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THESIS

PAINTING GEOMETRY:

An Abstract Language in Concrete Form

By

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Abstract

My thesis is that geometry is an abstract and universal language that can reflect the inner being of the world in concrete form. I propose that the ideal forms of geometry, like those of harmony in music, have an aesthetic and metaphysical dimension that is capable of touching the most essential part of our being in the world. In this context, I suggest that painting geometry may be understood as an art practice that is closely aligned with the ideals of philosophical reflection, and how, as a consequence of this understanding, my approach to painting geometry is directed towards the realisation of the ideals of beauty, truth and freedom in particular; an approach that I claim shares much in common with the origins of both abstract and concrete art in post-Kantian German Idealist thought and Romantic art. On this basis, I argue that my painting practice is engaged with the possibility of the realisation of an ideal form of expression. This goal may be summarised as the achievement in painted form of a visual or spatial equivalent to the formal language of harmony of music. The paintings that I have submitted for examination may be understood as a direct consequence of my research findings, in view of which my intention is to make a contribution to the current and evolving language of abstract and concrete art. To this end, my thesis serves as an exegesis for the paintings submitted for examination in fulfilment of the requirements of my doctoral candidature.

Chapter 1

Introduction

The ideas proposed in this inquiry are presented as terms of reference that define a way of thinking that informs my approach to the task of painting geometry, and how this practice may be understood as a form of engagement with the philosophical and historical origins of abstract art. I assume that one of the defining features of the early development of abstract art was its engagement with philosophy. In so doing, I place emphasis on the role that post-Kantian Idealist aesthetics in revealing the implicit philosophical foundations for the emergence of a self-consciously *abstract* art. In particular, I consider eight conceptual relationships that define the early development of abstract art, namely: abstract and concrete; ideal and real; subject and object; presentation and representation; truth and deception; form and content, finite and infinite; space and time.

Within this conceptual framework, my thesis assumes that painting geometry must make mediation between these opposing qualities explicit in order to achieve a form of visual harmony, akin to musical harmony, that is capable of touching the most essential part of our being in the world. While each chapter focuses on a specific conceptual relationship, there is a natural contiguity of ideas between chapters. Hence, there is a crossing of notional boundaries between chapters where the natural course of an idea touches upon that of another. Each chapter develops on a loosely chronological basis, and the ideas that are presented here may be considered not only as the original ideals that have defined the development of abstract and concrete art, but also as valid terms of reference in the contemporary context of my own approach to painting geometry.

The ideas of ‘beauty,’ ‘freedom,’ and ‘truth’ are fundamental to the development of this thesis. Therefore, by way of introduction, I define here the ways in which I understand and use them.

I define beauty as the product of our perceptions of harmony in our experience of the world. In abstract terms, this harmony relies upon the tension between opposing elements, the result of which being either accord or discord that requires some form of resolution, or dissolution. We experience beauty immediately and concretely by

way of the senses, perceptions, emotions and the imagination as a moment of revelation at the point of intersection between opposites. The prospect of the appearance of beauty in art is a central concern in my approach to painting, however fraught this preoccupation may be in a contemporary context. I consider beauty to be the most essential part of our being in the world because it represents the prospect of freedom.

I define freedom as the experience of the moment of the sudden growth of consciousness, which may also be understood as the revelation of mind, or spirit. (Throughout the course of this thesis I use the terms consciousness, mind and spirit interchangeably.) Like beauty, freedom relies upon the tension between opposing elements, the result of which being either accord or discord that requires some form of resolution, or dissolution. And like beauty also, we experience freedom immediately and concretely by way of the senses, perceptions, emotions and the imagination as a moment of revelation at the point of intersection between opposites. In this way, beauty and freedom may be understood in terms of their equivalence.

I define truth as the unity of all being. In its own way, truth, like beauty and freedom, is a universal, infinite and transcendental ideal. In the context of this thesis, I do not require that the definition of truth should correspond to that of proof, or evidence, since the emphasis of my approach is primarily aesthetic and metaphysical, and hence, any claims or reference that I make to the experience of truth are to be considered independent of objectivity. Nonetheless, I propose that truth presents itself to the mind most freely by way of formal necessity, much like the law-like ordering of harmony that I consider to be the defining feature of both beauty and freedom. In this way, this thesis assumes that the importance of the revelation of truth in the context of art is that it is a precondition of the revelation of beauty, precisely where it encounters its opposite.

Throughout the course of this thesis in general, I reflect on the inherent tensions that arise from within this conceptual framework. In so doing, I explore the notion that our perceptions of being and non-being, meaning and non-meaning extend from a self-centred origin on the basis of distinctions between what is presented before consciousness, and what this appearance represents, and how memory affords the contemplative subject a means of transcending the immediate appearance of things in

order to reach their inner essences. It is understood, nevertheless, that transitions in art from presentation to representation, from non-art object to art object, require some form of deception, despite appearances of truth. I propose here that whatever the content of this representation may be, it is revealed by way of an artwork's language-like formal characteristics, and that these may be understood as a finite expression of an inner and infinite conceptual nature. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I consider how the shape-making capacity of consciousness allows us to locate ourselves in a spatio-temporal continuum, and how, in the presence of a work of art, this function may also suggest transcendence of these limits.

More specifically, Chapter 2, *Abstract and Concrete*, approaches the possibility of the establishment of a harmony in the relationship between the abstract and concrete qualities of the paintings that I produce. In this context, I have sought to identify a theoretical foundation for my painting practice within a history of ideas about this relationship, and how it became important in the context of the early development of abstract art. It is proposed here that the capacity for abstract thought is aligned with the historical origins of consciousness, and that my painting practice represents an engagement with this moment of awakening. It is also proposed that idealist philosophy of the post-Kantian era anticipated the emergence of a fully self-conscious abstract art that sought to represent resolution or synthesis between abstract and concrete qualities of their art, the primary intention of which being how this may reveal the mind, or spirit's participation in beauty, truth and freedom.

Chapter 3, *Ideal and Real*, considers the influence of Idealist thought in particular on the early development of abstract art in the nineteenth century, and how this became manifest in a renewed engagement with the nature of the appearance of ideal and real qualities in the form of art objects. The importance of aesthetic judgements in determining the limits of our experience of beauty and freedom in art is explored in this context, as is the notion of the teleological orientation of abstract art's aspiration after, attainment, and transcendence of the Ideal as the true essence of beauty. My engagement with these ideas is directed towards a deeper understanding of the historical foundations of the ideal and real qualities of my own painting practice.

Chapter 4, *Subject and Object*, considers the extent to which art may emphasise the separateness of selfhood from the objecthood of things, and how our perceptions of

being and non-being, meaning and non-meaning in relation to art extend from this self-centred origin. I propose that this act of separation occurs by way of processes of abstraction that are understood as the first condition of reflection, or contemplation, and that in this way, in view of a work of art we may recognise ourselves in reflection as objects of our own processes of reflection. While this seeking for self-identification and confirmation is a central concern of art, there are no guarantees of success in this way. It is argued here that as such, the experience of making and beholding art carries with it the narcissistic threat of self-annihilation. It is suggested alternatively that art promises our participation in a beauty that restores us by bringing together the disparate parts of our selfhood. The primary purpose of this chapter is to establish a philosophical foundation for the further development of my understanding of the relationship between subject and object in my painting practice.

Chapter 5, *Presentation and Representation*, identifies my approach to painting geometry with a history of abstract art practice that seeks not to imitate nature, but rather, to see through it. It is argued in this way that aesthetic experience occurs when and where the representation of object to subject collapses, and that in this way, contemplation of works of art is free from the limiting structures of empirical observation. From within this freedom, we are able to separate art objects from the ordinary order of things on the basis of the distinction between what is presented before consciousness, and what this appearance represents. It is suggested also that memory plays an important role in art in affording the contemplative subject a means of transcending the immediate appearance of things in order to reach their inner essences.

Chapter 6, *Truth and Deception*, seeks to inform my understanding of the ways in which truth and deception operate in the context of my painting practice, beginning with the assumption that art is defined, however ambiguously, on the basis of judgements about what is and what is not true. In this context, it is proposed that transitions in art from presentation to representation, from non-art object to art object, require some form of deception despite the fact that much of the history of art has been concerned with efforts to produce the appearance of a truthful beauty. Whatever the will of the artist may be in this regard, it is argued here that truth presents itself to the mind most freely and by way of formal necessity.

Chapter 7, *Form and Content*, considers the notion that while we perceive form in a work of art through the appearance of its external elements, the content of this work is the significance or meaning that we attach to this appearance. It is assumed however that it is often unclear where, when and how perceptions and meaning become distinct from each other in our experience of a work of art, and hence, where form and content begin and end becomes ambiguous. In this context, it is argued that a harmonious relationship between form and content may be achieved in a work of art to the extent that in striving for completion, its form is able to distance itself from its content. This view is qualified by the understanding that within this tension, art's content may only be revealed by way of its language-like formal characteristics.

Chapter 8, *Finite and Infinite*, is intended to approach the idea that works of art suggest meaning that participates in an infinite beauty beyond the finite limits of their frames. In this context it is understood that no work of art exists in and of itself as a totality, and that the division of this totality occurs at the point where a work of art is received. At this point, what may be perceived as the external form of a work of art is in fact only a finite expression of the object's inner and infinite conceptual nature. It is argued here that the success of a work of art may be measured as the result of the compositional balance that is achieved between that which in it reaches out towards the infinite, and that which emphasises the limited nature of its presentation.

Chapter 9, *Space and Time*, considers how consciousness requires spatial and temporal coordinates in order to differentiate itself from an otherwise undifferentiated ground. Once these have been established in the context of a work of art, the shape-making capacity of consciousness begins to enact itself in the form of rhythmic divisions of space and time, the purpose of which being to transcend the limits of space and time. With this understanding, my approach to painting assumes that the movement of the eye through space in time corresponds to the movement and expansion of consciousness. The forms that I use are intended to rhythmically engage the eye and consciousness such that their movement becomes the content of the work. Ultimately, while my painting practice's engagement with the relationship between space and time derives from a basic desire to locate myself in the universe, this desire does not diminish my perhaps contrary desire to transcend the limits of my place in it.



Considered as a whole, the speculative nature of my research has been expressed both in the context of this thesis, and in the studio. It is understood that the ideas presented here have not only contributed to the development of the work submitted for examination in the context of my PhD candidature, but that they will also lead to new work. The conclusions arrived at throughout the course of this thesis, although synthesising the most important elements presented in each chapter, serve as possible future premises for consideration rather than as the sum total or end-point of my research, and may be understood in this way as a part of an ongoing process of thinking about and making art.

It should be noted that the intention of my thesis is not to produce a survey of the many artists whose work is relevant to the history of the abstract, concrete or even geometric art. The emphasis of my research project has been on the specific ideas that have contributed to the development of my understanding of the philosophical aspects of painting geometry. Therefore, I only consider a limited number of references that are necessary to the establishment of the intellectual context that is most immediately relevant to the original ideas with which my painting practice is engaged. Presented here in loosely chronological order is a brief overview of the most important texts that have been referred to throughout the course of this inquiry.

Literature Review

Immanuel Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, 1790, notion of the distinction between interested and disinterested delight is considered in chapters 2-6 of this inquiry in terms of the relationship between abstract processes of conception and the experience of concrete phenomena. It is understood that this distinction is made on the basis of representations to the subject either of the *real* existence of an object, or representations that are independent of any concern for the real existence of the object, and as such may be considered to be objects of *ideal* contemplation, which he qualifies as a distinction between objective 'sensation' and subjective 'feeling.'

Friedrich Schiller's *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, 1794, proposes that the power of judgement, including aesthetic judgement, operates as a function of our sensuous-rational nature. The extent to which this is negotiated by way of the

relationship between the abstract and the concrete is considered in Chapter 2. Schiller makes a distinction between ‘actuality,’ which derives from Nature, and ‘appearance’, which he considers to be a subjective construction, and as such an abstraction and a departure from reality per se. This notion will be discussed in Chapter 5 in the context of the relationship between presentation and representation. Schiller’s notion that truth presents itself to the mind most freely and by way of formal necessity will be considered in Chapter 6, and the notion that freedom of consciousness and beauty in art consists in giving form to the formless is taken up in Chapter 7. Schiller believed that the concepts of ‘endurance’ and ‘alteration’ define the absolute limits of Man. The ways in which these are expressed in space and time is considered in Chapter 9.

In his *System of Transcendental Idealism*, 1800, German Idealist philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling proposes a number of ideas that locate aesthetics and the consideration of art in general at the centre of his transcendental philosophy. A number of these ideas have been taken up in this inquiry. Chapter 2 considers the notion that while processes of abstraction represent a condition of judgement, they do not themselves constitute judgements. Chapter 3 considers the notion that the work of art represents the revelation of an ideal unity between nature and history within the real form of an art object. Chapter 4 considers the notion that the self is a reflection of its own products, and that the highest purpose of self-consciousness is to become an object to itself, identical with nature. It is understood in this context that the self separates itself from its intuitions, its acting from its actions, by way of abstraction. Chapter 8 considers the notion that the self moves most freely when and where it reaches towards the infinite, and remains limited only in relation to the objective world. It is assumed here that the infinite display of the finite *is* beauty, and that the production of a true work of art must emerge from the experience of such an infinite contradiction. Chapter 9 considers the notion of space as ‘intuiting without concepts.’

