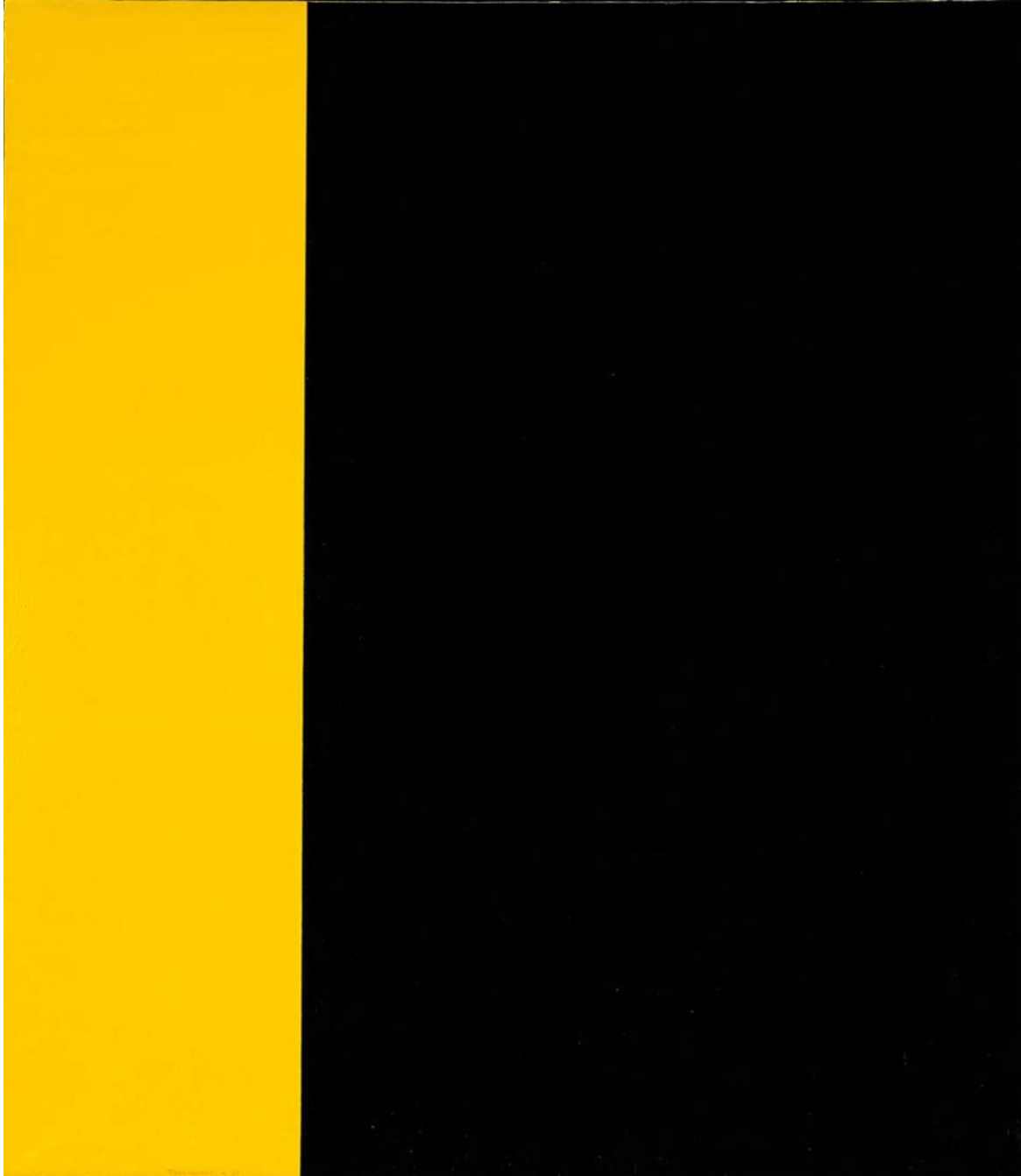


Figure 5. Claude Tousignant, *Hypnose*, 1956, enamel on canvas, 149.8 x 128.5. Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal.