Both versions of Arthur Schopenhauer’s *The World as Will and Representation*, Volume I, 1819 and Volume II, 1844, represent a significant development of post-Kantian Idealist thought. Representing his major philosophical statements, these works outline his epistemological, ontological, aesthetic and ethical theories. Chapter 2 considers his example of harmony in music as an abstract and universal language

that is capable of expressing the inner being of the world itself in a distinct concrete form, and how in so doing, it touches the most essential part of our being in the world. The importance of this reference here is in the development of an argument for there being equivalence between harmony in music as it is perceived in time, and harmony in geometry as it is perceived in space in the context of art. Chapter 4 refers to his understanding of the problem of the relation of inner subjective consciousness to outer objectivity, which he resolves in terms of their correlation rather than inimicality to each other. This view is relevant to my understanding of the resolution of the tension between abstract geometric ideas and their concrete expression in the form of paintings. This resolution is understood as an act of confirmation of my own being and place in the world. This idea is touched upon later in Chapter 9, in the context of Schopenhauer's statement of our need for spatial and temporal coordinates in order to locate our own being in the world.

Hegel's *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics* is an attempt to define the conditions and limits of aesthetics. This series of lectures, first given in Berlin in the 1820's, proposes a philosophy of art rather than of beauty per se, insofar as Hegel makes a clear distinction here between the sphere of art and that of Nature. This distinction turns on the idea that beauty in art is higher than that which is found in nature, since unlike Nature, which is determined, the mind is free even where this is a matter of an immanent historical necessity.

In particular, I consider Hegel's views on the function of reason and judgement in art, and how liberation from these is necessary in order that the concrete vitality of works of art may be established free from the limiting structures of empirical observation. Beauty in art is understood in this way as a resolution between the abstract and the concrete. The revelation of beauty in art will be considered in this context as an historical progression in stages from the aspiration for, attainment and transcendence of the Ideal in the corresponding forms of the Symbolic, Classical, and then to the Romantic modes of expression.

Also under consideration will be Hegel's notion that the basic impulse toward expression in art is 'abstract' in the sense that in art, we recognise ourselves as an object, and that this recognition is a basic form of abstraction. There is a distinction made here between reality as it is presented, and its image as it is represented. The

ultimate goal for Hegel in this context is the dissolution of the dichotomy between abstract knowledge and concrete experience. The distinction between true and deceptive beauty is brought into consideration as a matter of importance in this context. These ideas are discussed throughout this thesis.

In his book, *Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style*, 1908, Wilhelm Worringer asserts that in terms of aesthetic experience, the urge to empathy is towards the organic, whereas the urge to abstraction is towards the ‘inorganic,’ which he considers expresses the necessity of abstract law. It is in this context that Worringer states:

We found the need for empathy and the need for abstraction to be the two poles of human artistic experience, in so far as it is accessible to purely aesthetic evaluation. They are antitheses, which, in principle, are mutually exclusive. In actual fact, however, the history of art represents an unceasing disputation between the two tendencies.¹

Chapter 4 of this inquiry will consider Worringer’s notion that there is a simultaneous impulse in consciousness towards both self-alienation and self-activation, either by acceptance or resistance that is the essence of all aesthetic experience. Chapter 9 will consider the notion that the development of reason in Western civilisation was the result of an urge toward the suppression of this feeling of being ‘lost’ in the universe in the absence of spatial and temporal coordinates.

In his book, *On the Spiritual in Art and Painting in Particular*, 1912, Wassily Kandinsky describes the pursuit of the revelation of Spirit as art’s highest ideal. He argues that a true work of art emerges from within the artist as a matter of inner necessity, and that its form, constituted from an infinitely available and inexhaustible number of forms, colours, combinations and effects, is the revelation of this inner necessity. In this way, Kandinsky proposes that every work of art represents an awakening of spirit that is a ‘child of its time.’ These ideas are considered in Chapters 3, 6, 7, 8, and 9.

Mondrian’s *The New Plastic in Painting* was first published in instalments in *De Stijl*, 1917 – 1918. The essay was written whilst he was living near Amsterdam in the

¹ Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style*, trans., Michael Bullock, Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1954 (First Published 1908), 45

village of Laren where he spent better part of the war years. This village was home to many artists and writers, and it was here that Mondrian came in contact with the Dutch philosopher M. H. J. Schoenmaekers, author of *The New World Image*, 1915. This work introduced a series of ideas that became foundational in terms of the development of Mondrian's work.² Many of the ideas first proposed in this text are discussed throughout inquiry, including: the notion that spirit in art is revealed in the relationship between the abstract and the concrete; the importance of contemplation of the universal in art in the context of the relationship between the ideal and the real; the notion that Neo-Plasticism is an expression of an equilibrated relationship between inwardness and outwardness, or the subjective and the objective; the notion that the role of art is not to imitate nature, but to 'see through' it; the notion that truth may be revealed in art as the result of equilibrium between theory and practice in art; the notion that a law of opposites determines all formal relationships in art and in nature; the notion that the relationship between expansion and limitation is fundamental to composition; and the notion that the absolute appears within the relativity of space and time when and where a compositional rhythm is established.

In his manifesto of Suprematism, *The Non-Objective World*, first published in Munich in 1927 as *Bauhaus Book No. 11*, Kasimir Malevich sought to articulate a theoretical model for an art that turned its back on representation of the objective phenomena of the world, and toward feeling in the first instance. Chapter 3 considers his notion that reality as it is formed in the mind is only a 'caricature' of reality as it is in nature. The notion that Nature is the circumstances surrounding the human subject, and that human consciousness and the will to activity are in constant opposition to nature is taken up in Chapter 4. The notion that the empty square is the ideal non-objective form is considered in Chapter 5. Chapter 6 considers the notion that our conceptions of reality are in no way true reflections of a true reality. And Chapter 9 discusses Malevich's notion of the importance of the 'feeling of rhythm' in the context of the relationship between space and time in art.

In his work *Origin of Geometry*, 1936, German phenomenologist, Edmund Husserl considers the conditions from which geometry must necessarily have arisen for the

² Piet Mondrian, *The New Art – The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian*, Edited and translated by Harry Holtzman and Martin S. James, Da Capo Press, New York, 1993, 27

first time in what he calls its ‘primally establishing’ function, and how as an inheritance of this, geometry is present for us as a tradition that remains vital through forward development. In the context of this tradition, he argues that geometry in art is not equivalent to that which is in the service of mathematical purposes. The basic point of difference being that geometry in art proves nothing, whereas in mathematics, demonstration of proofs is its primary purpose. Nevertheless, geometry in art owes everything to its historicity, and consciousness of this includes its mathematical aspect. Thus, Chapter 2 will consider the notion that abstract reflection has the capacity to shape and change our historical existence by way of imaginative variations within the horizon of consciousness. Chapter 3 will consider the notion that an idea must first become communicable in order that it may become a real thing in the world. Chapter 5 will consider notion that the development of cognition follows a passive tendency to move away from intuitive life in its self-evident structures towards the sedimentation and ineluctability of language. And Chapter 7 will consider Husserl’s notion that consciousness of basic geometrical ideas emerged from within the world of concrete things, and that the realisation of these as shapes would have been a matter of preference and gradual improvement such that their form would have become increasingly refined, and that every form that we know has been handed down to us as the repetition of, or reference to, some previous form.

In his essay, *The Question Concerning Technology*, first presented as a lecture in Bremen in 1949, Heidegger argues that a thing does not stop at its boundary, but rather, it is here out of which a thing begins to be. This notion will be discussed in Chapter 8 in terms of the role of the frame in art.

In his book *Truth and Method*, 1960, Gadamer proposes the notion of *Erlebniskunst*, or art ‘as’ experience, a notion that is removed from the traditional distinction between experience per se, and the representation of experience as something other to this. He argues that this conscious emphasis on the participation of the subject in the completion of a work of art was grounded in the art practices of the early nineteenth century, citing for example the work of Caspar David Friedrich. He suggests that this change of emphasis was a move in art away from allegory towards a more symbolic mode of expression. This idea is explored in relation to my own work in Chapter 4.

In a seminar published in his book, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 1964, Jacques Lacan proposes the contest between Zeuxis and Parrhasius as a model for the relationship between truth and deception in art. This model and its consequences for an art that seeks to transcend the mimicry of nature are discussed in Chapter 6.

Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, 1970, presents a series of reflections on the relationship between philosophy and art. These reflections often appear to be contradictory, but it is their contradiction that makes the work dialectically productive. In essence, the work reviews modern art through the prism of post-Kantian philosophy, and in turn, philosophy through the vision of modern art. A number of important ideas proposed in the work are taken up. These are stated here in the order in which they appear throughout the chapters. Namely, the notions that in art: abstract reason functions in opposition to concrete realities; the irresolution of the antinomy between the 'enchantment' of the ideal and the 'indifference' of the real may become productive; the self ought not to seek confirmation in the form of the art object; art says what it represents, and yet does not represent what it says, and that in this way the truth of an art object is independent of the beholder's knowledge of it; form and content become most apparent when and where form attempts to distance itself from content, and that harmony survives where the relationship between form and content strives against its own completion; a work is never whole, but rather, only ever a finite part of an unfulfilled infinite potentiality; the historical promise of aesthetics is freedom from, or transcendence of, time and space.

This thesis distances itself to some extent from commentary on the socio-political implications of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*. This is not to say that such implications are not there, only that they are not stated explicitly. The basic reason for this choice of emphasis is that many of the ideas considered here, by their very nature, represent a turning away from the world and its entanglements. As Adorno puts it himself:

In the midst of a world dominated by utility, art indeed has a utopic aspect as the other of this world, as exempt from the mechanism of the social process of production and reproduction: It always has something of the feeling of the moment when the Thespian cart rolls into town.³

³ Theodor W., Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans., Robert Hullot-Kentor, Continuum, London, 1997, 393

In his book *The Truth in Painting*, 1987, Jacques Derrida considers the distinction in art between what is framed, what is excluded as frame, and what is outside the frame in view of the Kantian notion of the 'parergon,' or, what is supplementary to the work itself. Insofar as questions of the function and meaning of the frame present themselves immediately in my painting, there is a natural inclusion of Derrida's critique of the Kantian parergon in Chapter 5, which concerns the relationship between finite and infinite.

In his book, *The Open Work*, 1989, Umberto Eco considers the idea that openness and completeness stand together in opposition at the limit point where the work of art is received. He argues that consciousness is free at this point of ambiguity within the horizon of a work's openness, and as such, the infinite is contained within the finite in this way. This idea is explored in relation to my own work in Chapter 8.

Alain Badiou's article in *Artforum*, *Matters of Appearance*, 2006, is concerned with the appearance of truth in art, which he defines as being plus its place. This article is relevant to this inquiry insofar as it attempts to make a distinction between the philosophical preconditions for truth and its appearance, or localisation, in the form of the art object. Badiou's point of view in this respect is compared with that of Adorno, who posited a more synthesised model of the relationship between philosophy and art. This idea is considered in the context of the relationship between Truth and Deception in art in Chapter 6.

In his book *The Rhetoric of Purity: Essentialist Theory and the Advent of Abstract Painting*, 1991, the Canadian art theorist and historian Mark A. Cheetham argues that there was an essentialist basis for the origins of abstract painting in the late nineteenth century that was derived from a prevalent Neo-Platonism that sought to transcend the material and the merely apparent in the production of art. This move is to be understood as being in opposition to the objectivity of scientific method. Cheetham proposes that within this tradition, the role of memory assumed a privileged status as the faculty of consciousness that comes closest to the Forms or Ideas that precede all sensory experience. And thus, it is only through the abstractive processes of memory that an innate understanding of the truth of things may be revealed in the production of art objects. The work of Gauguin, Sérusier and Itten will provide examples for this argument that is taken up in Chapters 3, 5 and 6.

In a lecture presented at Ball State University, January 21st, 2004, American art critic and historian Donald Kuspit revisits Kandinsky's views on the ideal of a consciousness of spirit in our experience of both material and abstract phenomena in painting, and how this involves a 'forgetfulness' of the outer world as a matter of spiritual necessity. These ideas are taken up in Chapter 3 in the context of the relationship between the Ideal and the Real.

In his book, *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape*, 2009, the American art historian Joseph Leo Koerner suggests that the work of Caspar David Friedrich both embodies and makes intelligible the Romantic ideals of the philosophy of German Idealism. It is the establishment of the abyss in Friedrich's work between foreground and background that is of particular importance in this regard insofar as it articulates the complex relationship between finite and infinite, real and ideal, subject and object, abstract and concrete etc. Koerner argues that a synthesis between these opposing contraries was the stated aim both of Romantic art and of Idealist philosophy. Under consideration in Chapter 3 is Friedrich's notion that the 'symbol' as it relates to the relationship between the real and the ideal. Chapter 4 takes up the idea of *Eigentümlichkeit*, which is to particularity, peculiarity or strangeness, as it relates to the establishment of the 'radically autonomous self' in the development of German Romantic thought. This is considered in the context of the fragmentary symmetry of Nature as it stands in relation to the enframing symmetry of the viewer's gaze, and how this relates to the search for resolution between subject and object. Runge's treatment of the frame as a series of beginnings is discussed in view of this in Chapter 8.

Chapter 2

Abstract & Concrete

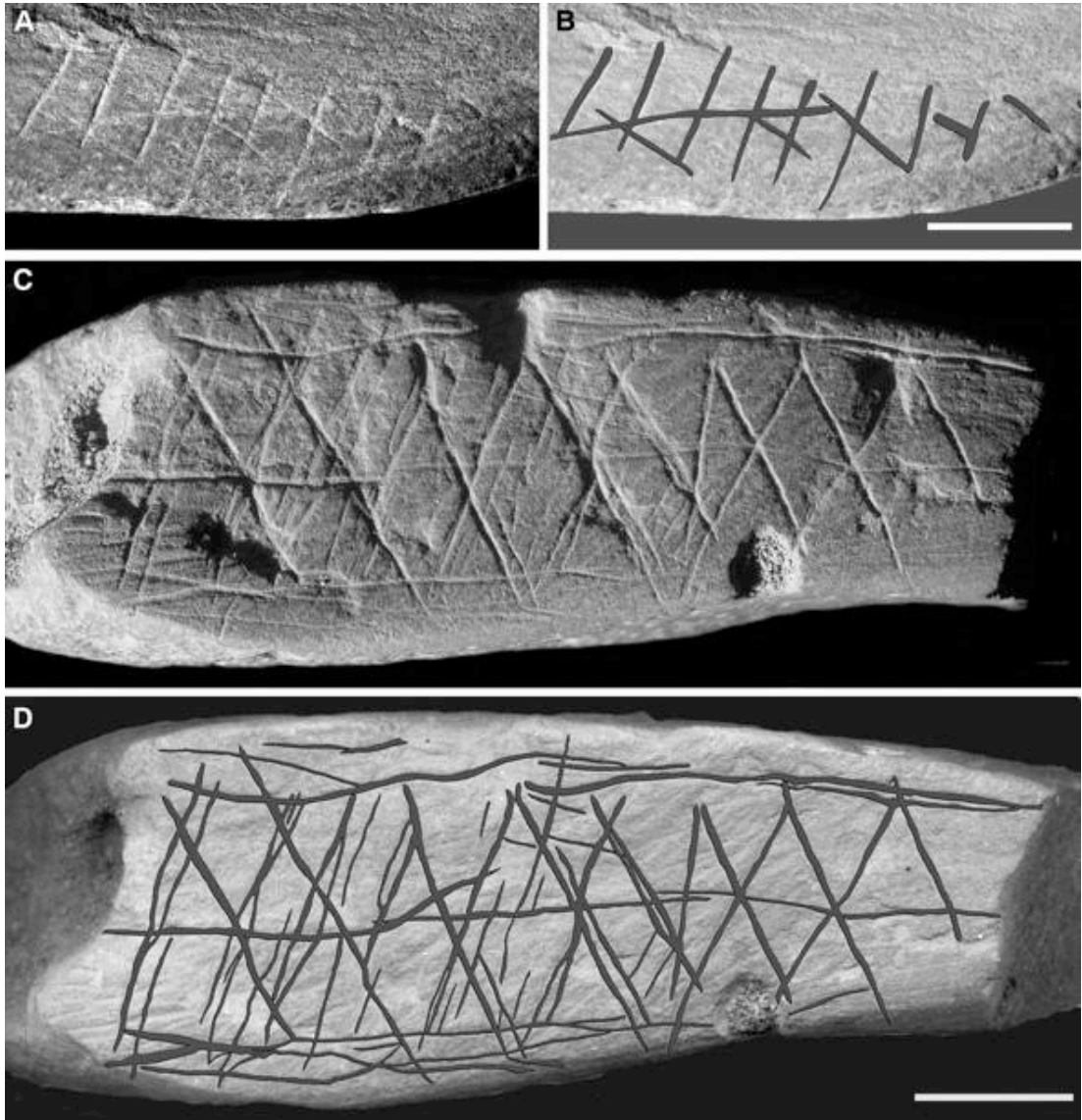


Fig. 1 Engraved ochre from the Blombos Cave, C70, 000-80,000 BCE

The primary purpose of this chapter is to identify a theoretical ground for my painting practice within an historical continuum of ideas about the nature of the relationship between the abstract and the concrete in the context of painting geometry. In so doing, my painting practice is presented as a contemporary expression of the pursuit of the ideal of the abstract in art, and this is identified with the pursuit of the absolute origin of human consciousness. To this end, this chapter argues that post-Kantian idealist and Romantic thought in the early nineteenth century anticipated to some extent the creation of a fully self-conscious abstract art at

the end of the century. On this basis, it is proposed that the original impulse towards the realisation of a self-consciously abstract art was the result of a shift in historical consciousness that was, to an unprecedented degree, towards the concrete expression not merely of particular abstract thoughts, but of thought itself in the form of art objects. It is assumed that throughout its history, abstract art has carried with it a promise of a transformative freedom to shape and change its historical existence, and importantly, that this position is aligned with the notion that the primary purpose of striving in the realm of art, of thought, of mind and of spirit is towards embodiment in the world.

The first artists to recognise themselves as abstract artists in the late nineteenth century acknowledged an immediate and almost talismanic affinity with ancient or primitive forms of abstract expression that were either forgotten or wilfully disregarded by previous generations of artists. However variously formulated this interest may have been within the explosive creative moment of the early development of abstract art, what may be considered essential to the idea of abstract art in its initial conception was the idea that abstract thought is aligned with the origin of consciousness, and that access to this origin held the promise of the restoration, or regeneration of art itself. We know that fossil records indicate that anatomically modern humans evolved around 100,000 years ago. Until recently it had generally been thought that credible evidence for behavioral modernity appeared roughly 40,000 years ago. However, in January 2002, the journal *Science* published a report by Christopher S. Henshilwood and his colleagues that challenged this view. Their excavation at the Blombos cave in South Africa yielded two pieces of ochre displaying 77,000 year old engravings that clearly display symbolic characteristics that demonstrate abstract thought, which may be considered to be the precondition, and hence evidential basis for behavioral modernity. The report states that:

The Blombos Cave motifs suggest arbitrary conventions unrelated to reality-based cognition [...] and they may have been constructed with symbolic intent [...] These finds demonstrate that ochre use [...] was not exclusively utilitarian and arguably, the transmission and sharing of the meaning of the

engravings relied on fully syntactical language [...] It seems that, at least in southern Africa, *Homo sapiens* was behaviorally modern about 77,000 years ago.⁴

This observation underscores some key issues that have come to define the idea of the abstract in the history of art. Most notably, it identifies abstract thought with non-utilitarian objectives that entail a certain distance from concrete reality. Abstract thought is also identified with the symbol, and concurrently with this, reliance upon a context wherein the symbolic content of abstract forms may be communicated. It is argued here that the emergence of abstract thought in this way was a defining moment in our evolution at the very beginning of human self-consciousness, a move that may be understood as a kind of proto exit from the Platonic cave motivated by an upward seeking towards greater knowledge and understanding of the world.

In a manner that is akin to this early moment of awakening of consciousness, my paintings suggest symbolic content even where such content is not explicitly nominated. There is something like language that begins to form itself, but not with any real or practical purpose beyond the instigation of a process of reflection. In this respect, there is no essential difference between my work and the engravings found in the Blombos Caves, and as such, my painting is directly engaged with an ancient tradition of representation of abstract thought. This engagement is with the first moments of abstract thought in the history of human consciousness that have defined us as reflective beings, *homo sapiens*, i.e. *wise* or *knowing* man.

Consciousness of the role of the abstract in relation to the production of art was of fundamental importance in the philosophy of German Idealism. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Kant regarded the beautiful in art as an agreement between an abstract concept and a concrete sensuous particular. He asserted that abstract processes of ‘conception’ stand in relationship with concrete ‘objects’ in such a way that they thoroughly interpenetrate one another. However, in this context, concrete particulars, like feelings and sensations of beauty, are ‘contingent’ in relation to themselves and what he identifies as a ‘universal’ abstract concept.⁵

⁴ Kate Wong, *Ancient Engravings Push Back Origin of Abstract Thought*, 2002, Source: <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=ancient-engravings-push-b>

⁵ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, trans., Bernard Bosanquet, Penguin Books, 1993, LXXXII, 66

As fraught as the notion of beauty has become throughout the course of the twentieth century, and now at the beginning of the twenty-first century, it is nevertheless a central concern in my painting. While I make no claim to the achievement of beauty in my painting as such, I do consider this end to be one that I aspire to as a point of orientation, however contingent this may be in my own experience of the work or in the way that it is experienced by others. Following the Kantian prescription for the presence of the beautiful in painting, I seek ways of presenting, or representing, the thorough interpenetration of the abstract and the concrete. The question of how to paint an idea at the point of intersection between abstract and concrete is always present. Whether or not this can stand in view of the prospect of beauty is another question, even if it is one that is ultimately unanswerable in absolute terms.

In the context of Kant's formulation, it is necessary for the artist to understand in both theoretical and practical terms how the abstract and the concrete may come to be reconciled in the form of a work of art. Schiller suggests in his *Aesthetic Education of Man* that the sensuous self claims absolute reality and seeks to make pure abstract form into world, whereas by contrast, the rational self claims absolute formality, and seeks to annihilate the world in the self in order to achieve harmony. As such, a person may only be understood in terms of the limits of the relationship defined by his or her sensuous-rational nature.⁶ It is Schiller's opinion that we are, ultimately, first and foremost sensuous beings, and that it is only of secondary importance that we are rational animals. He maintains therefore that we should neither be ruled exclusively by nature nor conditionally by reason, but rather, held in harmonious agreement between both independent systems of law.⁷

The law-like structure of harmony in music was well understood and regarded in the early nineteenth century in Germany. For Schopenhauer, music plays an important philosophical role in that it has an immediate capacity to touch the most essential part of our being in the world. The reason for this privileged access is that, in his view, music is able to express the universal, abstract language of the inner being of

⁶ Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, trans., Reginald Snell, Dover Publications, Inc., Mineola, New York, 2004, 60-4

⁷ Ibid. 119

the world itself in a distinct concrete form.⁸ The language of music is infallible in the context of its conformity to numerical rules of harmony, and that these are universally recognisable.⁹ As such, music can represent: ‘larger numbers and more complex numerical ratios than we can otherwise know only indirectly by comprehension in concepts.’ Music may be understood in this way as a kind of ‘philosophy of numbers’ that may be comparable to that of Pythagoras in its tacit recognition that: ‘All things are similar to number.’¹⁰ In support of this view, Schopenhauer cites Leibniz’s famous dictum: ‘Music is an unconscious exercise in arithmetic in which the mind does not know it is counting,’¹¹ a view which he reformulates as: ‘Music is an unconscious exercise in metaphysics in which the mind does not know it is philosophising.’¹²

From the outset, my painting practice has sought to explore the possibility of representing in visual terms the kind experience of unconscious harmony that music naturally and immediately represents. To this end, I have made the assumption that geometry is the natural visual analogue of the language of music. The basis for this assumption is that geometry, like music, is an abstract and ideal formal language that may be expressed concretely in visual form. Geometry conforms to universal, infallible, numerical laws that are in every respect analogous to the rules of harmony in music insofar as they may express complex numerical relationships in concrete and understandable terms that may not otherwise be self-evident. In this way, geometry may be understood not only as an unconscious exercise in arithmetic, it may also be understood as an unconscious exercise in metaphysics.

The competing claims of my sensuous-rational self, of reality and formality, find resolution in my painting in the form of the question: ‘How can I paint this idea?’ Even where I seek a harmonious agreement between abstract or conceptual propositions and their concrete representation, any response to this question must be considered in progressive rather than definitive terms, since each painting represents a recapitulation rather than a conclusion to the question. While the works involve

⁸ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World As Will And Representation*, trans. E.F.J. Payne, Dover, New York, 1969, 262

⁹ Ibid. 256

¹⁰ Ibid. 264-5

¹¹ Ibid. 256

¹² Ibid. I. 265

rational processes, and notwithstanding my careful attention to line making, it is the ambiguity rather than the clarity of the work that is of greatest interest to me, and this considered together with the force of their sensuous presence. In this way, abstract reasoning functions as a counterbalance to the concrete and sensuous aspects of my painting.

Hegel believed that abstract consideration of works of art dominated attempts of the Classical era to understand the beautiful in and of itself, as an essence, the idea of which being to transcend the particular instance in which it is made manifest.¹³ By contrast with the Classical model, he argues that the historical condition of the Romantic era was such that it was no longer possible to posit the universal in the abstract as a guarantee of artistic validity. Therefore, he claimed that a new order of probity in relation to works of art had become necessary in order to establish adequate grounds for their validity. His view was that this transformation of the Classical perspective was as the result of the emergence of a subjective imperative that oriented the Romantic artist towards a prevalent mode of critical reflection that sought to pass judgement on works of art, the result of which being, ironically, that more abstract thought was put into the works themselves.¹⁴

A problem for Hegel arises here in view of his belief that beauty in art is dissolved by abstract thought, and that along with this loss comes the loss also of reality through the process of coming to understanding that is grounded in judgement and assessment.¹⁵ As such, Hegel avoids abstract principles and categories in consideration of works of art, preferring concrete accounts that may be taken into aesthetic consideration as illustrations or instances of the particularities of history for which philosophy itself can make no account.¹⁶

To some extent, this emphasis on the concrete basis of art objects is a convenient way for me to think aesthetically about my abstract painting. From an historical perspective, while my paintings have an at least formally classical aspect, I do not suppose that they lay claim to any kind of universal guarantee of validity. Nor do I think that the work is beholden to any kind of Romantic, or, subjective imperative

¹⁴ Ibid. XVII, 12-3

¹⁵ Ibid. XX, 14

¹⁶ Ibid. XXXV, 24-5

grounded in judgement, even where the work is primarily concerned with representation of abstract thought. Insofar as this is the case, in order to avoid Hegel's critique of abstract thought's inimicality to beauty, I consider that it is important that processes of judgement and assessment be considered extrinsic to the paintings themselves in the context of their presentation, even where such processes are inextricably bound to the manner of their production.