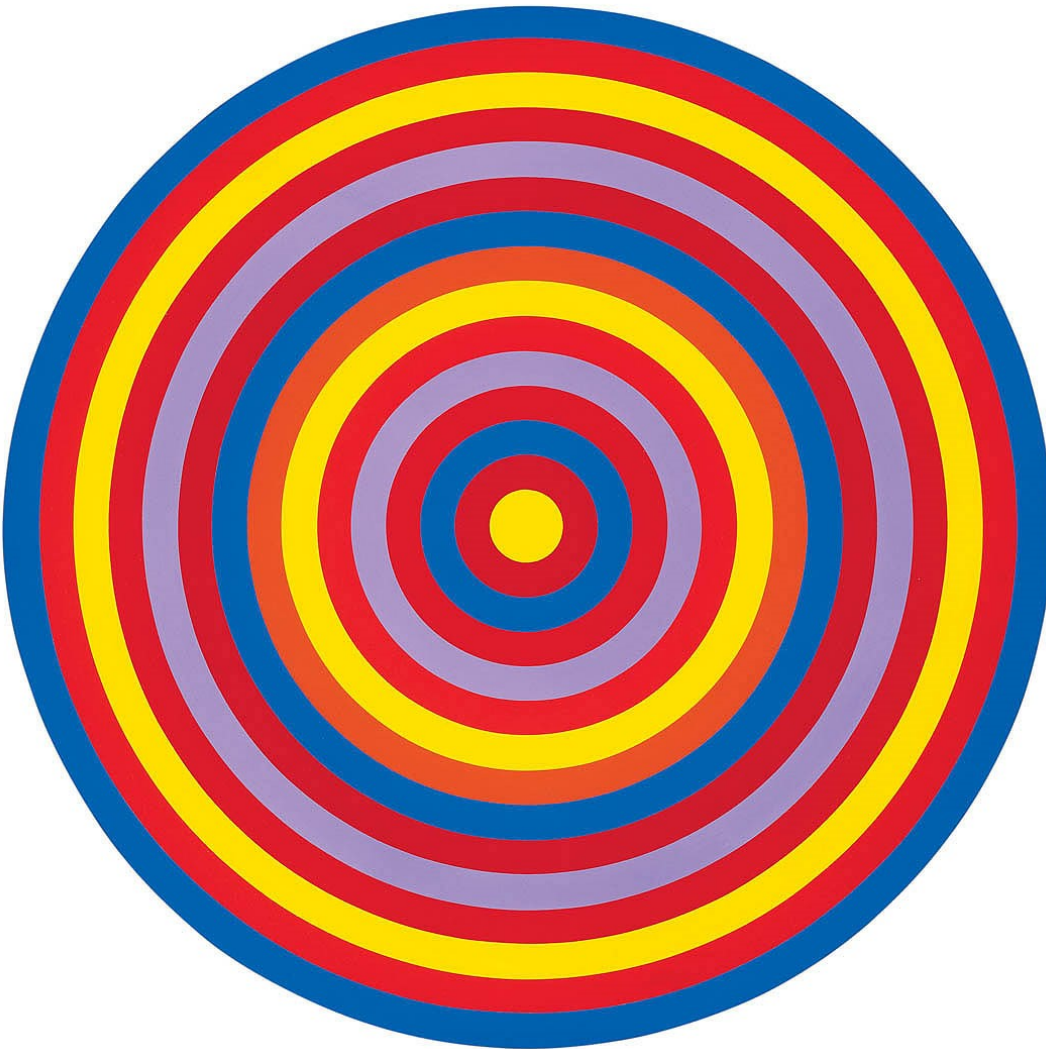


Figure 6. Claude Tousignant, *Chromatic Accelerator*, 1964, acrylic on canvas, 76.6 cm diameter. Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal.



Figure 7. Claude Tousignant, *Bi-chrome n° 1-10-91*, 1991, acrylic on aluminium, each painting 152.5 x 152.5 cm. Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec.



Figure 8. Yves Gaucher, R-M-III N/69, 1969, acrylic on canvas, 305.5 x 203.5cm. Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec.



Figure 9. Yves Gaucher, *Ochre, jaune et vert*, 1974, acrylic on canvas, 203.2 x 254 cm. Private Collection.



Figure 8. Yves Gaucher, *J. G./Ps.*, 1989, acrylic on canvas, 129.9 x 367.7cm.
<https://bydealers.com/auction/post-war-and-contemporary-may-26th-2019/j-g-ps/>