To some extent, Hegel's view that beauty in art is experienced immediately and concretely by way of the senses, perceptions, emotions and the imagination is consistent with my own. He believed that beauty, experienced concretely in this way, represents the prospect of liberation from the regularity of rational processes, and furthermore, that it is the freedom from this mode of abstraction in which the pleasure that we derive from art consists. As such, the work of art becomes a place of rest away from abstract thought, or from what he calls the conceptual 'shadowland of the *idea*', in order that the vitality of reality may flourish.¹⁷ It is at this point that the true nature of the beautiful in art necessarily involves a resolution between the abstract and the concrete, in which the metaphysical and universal are brought together with the determinate reality of the particular. In this way, it becomes generative in and of itself, and this is in contrast with the self-reflective sterility of pure abstraction.¹⁸

In my own practice, I believe that the better part of the abstract thought, or reason, that goes into my work takes place in their making, whether this takes place in preliminary drawings, or even before in moments of intuition. The working out of the paintings themselves is a passage towards a more concrete finality, which in turn becomes a beginning at the point where the painting is presented to the gaze of the beholder. In this way, the work itself comes to a kind of rest, but it is at this point that the labour of the gaze begins in its active suspension between the ideal and the real. As such, I believe that the paintings evade Hegel's critique of pure abstraction in art.

While Hegel maintains that works of art are not abstract thoughts or ideas in and of themselves, he does concede that they are an evolution of them. He argues that

¹⁷ Ibid. VII, 7

¹⁸ Ibid. XXXVII, 25-6

whatever measure of abstract thought is manifest in the work of art, it is to this degree that the work of art is alienated from its sensuous self, and that it is by way of the evolution of abstract thought back into definite sensuous form in which the work of art consists. Thus, it is through the undoing of the internal alienation in the work of art that the universal is preserved in its particularisations.¹⁹

The sense in which I understand the progression from abstract to concrete in my painting is that the abstract thought that I put into the work is to some extent exhausted at the point of its completion. The completion itself may be understood as the form of the undoing of the work's internal alienation between its abstract and concrete elements, even where the degree of success with which this completion has been achieved is uncertain.

The emergence of landscape painting as a stylistic genre in Germany in the nineteenth century ran concurrently with that of Romanticism. Philipp Otto Runge considered that the development of landscape painting was on the basis of a movement towards representation of a 'state of feeling,' the result of which the U.S. art historian, Joseph Leo Koerner, considered to be more 'abstract and sublime' than previous stylistic genres of painting.²⁰ With this understanding of the importance of a subjective feeling in art, Runge envisioned a new era of landscape painting whose mode of expression was more abstract than traditional historical painting. He believed that the necessity of this new form of art was as the result of the decline of the influence of religion in Europe, to wit Koerner cites Runge's statement:

The Greeks achieved the highest beauty in forms and figures at the moment when their gods were dying; the new Romans [i.e. Raphael and Michelangelo] went furthest in the development of historical painting at the time when the Catholic religion was perishing; with us too something again is dying: we stand on the brink of all the religions that originated with Catholicism; the abstractions are fading away; everything becomes more airy and lighter than before; everything draws towards landscape, seeks something definite in this indeterminacy, and does not know where to begin?²¹

Here, Runge clearly identifies the historical condition of his era that Hegel had also identified, yet he casts this in more projective terms than Hegel, envisioning rather a

¹⁹ Ibid. XXI, 15

²⁰ Joseph Leo Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape*, Reaktion Books Ltd., London, 2009, 63

²¹ Ibid. 161-3

possible future direction of art production that would evolve from the principle of abstract feeling, a notion that would later be taken up by Malevich in his Suprematist manifesto, *The Non-Objective World*. Fundamentally, I consider my paintings to be representations of states of feeling within this basic historical trajectory. Although there is not an explicitly identifiable feeling within the geometries that I use, this is not to say however that they are without feeling. Whatever feeling there is in my painting is there in the form of the consciousness that is engaged with it in abstract contemplation. In this way, I consider that my painting is directly engaged with Runge's first anticipation of what would later evolve into a fully self-conscious abstract art that considered the representation of states of feeling to be its primary achievement.

Like Malevich, integral to Mondrian's approach to art is a notion of the self-consciousness of spirit. These artists realised Hegel's great anticipation of art, that spirit is revealed in the relationship between the concrete, the abstract, the universal and the particular. Mondrian's task in this context is the revelation of spirit in painting. For both Hegel and Mondrian, the self-consciousness of spirit of the artist is teleologically aligned with the history of both art and society. This assumes that self-consciousness must be acquired both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, in the sense that the artist must: 'represent himself to himself, fix before himself what thinking finds as his essence.' And practically, in the sense that the artist must: 'produce himself and therein equally to recognise himself.'²²

More specifically, Mondrian believed that in turning away from the natural, or external aspect of life, modern life becomes more abstract. He held that this tendency towards the abstract marks a turn inward, away from either material or emotional ends in and for themselves, and towards what he called: 'the autonomous life of the human spirit becoming conscious.'²³ His suggestion here is that this turning occurs by way of the 'evolution' of the modern individual, and that this involves a change in consciousness through a unity between body, soul and mind, the result of which being that the appearance of life becomes more abstract in the sense that it becomes

²² Mark A. Cheetham, *The Rhetoric of Purity: Essentialist Theory and the Advent of Abstract Painting*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991, 53

²³ Mondrian, op. cit. 28

more ‘determinate.’²⁴ Understood thus, Mondrian embraced the abstract as an essential human condition in the context of modern life and modern culture, and as such, he believed that the modern mind must abstract reality to the point where real life extends into the abstract in order to realise that life itself has become an abstraction.²⁵

My engagement with painting is primarily concerned with the moment of the expansion of consciousness, which I identify with spirit, and how this may be fixed as a painting. This fixing has taken on a simultaneously determinate and yet ambiguous character in my painting, and this involves a theoretical and practical engagement with history to the extent that it represents a manifestation of the expansion of my own consciousness, and hence my own history, and to some extent my engagement with history in general. This is a process of self-production and self-recognition that is perhaps comparable to Hegel’s, or Mondrian’s notion of the telos of Spirit, or Mind.

From a different point of view, and yet still coming out of an intellectual climate dominated by Idealist thinking, Husserl observes from a phenomenological point of view that in abstract reflection it becomes possible to penetrate the horizon of knowing and not-knowing, through which may be revealed what he calls the ‘undisclosed.’ The importance of abstract reflection in this sense is that we have a transformative freedom to shape and change our historical existence by way of imaginative variations of all the given possibilities within our horizon, which may be understood essentially as an exposition of all the variants of a general set of elements. Such a freedom of reflection, of the gaze, presents the world as a set of conceptual possibilities.²⁶

My paintings reach towards the prospect of freedom from within the perimeters of the set of variants to which they belong. These are only ever known in some limited way, and, as such, stand between the known and the unknown. Thus, abstract reflection in my painting occurs at the threshold between knowing and not knowing,

²⁴ Ibid. 28

²⁵ Ibid. 43

²⁶ Edmund Husserl, appendix to Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1987, 177-8

and this involves a meeting between the disclosed and the undisclosed. The intention of my painting is to make this threshold of knowledge a central concern, not as a representation of the revelation of knowledge or its suppression, but rather as a framing of the moment of either possibility, and in this, the prospect of freedom also.

For Heidegger, like Husserl, the limits of consciousness are readily observable where he identifies the appearance of the beautiful with ‘spirit,’ or, what he calls: ‘the subject springing forth as the Ideal.’ And like Hegel, Heidegger assumed that the inner necessity of spirit is to, as he states: ‘deliver itself from abstraction, in absolving itself in the concreteness of absolute subjectivity and so to free itself to its own self.’²⁷ In this context, the primary purpose of striving in the realm of thought, of mind and of spirit is towards embodiment in the world. And, it is in this sense that the role of art as a conduit in the relationship between abstract and concrete was equally important to both Hegel and Heidegger.

It should be noted that Heidegger has identified equivalence between the abstract, beauty and spirit, and he believes that it is imperative that these should be embodied in the world. In view of this qualification, I consider my painting practice to be a manifestation of an inner urge to see or realise the idea that precedes a painting. What may be beautiful as an idea desires fulfillment in the sensual presence of concrete form. There is no doubt a good deal of sublimation in this desiring, and I think that this can be most aptly compared with the relationship between lover and beloved in the sense that the reaching of the lover is never absolutely fulfilled. Just as any real synthesis between lover and beloved may only ever be touched upon fleetingly, the inner necessity of the abstract intentional idea of my painting is only ever provisionally held within the concreteness of the frame of my paintings themselves.

There are resonances of Hegel in Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* where he argues that in the context of art, abstract thought, or reason, merely functions as ‘gesture’, which is to say that artworks make a gesture towards reason without actually being reasonable per se. They follow processes of synthesis in the way that pure reason does, yet the kind of synthesis that operates in an artwork does not proceed by way of concepts,

²⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Hegel and the Greeks*, From the Conference of the Academy of Sciences at Heidelberg, July 26, 1958, <http://www.morec.com/hegelgre.htm>

propositions and syllogisms in the same way that arguments do. Reason in the artwork is directed inwardly and gesturally towards self-unity, without any immediate necessary relation to external factors. Hence, the status of reason in an artwork is one of subordinate means to aesthetic ends.²⁸

What then might be the end of such a gesture? Adorno believed that the artwork necessarily participates in what he calls the ‘dialectic of enlightenment,’ the aim of which, like Hegel, is concrete rather than abstract in the sense that it is the specific concrete contexts and processes that define ideas and realities in their contradictions. As such, in Adorno’s view, it is only through its concreteness that the spirit of a work may originate, and it is only by way of this that it may become transcendent.²⁹

With this understanding, when I employ a geometric figure, it is not intended as a demonstration of some mathematical proof. It is intended simply as something to be looked at, or, something in which the eye may move freely. Geometry functions in my painting as a gesture that marks the beginning of an engagement with the beholder as an object of aesthetic contemplation. To this end, my paintings begin as simple statements. Whatever happens next in terms of insight, or transcendence has to do with the subjective experience of the beholder in terms of their dialectical relationship with the paintings themselves.

Conclusions

Abstract art has, since its origin, made the provisional coexistence between abstract and concrete categories a primary concern. In the shadow of Idealist philosophy, the early pioneers of abstract art assumed that contemplation of this relationship held the promise of the establishment of a conceptual framework that could provide greater freedom of expression than had previously been conceivable. In the establishment of the abstract as an ideal to which artists might aspire to achieve in the concrete form of abstract art, the immediate concerns of art practice became more bound up with those of philosophy than had been the case previously.

The most basic connection between Idealist philosophy of the early 19th Century and the emergence of abstract art is the notion that spirit is revealed in the relationship

²⁸ Adorno op. cit. *AT*, 387-8

²⁹ *Ibid.* 387-8

between abstract and concrete, where the beautiful is revealed in the form of an agreement between abstract concepts and concrete particulars. It was understood in this way that the inner necessity of spirit leads away from the abstract towards embodiment in the world, and that its transcendental promise appears only as a possibility subsequent to its initial concrete manifestation. Thus, the role of art was as a conduit insofar as it could enable the evolution and transition of abstract thought towards sensuous form. The evolution of art towards the representation of abstract and sublime feeling was considered in this way to be teleologically aligned with that of society, since both involve a turning away from the external aspect of life towards the internal and autonomous life of the human spirit. The emergence of a fully self-conscious abstract art was intended in this way to shape and change our historical existence in its presentation of the world as a set of simultaneously abstract and concrete possibilities.

In view of the philosophical origins of the relationship between abstract and concrete in the context of abstract art, a number of concerns become apparent in the way that I understand and intend my painting practice. In the most basic sense, while my painting involves abstract thought, or reason as a means to an end, the paintings themselves are non-rational. They gesture towards rationality insofar as they express geometric ideas, yet they offer proof of nothing. I understand therefore that painting geometry is a form of aesthetic or metaphysical proposition that expresses an abstract desire for freedom, and yet I acknowledge that this desire is bound necessarily to a concrete reality. The tension that results requires negotiation between the competing claims of my sensuous-rational self in order to achieve a form of agreement between its abstract and concrete aspects. Such an achievement stands thus, in the form of my paintings, at the threshold between knowing and not knowing. Where there is harmony, there is beauty; where there is beauty, there is freedom. I understand that the appearance and experience of these abstract qualities is a reflection of the inner being of the world in the concrete form of my paintings.

Chapter 3

Ideal & Real

Idealist thought in the nineteenth century was an important influence on the first generation of artists whose intention it was to produce art that was self-consciously abstract. In the context of this influence, the primary concern of this chapter is with the question of how the qualities of the ideal and the real may appear in the form of art objects, and how this appearance may reveal beauty and freedom through aesthetic contemplation. Beginning with the assumption that aesthetic judgements play an important role in determining the limits of our experience of beauty and freedom in art, this chapter approaches the prospect of a unity between the ideal and the real and how this may be achieved in order that beauty may appear in the form of geometric painting. Thus, the possibility of the embodiment of the ideal in art is explored in the teleological context of the aspiration after, attainment, and transcendence of the Ideal as the true essence of beauty. However, notwithstanding aspirations of unity between the real and ideal qualities of a work of art, it is also suggested here that a work of art can become productive of meaning from within the irresolution of this antinomy. Engagement with these concerns in this chapter is intended, ultimately, to deepen my understanding of the historical foundations of the ideal and real qualities of my own painting practice, thereby allowing me to become freer and more receptive to the possibility of the appearance of beauty in it.

Kant wrote the *Critique of the Power of Judgement* in order to reconcile, in philosophical terms, the sensible with the super-sensible, nature with freedom, and theoretical with practical reason.³⁶ Here he suggests that free patterns may signify nothing in contemplation, and yet they may be judged agreeable; they may be beautiful in an ideal sense without the further qualification as being good or otherwise.³⁷ He argues, however, that if any form of sensuous, acquisitive, appetitive or utilitarian interest becomes involved in the experience of the beautiful, then beautiful objects lose their ideal status. As such, their meaning and importance become real in the sense that these objects become subordinate to our desire, in

³⁶ Wood, op. cit. 151-2

³⁷ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of the Power of Judgement: 'Analytic of the Beautiful'*, trans., James Creed Meredith, appearing in: *The Philosophy of Art: Readings Ancient and Modern*, Ed., Alex Neill and Aaron Ridley, McGraw-Hill, New York, 1995, 272-3

which case aesthetic judgement is no longer free and independent.³⁸ Thus, our delight in the beautiful is either of an order of interested or disinterested order. Interested delight is derived from the representation to the subject of any *real* existence of an object determined as an operation of the faculty of desire. Whereas disinterested delight is derived from representations that are independent of any concern for the real existence of the object. In this case, aesthetic judgements are of an order of *ideal* contemplation, intuition, or reflection.³⁹

This aesthetic formula anticipates to a large degree the ideological dissonance that has defined the course of abstract art from its earliest statements until now. An engagement with this basic assertion with idealist aesthetics remains as an important point of reference in terms of any claim that may be made to an engagement with abstract art in the contemporary context. The question of beauty vis á vis the abstract art object cannot be avoided as such. What is at stake for me in view of Kant's claim is that, in my experience, I am most free and receptive to the beautiful in my painting when and where I have no particular interest or expectation of what I should be seeing in it. From within this freedom, the intuition of patterns is essential to the way in which I construct and contemplate my paintings. The agreeableness or otherwise of the patterns is, I believe, the result of their proximity to an ideal form that precedes my engagement with them. There is no particular interest in the real existence of this ideal, or expectation of its true nature on my part beyond the moment of identification of the agreeableness of the form with which I am working. In this way, I consider that my painting practice is oriented towards the model of disinterested delight that Kant proposes. And as such, whether the paintings are really beautiful or not is of no real interest to me beyond the fact that they represent a form of documentary evidence of the thought world that I invest in their making.

However, the promise of such a freedom and beauty in this ideal sense does not account for the entirety of the experience of an art object, at least not in my experience. In practical terms, its reality is no less important than the ideal aspect that it may communicate, and perhaps the real qualities of art play a necessary concrete otherness to that which is essentially abstract, ideal and transcendent in it.

³⁸ Hegel, op. cit. LXXVIII, 64

³⁹ Kant, op. cit. 270-1

Unlike other things in the world, a work of art may appear as a form of coherent unity between that which is ideal and real in it. Somewhat distanced from Kant's absolute terms of reference, Schelling refers to such a form of unity in his claim that the philosophical importance of art is that it has the capacity to reveal the original and ideal unity of nature and history, whereas in the normal course of our experience, these things stand in opposition to one another. The assumption here is that while the philosopher may only frame this unity artificially, this is the natural and original point of view of the artist. Thus, the work of art stands as what he calls the 'holy of holies' in the sense that it represents the revelation of an ideal unity between nature and history within the reality of an art object. In this way, he states:

Each splendid painting owes, as it were, its genesis to a removal of the invisible barrier dividing the real from the ideal world, and is no more than the gateway, through which come forth completely the shapes and scenes of that world of fantasy which gleams but imperfectly through the real. Nature, to the artist, is nothing more than it is to the philosopher, being simply the ideal world appearing under permanent restrictions, or merely the imperfect reflection of a world existing, not outside him, but within.⁴⁰

As such, the production of art involves the contrary activities of the self extending in opposite directions. In reaching out towards the infinite, the self claims the *real*, whereas the self, when it reaches inwards within this infinitude, claims the *ideal*.⁴¹

In terms very similar to those of Schelling, Schiller held that the beauty of a work of art results by virtue of the extent to which equilibrium between reality and the expression of ideal form may be achieved in it. However, he takes pains to make clear that since this is an ideal union, it may not be wholly attained in actuality, and hence, either the weight of a work's reality or of its intended ideal form must necessarily predominate one over the other. Therefore, the beauty of the ideal vies with that of the real such that both may be experienced through the senses in the 'tightening' and 'slackening' of each reciprocal impulse within the limits of their necessity.⁴²

⁴⁰ Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, trans., Peter Heath, University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville, 1997, 232

⁴¹ Ibid. 49

⁴² Schiller, op. cit. *AEM*, 81-2

While my painting practice is influenced to some extent by the Kantian ideal of disinterested delight, this influence must be qualified in terms of both Schelling's and Schiller's views on the mediated experience of beauty in relation to the claims of the real. In this way, while my painting is a form of aesthetic reflection that aspires to a state of disinterested delight, I concede that my paintings must function also as real objects within the laws of nature, which I understand to be the formal conditions of the world. Thus, when I reach outwards in my painting it is to claim the real. When I reach inwards, it is to claim the ideal. This is a balancing act of sorts, where beauty finds itself poised between leanings in either direction towards infinite possibilities.

While these qualifications speak directly to the conditions of the interior world of my painting practice, my paintings have a life that is independent of my own processes of reflection. As such, the limits and location of the ideal and the real aspects that define an art object must be negotiated in some way, not only within my own experience, but also with others within limits of the communicability of ideas. Here I assume that processes of abstraction, including reason, are central to this negotiation. By way of development of this idea, Hegel argues that reason operates by way of abstraction from the concrete particularities of observable phenomena, and moves in the direction of an abstract ideal, and that as such, if art were entirely rational, our experience of it would remain entirely abstract, and the reality of the art object would be diminished to the point of annihilation. He concludes therefore that in the absence of any reconciliation between the ideal and the real, abstract thought becomes inimical to the vitality and the concrete reality of a work of art.⁴³

This understanding of reason's tethering to the real in the form of art objects is significant in terms of the development of my work in the sense that I generally begin with an abstract concept which, by means either of elaboration or reduction, and by way of negotiation with concrete reality, I bring towards a point of resolution in the form of a painting. Following this process, I endeavour to produce paintings that are as engaged with what in them is abstract as with what is concrete, with what is ideal as with what is real. If and when beauty appears in this way, then this is the result of a harmonious accord between these opposing elements.

⁴³ Hegel, op. cit. *ILA*, VII, 7-8

Beyond their personal meaning, or significance in respect of this endeavour, my paintings must derive some of their content within the context of their inter-subjective communicability, and the historical trajectory that may be described thereby. For instance, Hegel believed that the embodiment of the Ideal in the sphere of art progresses from the Symbolic, to the Classical, and then to the Romantic according to the following stages: in the aspiration after, the attainment, and transcendence of the Ideal as the true essence of beauty.⁴⁴

In the first instance, Hegel suggests that where the Ideal is the origin and central import of art, that art must remain obscure in its indeterminacy and abstractness. Without having found its true form, or the essence of what it seeks, a work of art may only represent imperfectly the aspiration towards the Ideal. He understands this form of art as the 'Symbolic' form of art, in which the outward shape of the abstract Ideal, presented in sensuous matter, is external to itself yet inseparable from it. As such, Symbolic art clearly articulates the antagonism and difference between the ideal and its sensuous embodiment. By contrast with this more primitive mode of expression, Hegel believed that 'Classical' art freely embodies the ideal in a form or shape that is uniquely appropriate to it, and hence, the form itself may enter freely and harmoniously with the ideal. Any failing of Classical art as such is one that exists as an inherent limitation of the sphere of art.⁴⁵

As a development or evolution, or outgrowth of Classical art's fulfilment of the ideal, Hegel asserts that Romanticism in art involves the denigration of the unity between the real and the ideal. In terms of the historical manifestation of Spirit, Hegel argues that the Romantic art of his own epoch, unlike previous eras, was no longer able to reveal the absolute since it had past the point of historical consciousness where works of art could be worshiped as divine, and as such, their status in the modern world had come to require confirmation.⁴⁶

Such an historical formulation suggest that art can pass through a cycle of aspiration, attainment and transcendence of the embodiment of the Ideal, only to find that the condition of art has arrived at the point where it began, and that the evolution of art is

⁴⁴ Ibid. CVII, 85-8

⁴⁵ Ibid. CVI, 82-4

⁴⁶ Ibid. XVI, 12

cyclical rather than linear in this way. This is the case not only in the character of an epoch, but in the production of a single work of art, and perhaps necessarily so, since each of these stages is fleeting, and each stage requires the next in order to be what it is. Without this movement, the appearance of beauty is impossible.

In the context of this Hegelian cycle of art's evolution, I consider that if my painting has a Classical quality, this is perhaps the manifestation of an affinity with, or longing for, the achievement of Classical ideals. This is not a claim to the achievement of Classical ideals, but an acknowledgement that I self-consciously draw upon these as a point of reference in the manner in which I go about painting. In the absence of the achievement of an ideal status, my paintings must therefore be aligned more closely with the aspirations that characterise the Symbolic stage of artistic development, and concurrently with this, there is a clearly Romantic legacy that defines the limits my painting to the extent that the status of my work in the contemporary context requires confirmation. The position that I take here is that it is not possible to simply assert that my paintings are real manifestations of transcendent ideals. But rather, they are painterly propositions that are actively engaged with a concurrence of stages of artistic development that define their historical condition in the contemporary context.

Like Hegel, Adorno believed that the self-evident status of art that had persisted throughout art history until the nineteenth century had come to an end, and that this ending had prepared the ground for the condition of indeterminacy and complexity that had come to define the origins of Modernism in art. Early formulations of the idea of the Modern along these lines began to appear in the writings of Baudelaire who identified beauty in terms of the transient experience of the quotidian that became manifest in the concrete and the particular, rather than in the universal, the eternal and the transcendent. The result being that beauty in art, in the early Modern sense, had become 'eloquent' in its opposition to the universal.⁴⁷ Notwithstanding this basic orientation of early Modernist aesthetics, Adorno argues that: 'art reaches toward reality, only to recoil at the touch of it.'⁴⁸ The assumption here being that we only very reluctantly let go of the prospect of beauty in the ideal sense, perhaps as

⁴⁷ Adorno, *AT*, op. cit. 269

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 366

the direct result of some primal terror of art's descent into the realm of the 'indifferent' in the absence of the moment of 'enchantment,' or 'elevation' that is its unique promise.⁴⁹

When we touch reality in an aesthetic sense, it is never without the trace of this terror. The way in which I approach my painting is an exception to this rule. Terror sits very close to my most basic impulse towards painting. As a consequence, my engagement with the real is never consciously disarticulated from a more basic desire for the reconciliation of the real in my painting with some form of transcendent ideal, even where this ideal resists identification or nomination.

On this subject, Adorno resists the traditional Platonic view that the role of the masterful artist is to achieve a mean between the ideal and the real. In preference, he suggests the more nuanced notion that art functions, or becomes productive from within the irresolution of this antinomy, rather than in the accomplishment of its resolution.⁵⁰ In this context, the only way for a work of art to be successful, and the only way that art may move forward, is in the form of what he calls its 'progressive impossibility.'⁵¹ By way of reaching towards the impossible, the condition of the work of art is such that it is both suspended and emergent in a liminal moment of irresolution between the ideal and the real, and hovers at the boundary between the possible and the impossible.⁵²

It is Adorno's understanding of the productive irresolution of the antinomy between ideal and real in the work of art that fits most comfortably with my own. While I understand this to be a general condition of the experience of all art, it is with a working consciousness of this that I seek to further the development of my own.

As a counterpoint to the Hegelian mainstream in Idealist thought in the nineteenth century, it is also necessary to consider the influence of Arthur Schopenhauer on the artists who would come to define the origins of abstract art. Schopenhauer's *World as Will and Representation* was first published in 1819. However, it only became widely read in France towards the end of the nineteenth century with the publication

⁴⁹ Ibid. 384

⁵⁰ Ibid. 379

⁵¹ Ibid. 265-6

⁵² Ibid. 84

of the first French translation in 1884. While he is often critical of Hegel, Schelling and others in this work, it is nonetheless deeply rooted in post-Kantian Idealist philosophy, and more classically Platonic formulations. It became widely influential in the intellectual climate of the late 19th century, particularly by way of its influence on the French philosopher J. Burdeau, who went so far as to suggest that the object of art *is* an ‘Idea’ in the Platonic sense, and that in this way it offers a ‘salvation’ from the world of appearances. He believed that art attains this Ideal status by: ‘returning to the soul through memory, through reminiscences from a prenatal perception of truly existing things.’⁵³

This form of Neo-Platonic thinking at the end of the nineteenth century represented a kind of metaphysical repose, or, a suspension above the malaise of relativity that had come to characterise the quotidian experience of the Modern world. It represented an antidote to what was then an emergent positivism within intellectual life, in defiance of which the symbolist critic Albert Aurier states: ‘We must become mystics again.’⁵⁴ Aspiring to the attainment of this new order of consciousness, he called for an art that departed from nature and relied on memory. He believed that such a form of art was purer than naturalistic representation since it could separate ‘matter’ from ‘idea.’ It is in this context that he formulated the notion of ‘transcendental emotivity’ which could, through the genius of the artist, allow the viewer to be liberated from the constraints of materiality in such a way that, as he states: ‘the soul tremble[s] before the pulsing drama of the abstractions.’ It is in this sense that Aurier equates the ‘idea’ with the ‘abstract.’⁵⁵

With this equivalence in mind, Aurier, a contemporary of Gauguin, described the work of the artist as the: ‘plastic interpretation of Platonism done by a savage genius.’⁵⁶ The process of abstraction in Gauguin’s painting from memory is methodological, and its end, from a Neo-Platonic point of view, is spiritual enlightenment. As such, it is not an end in itself, but rather, a means. It becomes a way to essences that is unavailable through naturalistic means. Abstraction in this sense may be understood as the way out of Plato’s allegorical cave, and Gauguin an

⁵³ Cheetham, op. cit. 16-7, cit. Schopenhauer, *The World As Will And Representation*, trans. E.F.J. Payne, Dover, New York, 1969, vol. I, p. 233

⁵⁴ Ibid. 24

⁵⁵ Ibid. 31-2

⁵⁶ Ibid. 9

escapee from within the tradition of naturalism in art.⁵⁷ It is in this context that Aurier's article on Gauguin in the *Mercur de France*, 1891, is critical of the Academy, stating that they are 'poor stupid prisoners of the allegorical cavern.' He continues in this vein stating:

Let us leave them to fool themselves in contemplating the shadows that they take for reality, and let us go back to those men who, their chains broken and far from the cruel native dungeon, ecstatically contemplate the radiant heavens of Ideas. The normal and final end of painting, as well as of the other arts, can never be the direct representation of objects. Its aim is to express Ideas, by translating them into a special language.⁵⁸

This kind of critique is emblematic of the origins of the then emergent avant-garde and of Modernity in art, and it is no doubt a development of Schopenhauer's own allusion to Plato's allegory of the cave, where he states:

Those who outside the cave have seen the true sunlight and the things that actually are (the Ideas), cannot afterwards see within the cave any more, because their eyes have grown unaccustomed to the darkness; they no longer recognise the shadow-forms correctly; they are therefore ridiculed for their mistakes by those others who have never left that cave and those shadow-forms.⁵⁹

Although I am uncommitted to Burdeau's view that a work of art is a Platonic Idea, I do nevertheless treat my own painting as a form of salvation from the world of appearances, and in this respect, memory plays an important function in my work in two related but distinct ways. Firstly, in a very practical sense, I remember how to paint in the way that I paint by way of repetitively learned haptic experience. This kind of experience is essentially a form of sub-conscious memory that is bound up with the concrete specifics of the manipulation of paint.

Secondly, I have a mental schema of each of the patterns that I use in my paintings that allows me to reproduce them from memory. This memory is important, as the schema is the ideal form of each work and my memory of this is as close as I can come to holding its ideal form. In order to approach this ideal in concrete terms, to make it a concrete proposition, my tools are as simple as possible: pencil, paper and ruler. Whether it is through the memory of a schema, or the haptic memory of how to

⁵⁷ Ibid. 8

⁵⁸ Ibid. 20

⁵⁹ Ibid. 18

paint this schema, my approach to painting is always directed towards greater understanding of the form with which I am working.

Thirdly, there is a kind of symbolic function of memory in my painting that has to do with the sedimented layers of meaning that the forms that I am working with may intimate. Necessarily, the specific content of these intimations is open within the subjective consciousness of the beholder.

If I move in the direction of purer light or greater understanding in my painting process, it is by virtue of these three dominant aspects of memory. While this is my intended goal as a painter, I acknowledge equally that this movement takes place without any guarantee that such an attainment would be recognisable, even in view of its absolute and ideal presence. This qualification is a basic assumption concerning my understanding of the limits of my undertaking as a painter. Nevertheless, given this limit point, I am as intrigued by what is possible within the sphere of what is apparent as I am by what is not.

Beyond the limits of our perceptions and constructions of the ideal, more must be said of the same in respect of the real. Much like Aurier, Malevich supposed that our conception of reality is only a ‘caricature’ of reality as it is in nature. As such, what we call nature is in essence a product of the imagination with no actual influence on the reality status of nature itself. He states: ‘If the human being were suddenly to comprehend actual reality – in that very moment the battle would be decided and eternal, unshakeable perfection attained.’⁶⁰ It is for this reason that he moved progressively away from representation of the objective world in his painting towards representation of pure inner feeling.

Like Malevich I recognise that, as a painter, I work necessarily within the limits of what is really and naturally possible, understanding however that such limits are necessarily determined by my ability to imagine them. What is most important to me within these limits is the representation in my painting of inner feeling.

A propos of the possibilities for art and its relationship with Nature, Plotinus is quoted in the first issue of *De Stijl* in 1918: ‘Art stands above nature, because it

⁶⁰ Kasimir Malevich, *The Non-Objective World: The Manifesto of Suprematism*, Dover Publications Inc., New York, 2003, 20

expresses the ideas, of which the objects of nature are the defective likeness. The artist, relying only on his own resources, rises above capricious reality.’⁶¹ The assumption here is that artistic representation, as an expression of pure intuition, approaches the Ideal realm more directly than nature presents itself.

There is no suggestion here that rising above nature in art requires the achievement of an admirable likeness that outshines the products of nature. This was well understood by members of the De Stijl group. Their primary focus was to approach an ideal in their art that could not be included in a history of art practice that was itself a defective likeness of a defective likeness. Their appeal to Plotinus in this way is to a venerable theoretical framework that could support the emergent ideology of Neo-Plasticism, and by extension, modern art.

In this context, Mondrian defined Neo-Plasticism as: ‘a plastically determinate aesthetic expression of the universal.’ He believed that this radically new mode of expression represented a subjective transformation of the universal, and that, as such, it satisfied the basic requirements of all art. Citing Schopenhauer as a point of reference, Mondrian claimed that such an art shares much in common with religion. He identifies three key features that define their commonality: both posit the universal as being concurrently immanent and transcendent within human experience; both emphasise the essential importance of contemplation of the universal; and both are ends in themselves. In support of this claim, Mondrian alludes to Schopenhauer’s concept of contemplation when he states that:

Contemplation springs from the universal (within us and outside us), and completely transcends the individual. Our individual personalities have no more merit than the telescope through which distant objects are made visible.⁶²

Quite independently of art’s affiliations with religion, the idea of unity in the form of art is for Mondrian: ‘a particularisation of universal consciousness.’ The formation of the idea of unity in this context is aesthetically determined through the equilibration of formal relationships. In this sense, he proposes that the movement, or evolution, of consciousness away from vagueness towards determination is also a movement

⁶¹ Cheetham, op. cit. 48-9

⁶² Mondrian, op. cit. 42

towards unity, and that this is as true for individual consciousness as it is for the spirit of the age.⁶³

The logic that Mondrian follows here is that in a culture at a time when the universal prevails over the individual, art will become increasingly less necessary to the point where it will be replaced by a new kind of life that is capable of realising the universal without art.⁶⁴ In this way, Mondrian held that the evolution of the art of his time was toward a condition of ‘non-art.’ Or, in other words, toward unity between spirit and nature, where art and life would come to resemble each other to such a degree that they become indistinguishable, and where the ideal and the real become perfectly reflected in each other.⁶⁵

Within this evolution, Mondrian held that Neo-Plasticism represented an important turning point in the history of art, where the origin of the artwork in the mind of the artist moved away from the ‘natural’ and the ‘individual’, and turned to the ‘universal’ as its absolute basis. He believed that it was necessary for the art of his epoch to begin with the universal or ideal, and that the expression of the Neo-Plastic work of art must necessarily be abstract rather than naturalistic, as had been the case historically.⁶⁶

Like Mondrian, I consider that the opposition made between nature and spirit is a false one. If it is understood that these may be two attributes of some more basic unity, then it becomes quite clear that the role of art in terms of the evolution of spirit is to find new ways of expressing, or at least approaching, this most basic unity. And like Schopenhauer, I consider that aesthetic contemplation emerges from the universal and transcends the individual, yet I would qualify this point of view by adding that contemplation itself is not universal. It does however have the capacity to participate in it, and it is through this participation that the experience of art takes place.

On the basis of these considerations I intend my painting process as a form of contemplation that manifests itself as a particularisation of universal consciousness.

⁶³ Ibid. 30

⁶⁴ Ibid. 42

⁶⁵ Ibid. 46

⁶⁶ Ibid. 62

Despite Mondrian's utopian anticipations of a time when the universal would prevail over the individual, where art would become indistinguishable from life, I do not believe that we have arrived there yet. As such, my painting is intended as place and time for contemplation away from ordinary experience in order that, to whatever extent I may, I participate in a form of transcendental ideal and perhaps beauty also.

Much like Mondrian, Kandinsky argues that art is not a purposeless means of producing things that may: 'dissipate themselves in a void.' But rather, art is essentially a power that must always serve: 'the development and refinement of the human soul.' Importantly, however, by way of contrast with Mondrian's view that art will ultimately be indistinguishable from life, Kandinsky presents the perhaps more moderate view that: 'If art renounces this task, then this gap must remain unfilled, for there is no other power that can replace art.'⁶⁷ He held that when and where the human spirit is strong, art is also strong. Thus, at times in history when the importance of the spirit is overshadowed by materialistic and practical concerns, then a prevalent atmosphere of the purposelessness of art prevails. In which case, the relationship between the spirit and art, art and spectator becomes weak, and ultimately, the beholder loses faith in any spiritual value that art may hold. He or she begins to believe that art is an empty display in an elaborate game in which the ideal, the magical, the sacred and the transcendent are presented as, and hence become, mere illusions.⁶⁸ In defiance of such a critique, he argued that if we are to be led forward at any historical moment then this is by virtue of the revelation of spirit.⁶⁹

Echoing these views in a lecture presented at Ball State University, January 21st, 2004, Donald Kuspit revisits Kandinsky's notion of the 'spiritual' in art. He observes that Kandinsky's principal aim in writing *On the Spiritual in Art*, 1911, was to bring to light a consciousness of spirit in our experience of both material and abstract phenomena. For Kandinsky, revelation of Spirit was the highest ideal of art. The pursuit of which was to be understood as a mode of 'forgetfulness' of the outer world, and that abstract painting lent itself very well to the forgetting of what he called the 'external aspect of phenomena,' and towards the spiritual necessity that

⁶⁷ Wassily Kandinsky, *Complete Writings on Art*, Ed., Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo, Da Capo Press, New York, 1994, 212

⁶⁸ Ibid. 212

⁶⁹ Ibid. 141

was concealed within the material. Kuspit observes that in the contemporary context, by contrast, we can no longer accept the concealed as Kandinsky understood it. He cites the dominant ‘what you see is what you get’ attitude of our age whereby it is impossible to speak of internal necessity. In this way, direct experience is lost and is replaced by irony and theoretical analysis. Kuspit believes that the importance of Kandinsky’s spiritual crisis was that it brought into relief the relationship between freedom and necessity in the production of meaning of art, and that in this respect the modern question of the role art in society was subordinate to its transformative potential of the individual.⁷⁰

It is unclear what the basic attitude of the times is right now, seen from within. While there is a lot of talk for instance about the pervasive influence of the art market on art production, or of art’s increasing institutionalisation as a manifestation of the corporatisation of culture, and while many consider this to be the basic attitude of the times, these things do not represent a total account of art’s accomplishments or potential in the contemporary context. If the basic attitude of the times is overwhelmingly an expression of the pervasive influence of the art market and similar materialist concerns, this situation is not inescapable. These things may be forgotten in order that the inner necessity of spirit may be revealed. This assumption is fundamental to the way in which I approach my painting practice.

Conclusions

What we imagine to be real is not the same thing as reality, and there is no guarantee that we might recognise the ideal even in its absolute presence. Nevertheless, the history of art progresses on the basis of these ambiguities. In the broadest historical sense, symbolic art represents the antagonism between the ideal and its sensuous embodiment. It then follows that Classical art embodies a form that is uniquely appropriate to the Ideal that it represents, and Romantic art represents the denigration of the unity between the ideal and the real in such a way that the revelation of the absolute in the form of the art object requires confirmation. In this context, there was a tendency in early modern art to seek beauty in the transience of quotidian

⁷⁰ Donald Kuspit, *Revisiting the Spiritual in Art*, Transcript of a lecture given January 21st, 2004, Ball State University, Muncie, IN, <http://www.bsu.edu/web/jfillwalk/BrederKuspit/index.html>

experience, and the art that reflected this became eloquent in its opposition to the universal. Notwithstanding this return to the real in art, there was a countervailing flourishing of Neo-Platonist thought at the end of the 19th Century that was a response to the increasingly positivist character of modern intellectual life. Artists who followed this Neo-Platonic doctrine understood that art is more than a representation of nature because it expresses the ideas of which nature represents only a defective likeness, and that art may only attain an ideal status by returning through memory to the essences of things. This Idealist way of thinking was common held among artists of the epoch who sought to separate, and indeed liberate the idea, or ideal, from the merely material. These two tendencies in modern art are not, however, mutually exclusive if it is understood that the relationship in art between the real and the ideal is a form of consciousness of spirit that involves simultaneously, a forgetfulness of the external aspect of phenomena, and a seeking for an internal necessity within the material, and that the purpose of this experience is the refinement and revelation of spirit in the world. In this way, by referring our experience of phenomena to the universal ideals that are their essence, the self reaches out into the infinite and claims the real, and, reaching inwards into this infinity, it claims the ideal.

I seek to approach the ideal in art as directly as possible in the way that I approach painting geometry, as a real manifestation of ideal philosophical reflection. This basic orientation is consistent with the Classical ideal of the representation in art of the harmonious or appropriate agreement between opposing qualities. There is, nevertheless, a clearly modern context in which my painting must be understood. As such, I understand that the epoch in which I am working provides no absolute guarantee of the ideal status of my work. In the absence of such a guarantee, I acknowledge the presence in my work of a basic terror of the indifference of the real as regards my place in the universe. To some extent therefore, my engagement with art is an attempt to reconcile this terror with the competing claims upon consciousness of the real and the ideal. Even where the achievement of this end remains withheld or uncertain, I believe that my painting is most free the closer it approaches this ideal.

Chapter 4

Subject and Object

Narcissus, wearied with hunting in the heat of the day, lay down here: for he was attracted to the beauty of the place, and by the spring. While he sought to quench his thirst, another thirst grew in him, and as he drank, he was enchanted by the beautiful reflection that he saw. He fell in love with an insubstantial hope, mistaking a mere shadow for a real body. Spellbound by his own self, he remained there motionless, with fixed gaze, like a statue carved from Parian marble [...] Unwittingly, he desired himself, and was himself the object of his own approval, at once seeking and sought, himself kindling the flame with which he burned.⁷¹

The relationship between subject and object is fundamental to the origins and evolution of the history of art. In the most basic sense, we intuit our selfhood as something separate from the objecthood of things on the basis of what is given to us through our perceptions, and what we take this to mean. Necessarily, our perceptions of being and non-being, meaning and non-meaning extend from this self-centred origin. It is assumed here that the self separates itself from its intuitions, its acting from its actions, by way of abstraction, and that this process is the first condition of reflection. It may be understood that the basic impulse toward expression in art is ‘abstract’ in the sense that it is in this way that ‘Man’ recognises himself in reflection, as an object, for himself. In this way, the image of the self, seen as a reflection in view of a painting, appears as something suspended above. By way of reference to these ideas, their origins in Idealist philosophy and their influence on the early development of abstract art, the purpose of this chapter is to establish a philosophical context that may serve as a ground for the further development of my understanding of how the relationship between subject and object informs the way in which I approach painting geometry.

The process of reaching for some confirmation of self, or what we may identify with ourselves, and also, what is not our self, is still very much a part of the function of art today. However, art provides no guarantees of success in this regard. Very often, art falls short of its intended goal, and there is always the possibility of an overreaching of the mark. As such, the narcissistic threat of self-annihilation is a precondition of the experience of art at all stages of its production, consumption and valorisation. As

⁷¹ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Penguin Books, trans., Mary M. Innes, London, 1955, 85

always, the promise of art is embodied in its enthralling beauty, or horror, and the prospect of the reintegration of the disparate parts of what we identify as belonging to our selfhood. Ultimately, this is made manifest as a fascination with the ontological question of the meaning or relevance of the subject in the world and its organic growth towards maturation.

For Schopenhauer, Descartes' *cogito ergo sum* is philosophy's only correct point of departure, and that all other true philosophical propositions are dependent upon it.⁷² Despite this essentially idealist view, he considers that consciousness and matter are correlates that may only exist in relation to each other.⁷³ His understanding of the problem of the relation of inner subjective consciousness to outer objectivity is that despite the appearance of objectivity as such, the condition of being in the world is dreamlike in the context of its ideality, but that nonetheless, the objectivity of the world and its ideality are: 'cast from a single form.'⁷⁴ He observes that idealism is often misunderstood as being a philosophy that denies the empirical reality of the external world. In defence of his view, he claims that: 'true idealism leaves the empirical reality of the world untouched.'⁷⁵ Thus, he maintains that subjective consciousness and the empirical world, or the world of objectivity, are correlates, to wit he states: 'one is only there for the other, both stand and fall together, and one is only the other's reflection; indeed, they are in fact one and the same, observed from two opposite sides.'⁷⁶

This understanding is very useful in terms of understanding the relationship between subjective experience and the givenness of paintings. In the context of my own painting practice, I imagine, reason, intuit and feel ideal geometric ideas that may hover in a suspended way within my own subjective experience, but this remains entirely abstract until it finds expression and resonance in the concrete form of a painted object. I understand that as a painted object, it must find its own reflection in subjective experience beyond its own objectivity in order to make any claim on being. In this way, it is important for me as a painter to see my ideas, ideal geometric

⁷² Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Presentation*, Vol. II. Trans. D. Carus and R. E. Aquila, Prentice Hall, Boston, 2011, 4

⁷³ Ibid. 18

⁷⁴ Ibid. 3

⁷⁵ Ibid. 7-8

⁷⁶ Ibid. 17

forms or otherwise, realised as paintings. There is a sort of resolution of tension between such ideas and their concrete expression that serves as an act of confirmation of my own being and place in the world. The basis for this understanding is that:

Nothing is more certain than the fact that no one can ever transcend himself so as to identify immediately with things that are different from him; but rather everything of which he has sure and hence immediate notice lies within his consciousness.⁷⁷

For Schelling, the self, seen as a reflection of its products, appears as something suspended above them. It is not free in this way. It cannot attain to a self-willing consciousness, and so it remains as a reflection of its products in an entirely determined way. In the case of aesthetic production, there is an impulse to create works that require resolution of this suspended state of affairs. This impulse is qualified by an inner contradiction between the voluntary and the involuntary, the conscious and the unconscious, the subjective and the objective. The production of works of art pacifies this striving, bringing together this irresolution of contradictions, and ultimately harmony. The artist, though seemingly acting directly as a matter of will, acts in a very determined way, even where the artist has no understanding of these actions, and where their meaning is infinite. Resolution of these contradictions is comprehensible only in the art object. Art is neither wholly subjective nor wholly objective. It is the genius of a resonant harmony between the two. Each of these elements in the absence of the other is valueless from an aesthetic point of view.⁷⁸

Schelling believed that the highest purpose of Nature is to become an object to herself by way of reflection in the form of 'Man.' He held that it is Man's capacity for abstract thought that allows Nature to return to herself in this way.⁷⁹ This may be a more poetic than properly philosophical point of view, but one nevertheless that informs much Idealist thinking about the telos of human experience. From Schelling's point of view, it is in pursuit of this end that transcendental philosophy requires a constant process of reflection upon the production of intuition in such a way that the subject, or producer of intuition, is continuously self-presented as both

⁷⁷ Ibid. 4

⁷⁸ Schelling, *STI*, op. cit. 221-4

⁷⁹ Ibid. 6

intuited and *intuitant*. He argues that the self separates itself from its intuitions, its acting from its actions, by way of abstraction, and that this process is the first condition of reflection. Schelling assumes here that an abstraction involves the separation between subject and object, and that the product of this mental act is called a ‘concept,’ and that if the self has not made this separation, then nothing is brought to consciousness distinctly.⁸⁰

While the function of ordinary thought is directed by concepts that conform to objects, transcendental thought, which may be identified with aesthetic contemplation of a work of art, entails the suspension of this mechanism through the identification of the concept of the self itself as a ‘non-objective’ mental act. It is on the basis of this suspension that the non-objective content of transcendental thought becomes self-conscious as the subject represents itself to itself as an act of will in the continuous coincidence of act and thought.⁸¹ This identification of the concept of the self with the non-objective is made at least in over a century in advance of the publication of Malevich’s *The Non-Objective World*. Nevertheless, the notion of the suspension of the conformity between concept and object in the experience and production of art had to wait this long before it reached its logical conclusion in the form of Malevich’s *Black Square*, 1915. Here, self-consciousness appears explicitly, and is realised fully as an art object in a work for the first time.

Importantly, it should be noted that for Schelling, if the self is an object, it is so only to itself. In this way, the self may be infinitely non-objective insofar as it originates inside and for itself and cannot exist outside itself in the world of external objects.⁸² The reason for this being that the self, unlike other things in the world, cannot be considered as a matter of fact, or a thing, in the way that other things are. As such, it is the only truly non-objective ground that may be postulated in philosophy. It is in this context that Schelling states: ‘The self is pure act, a pure doing, which simply has to be non-objective in knowledge, precisely because it is the principle of all knowledge.’⁸³

⁸⁰ Ibid. 13-4

⁸¹ Ibid. 9

⁸² Ibid. 26

⁸³ Ibid. 27

If the self may only be an object to the self, it must be understood in this context that a work of art like Malevich's *Black Square* is not an objectification of Malevich's selfhood, or even necessarily of Malevich's subjective feeling as such. Rather, the work functions as a prism through which the beholder may begin to experience the process of objectification of their own selfhood or subjective feeling. My approach to painting may be identified with a tradition of non-objective painting that owes its heritage not only to Malevich, but to Schelling also, insofar as it attempts to produce this kind of prism.

Like Schelling, Hegel believed that the basic impulse toward expression in art is 'abstract' in the sense that it is by way of abstraction that 'Man' recognises himself, as an object, for himself. This abstract impulse is towards freedom of spirit, which is attained through the full manifestation in the external world of the totality of the inward self, thereby making self-knowledge available in the world, and hence, available to others also.⁸⁴

My painting practice is a form of evolution and elaboration of a basic abstract impulse. On this basis, I am able to recognise my own thought, and hence, my self as an object also. This impulse directed towards a form of expression in art represents a freedom of spirit in this that is not available in my ordinary experience of the world. I do not claim that I have realised the 'totality' of my inward self in this, only that my painting serves as a kind of testing ground, and as a kind of refuge away from the practical concerns of daily life. I recognise a natural affinity between this understanding and Schopenhauer's claim that there is a unique possibility in the calm contemplation of art, a state of inwardness where the self is unified with the absolute; the result being that the self, its will and individuality may be lost entirely in the object of contemplation. What is left, the remainder as it were, is the continuity of the subject as what he calls the 'clear mirror of the object.' In this state, there is no distinction between perceiver and perception since, as he states: 'the two have become one.'⁸⁵ When the painting reveals itself in this way, I see my self as a reflection of the painting, and yet there is sometimes a concurrent blurring of

⁸⁴ Hegel, op. cit. *ILA*, L, 36

⁸⁵ Cheetham, op. cit. 62

perceptual boundaries in this experience such that I may also lose myself in this reflection.

As a development of Hegel's notion of the abstract impulse towards expression in art, Worringer held that our experience of art is directed by a simultaneous impulse towards empathy and abstraction. He argues that while these two impulses are antithetical towards one another, both entail a form of self-alienation that is the essence of all aesthetic experience, and this emerges from within the range of these two antitheses. In the case of the urge to abstraction, the impulse towards self-alienation is towards transcendence of the dynamic complexity of the organic world in the contemplation of the ideal, whereas in the case of the urge to empathy, there is an urge to alienate oneself from individual existence in the sense that the subject transcends their individuality to the extent that they are 'absorbed into' an external object.⁸⁶

A work of art can focus consciousness in such a way that any complexities of the context in which it is presented may begin to fall away as a result of the reductive clarity of the work itself. In this way, the beholder may begin to experience a kind of transcendence, or self-alienation that is the result of an urge to abstraction.

Alternatively, a work of art may be so appealing in terms of the complexity and particularity of its concrete aspect that consciousness reaches out beyond the limits of normal and normative expectations of things that it begins to self-alienate empathetically within the elaboration of complexity and particularity. In the case of my own recent painting, there is probably an impulse in my approach or intent that tends more towards abstraction than empathy, but I do not think that this precludes the possibility of empathetic content. In my view, it is rather the balance achieved between these two antitheses in the consciousness of the beholder that gives my painting its specific content in this respect.

Worringer believed that we experience a sensuous object as the product of what is sensuously given. This experience precedes an aesthetic proposition that is the product of the expansion of an 'inner vision' to embrace any given sensuous object and the simultaneous delimitation of that object as it stands in relation to its

⁸⁶ Worringer, op. cit. 24-5

surroundings. As such, a complex range of demands is placed on the subject as the direct result of, for instance, the direction and shape of a line. In view of such a line, the subject either freely exercises, by acceptance, the activity that is required of the aesthetic proposition that it represents, in which case self-activation ensues, or, the subject resists that requirement, and in this resistance self-activation also occurs. In the first instance, where the self is able to give itself over to self-activation in response to the line without resistance, a pleasurable feeling of freedom is experienced as the result of a conscious unity between the requirement of activity, and the harmonious exercise of it. In the second however, a sensuous object may be constituted such that self-activation may not occur without ‘friction’ or ‘inner opposition.’ In which case, conflict arises between the urge to self-activation and what a sensuous object qua aesthetic proposition requires of the subject, resulting in a sensation of displeasure. Worringer believed that self-activation in view of such aesthetic propositions, either by acceptance or resistance, is a fundamental human need.⁸⁷

I have been inclined in my painting to make lines that offer as little friction as possible in order to obviate inner opposition where possible. In this way, I hope to activate the subject’s consciousness through the representation of forms that invite them to begin to reflect upon their own subjectivity. This notion may be considered in the context of Heidegger’s *The Question Concerning Technology*, where he speaks of how an object comes to stand forth as a result of being ‘challenged’ or ‘set upon’ by the subject. To describe this process, Heidegger employs the word *Gestell* [enframing]. The word *stellen* [to set upon] implies simultaneously, ‘challenging,’ ‘producing’ and ‘presenting,’ which, from Heidegger’s point of view, is that which ‘presences,’ which is to say, comes forth into ‘unconcealment.’⁸⁸ My *Gestell Series* of paintings is directly concerned with the moment of enframing of consciousness that results from the subject’s gaze setting upon them, and this consciousness being held within the unfolding of the elaboration of form. In these paintings, I have presented a series of frames that turn in upon themselves recursively in systematic fashion, and their elaboration becomes the object of the subject’s enframing. As a

⁸⁷ Ibid. 6-7

⁸⁸ Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans., William Lovitt, Harper Torchbooks, New York, 1977, passim, 17-27

reflection of the process of enframing, the figures that I employ stand out from the standing reserve, or the order of ordinary things, and reveal the thinking subject in the process of thought. Thought itself begins to appear as a series of elaborations unfolding within which the world and all its particularities and contingencies may be suspended or set apart.

In a manner that is consistent with Heidegger's notion of enframing consciousness and the bringing to presence that a work of art may yield, Adorno argues that the artwork requires the beholder's 'self-relinquishment,' 'assimilation' and 'submission' to its own discipline in order that the work may be fulfilled.⁸⁹ This understanding is based on the assumption that the human subject becomes an object to him or herself, both true and real, through the act of labour, insofar as labour as the principle of the domination of nature, satisfies human needs in exchange for sacrifices.⁹⁰ In this way, the more deeply the beholder engages with the work of art, the more effectively he or she is able to forget their own subjectivity in the awareness of the work's objectivity.⁹¹ Adorno suggest that the more thoroughly an artist represents the objective requirements of a work of art, or, its internal consistency, the more authentic it is.⁹²

If a work of art requires the beholder's self-relinquishment, assimilation and submission in order to be complete, this does not preclude the possibility that the beholder should find self-confirmation, satisfaction or elevation in the work of art. Adorno's injunction here is against searching for these things, not finding them. It is perhaps precisely in places where things are not searched for that they are found. The requirements of self-relinquishment, assimilation and submission are very important elements in terms of the way in which I work. Once I have established the conceptual schema for a painting, there is then the labour of realising this as a painting. This is often a very long and painstaking process, and deliberately so. The care that I take to produce each line with utmost clarity is a way of forgetting the world that exists beyond the immediate process of assimilation and submission of consciousness to the task at hand. Once this internal process has taken place, the paintings are then

⁸⁹ Adorno, *AT*, op. cit. 353-5

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 20

⁹¹ *Ibid*, 345

⁹² *Ibid*, 265

given over to the experience of the beholder in order that they may be complete as aesthetic propositions.

The primacy of the beholder's experience as a constitutive element of the work of art was a fundamental aspect of the emergence of Romantic painting in the early nineteenth century, in landscape painting in particular, and the inevitable orientation of this consciousness towards emergence of a fully self-conscious abstract art. In the most basic sense, the concept of *erlebniskunst* relates to art that derives from experience, and is itself an expression of experience, and more specifically 'aesthetic' experience. Art understood in this way *is* an expression of an experience that may only be apprehended by way of experience.⁹³ Outlining the metaphysical basis of the symbol, Gadamer makes an important distinction between experience *per se*, and the representation of experience. Writing in *Truth and Method*, 1960, he suggests that the emergence of the symbol as a value over and above that of allegory was a direct result of the notion of *erlebniskunst* establishing itself as an aesthetic norm in the early part of the nineteenth century. The suggestion here is that at that time there was an emphasis on the experience of the viewer, or the subject, as a constitutive element of the work of art, and equally a turning away from the notion of the role of art as a mere illustration of religious or moral ideals. Symbols become inexhaustible in this way as they are given infinitely, and hence universally, in the experience of the viewing subject.⁹⁴

While my paintings invite an engagement with the beholder's gaze, nomination of the symbolic content of my painting prior to this experience is inimical to an open reception of the works themselves. This is not to say that I am unwilling to enter into discussion of the symbolic aspects of my work, but rather, I consider that these things are a matter for discussion in view of the works, and not for simple statement in advance of such experience. Nevertheless, in the most general terms, the idea of the abstract itself is an important symbolic aspect of my work. This is most evident in relation to ideas of the absolute, beauty, spirit and mind, and equally with the origin of human consciousness and its ongoing revelation in our experience of the world.

⁹³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans., Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, Continuum, New York, 1988, 70-1

⁹⁴ Koerner, *op. cit.* 169-1

Contemplation of the distinctions between what is subjective and what is objective in a work of art drew the concerns of art very close to those of philosophy in the early part of the nineteenth century. Koerner observes that the idea of *eigentümlichkeit* played an important role in the development of German Romantic thought. This term may be translated as ‘peculiarity,’ ‘characteristic quality’ or ‘strangeness.’ In general, it relates to a principle of, and orientation towards, individuation both of people and of things. Truth in this context becomes the property of the ‘radically autonomous self.’ This notion is evident in the philosophy of Friedrich Schleiermacher, where, in his *Monologues*, 1800, he writes: ‘It became clear to me that every man must represent humanity in his own way, in a particular [eigen] mix of its elements.’ Caspar David Friedrich was a personal acquaintance of Schleiermacher, and his own subjectivist aesthetics reflect those of the philosopher. This is the case in his text *On Art and the Spirit of Art*, published posthumously, where he refers to the ‘temple of Eigentümlichkeit’ as being fundamental to all ‘great’ art.⁹⁵

The notion of *eigentümlichkeit* is closely aligned with that of the ‘fragment,’ which assumed prominence within the writings of the philosopher Friedrich Schlegel, who was a central figure within the Jena circle that emerged at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Schlegel believed that the subject could not be conceived of as a whole, nor that it could be entirely understood beyond fragmentary appearances.⁹⁶ Fundamental to this view was the notion of a co-dependence between the systematic and the fragmentary. This is evident in his statement that: ‘it is equally deadly for the spirit to have a system and to have none. Therefore, it will have to decide to combine both.’ Coexistence between the symmetrical and the fragmentary is an important aspect of the work of Friedrich. This may be observed in the contrast between the unpredictable profile of a ruin; the chaos of broken ice, or the play of branches against the sky on the one hand, or on the other, in the emphatic presence of the solitary object, a tree or traveller, in the centre of the picture plane. The natural and yet partial symmetries and asymmetries of worldly objects compete with the inherent symmetry of their enframing as images, and hence, the symmetry of viewer’s gaze. The result is uncertainty on the part of the beholder as to whether the symmetry that

⁹⁵ Ibid. 69-0

⁹⁶ Mehring, op. cit. 29

is perceived belongs to the things themselves, or to their experience of them. What is presented in this way is the dynamic order between the viewer and the viewed. In this way, Friedrich's images represent in art the search for resolution between subject and object that was of fundamental importance in German Idealist philosophy.⁹⁷

The relationship between part and whole and how this relates to the possibility that the self may only be understood in parts is an important aspect of my painting. While the general direction of my work has been away from self-evident fragmentation, the implications of this way of thinking are nevertheless present in my move towards representation of continuous, or, conditionally whole forms. While systematic processes are characteristic of my most recent work, I believe that these comprise just one element of the work, and their realisation is not the primary purpose of the work. Such structures are there as a kind of testing ground for other elements that may be considered arbitrary, but nevertheless, subject to the overriding aesthetic impulses intuition and imagination. It is the relationship between these elements together with reason that constitutes the unique characteristics of my work.

Recursive figures play an important role in my painting practice. I assume that there is an important parallel between self-centred consciousness and the recursive figure insofar as both are predicated on a return to a central point of reference. A single iteration of a recursive figure is a frozen moment drawn from an infinite continuity of possible moments. While we may intuit the wholeness of these figures, it is nonetheless difficult to maintain the intentional wholeness of their form all at once. In my experience, I can only really maintain this intentionality in some partial way, and only fleetingly as the eye is continuously required to move around the whole in its seeking for a place of rest. There is a kind of comfort in the recognition of patterns, where identification of a certain order carries with it the assumption that we have an understanding of that pattern as a whole. However, it is not so much the completeness of recursive figures that is of enduring interest to me, but rather, it is the possibility of their infinite elaboration within my individual experience of them. While I consider the recursive figure to be emblematic of the self-centred consciousness in the experience of my work, I recognise also that beyond this, the experience of others is constitutive of the work as a whole.

⁹⁷ Koerner, *op. cit.* 119

The prospect of relativism must also be considered any discussion of the individuality of subjective experience. Such a prospect was not far from the thinking of Malevich in the context of his own work in the sense that he understood Nature to be the circumstances that surround the individual subject in which the subject's thought, feeling and actions unfold. Invoking Descartes, Malevich observed that while we can be sure of our own consciousness, this is no guarantee of reciprocal consciousness beyond that of our own. There is a suspension of subject above object in this relationship, and an inherent contradiction between consciousness and nature, where consciousness may not participate in nature in an immediate way. He believed that consciousness and the will to activity are in constant opposition to nature, and that it is a constant struggle for us to maintain a vertical orientation to the world. And thus, our verticality must be relinquished to the world, first in sleep, then in death.⁹⁸

Both Malevich and Kandinsky sought to develop a form of pictorial representation of subjective experience that could stand in opposition to art's historical function as a mimetic record of natural phenomena. Much in the vein of Malevich's turn away from representation of the outward forms of nature, Kandinsky believed that the struggle toward non-naturalistic and abstract art is towards inner nature. He identifies this movement with Socrates' famous injunction to 'know thyself.' Seeking this end, he held that the artist must, either consciously or unconsciously, turn their attention to the materials with which they are working in order that their spiritual content may be revealed.⁹⁹ In this way, the sense of rightness, or, inner necessity in art, is a matter of feeling and thus, he argued that practice should precede theory in art as its most essential element, even where a theoretical schema has been employed at the outset in the construction or conception of a work of art. His basic assumption here is that reason alone cannot achieve 'the right result' since this may only be achieved through a 'feeling for artistic limits' that may only be found within the artist by virtue of a kind of innate sense of 'tact' that is the genius of the artist.¹⁰⁰ It is on this basis that Kandinsky asserts the notion that the beautiful is a matter of spiritual necessity that emerges from within the subject.¹⁰¹ As such, every work of art conceals within itself: 'A whole life with many torments, doubts, and moments of enthusiasm

⁹⁸ Malevich, op. cit. 19-20

⁹⁹ Kandinsky, op. cit. 154

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. 175

¹⁰¹ Ibid. 214

and enlightenment.’¹⁰² Consequently, the artist must carry the burden of the responsibility for all actions, thoughts and feelings that constitute the works of art that they produce, since it is these things that become the intangible material out of which works of art are created, and hence, there is no freedom for the artist in life, only in art.¹⁰³

For Mondrian, Neo-Plasticism was intended to express the evolution of an essential duality inherent to the human condition, which he understood to be an equilibrated relationship between inwardness and outwardness, or the subjective and the objective. The orientation of this evolution was away from the natural and towards the abstract, where outward objective expression comes to reflect the abstract character of inward experience. Mondrian believed that such equilibrium, between inwardness and outwardness, nature and spirit, which he identified with the abstract, was very new in the history of the evolution of humanity, and that the moment of its arrival marked only the beginning of a new stage of evolution.¹⁰⁴ The concept of evolution of Spirit in Mondrian’s work is similar to that of Hegel’s. Hegel’s influence here is acknowledged in *The New Plastic in Painting*, of 1917. It was in fact van Doesburg who recommended the reading of Hegel to Mondrian, quoting him in the second issue of *De Stijl*:

Whatever happens in heaven or on earth...moves towards one aim; that the spirit be aware of itself, that it be objective to itself, that it finds itself, is itself and at one with itself.¹⁰⁵

In this context, Mondrian argues that the life of the artist involves a process of constant ‘sacrifice of the material to the spiritual and the spiritual to the material.’ The universal, inward aspect of man, or spirit, is in constant motion as the result of its reciprocal interaction with nature.¹⁰⁶

If my painting is an outward objective expression of an inward abstract character, then this character is an expression of an internal absence, or desire to fulfil that absence. If the sole aim of my spirit is to be aware and objective to itself, then the completion of this aim at any point in time, if ever, is never certain. The important

¹⁰² Ibid. 130

¹⁰³ Ibid. 213

¹⁰⁴ Mondrian, op. cit. 34

¹⁰⁵ Cheetham, op. cit. 52-3

¹⁰⁶ Mondrian, op. cit. 48

thing is that there is such an aim, the effect of which being the creation of a perpetually withheld satisfaction of purpose that requires the constant motion and labour of the spirit in the production of art. Notwithstanding this equivocation, I consider that there is no purpose in art higher than that of the revelation of self-knowledge, together with the beauty, freedom and truth that such knowledge may reveal. In the simplest terms, I understand that the inner necessity of my painting is an impulse that is directed towards each of these related qualities, and that my painting progresses on the basis of a feeling of what is right in view of the material and objective form of the painting.

Conclusions

The notion that subjective experience is a constitutive element of the work of art came to the fore in the early part of the 19th Century, and with this, equally, a turning away from the notion of the role of art as a mere illustration of religious or moral ideals. The basic philosophical assumption that enabled this shift in emphasis was the idea that there is no certain epistemological ground for the establishment of knowledge and meaning beyond the experience of the subject. Thus, for the first time in the history of art, it was assumed that aesthetic experience, while it may approach the absolute, is also entirely subjective, and therefore, the mind itself must be considered as the ultimate limit point of a picture. In view of this understanding, early abstract art emphasised the importance of outward objective expression that could reflect the abstract character of inward experience. Such art was much concerned with how the universal, inward aspect of man, or spirit, is in constant motion as the result of its reciprocal interaction with nature. It was held that the more deeply the beholder engages with the work of art, the more effectively he or she is able to forget their own subjectivity in the awareness of the work's objectivity. Thus, the self, despite the threat of Narcissistic self-annihilation, was considered to be a reflection of its products, which in reflection could suggest the prospect of the reintegration of the disparate parts of our fragmented selfhood.

In the first instance, my painting is engaged with the moment of enframing consciousness that results from the fixing of the gaze upon the elaboration of geometric forms. The figures that I present reflect a process of enframing of subjective processes of thought that is distinct from the ordinary order of things. As

such, I present forms that invite reflection upon the indeterminacy of subjectivity, and in this way, I believe that my painting functions as a prism through which the beholder may experience the process of objectification of their own selfhood or subjective feeling.

My painting is both systematic and fragmentary in the sense that I have a system, and yet I have none. While each painting begins with a determinate conceptual schema, the manner of its realisation is open to the indeterminacy of material necessity. In practice, the care that I take to realise conceptual schemata as articulately as possible is a means of forgetting the world beyond the perimeters of their frame, a process that is directed towards the establishment of the conditions for trust, if not belief. Ultimately, I understand my form of geometric painting as an abstract impulse in which I recognise my own thought and selfhood as an object. This process represents a unique freedom of spirit that is distinct from my ordinary experience of the world, and in this way, it functions as a meditation on the prospect of the absolute and the extent to which my selfhood may find unity with this. The related ideals of beauty, freedom and spirit are equally important aspects of the way that I understand my painting in the context of the origin of consciousness and its ongoing revelation.

Chapter 5

Presentation and Representation



Fig. 2 *Trees and Bushes in the Snow*, Caspar David Friedrich, oil on canvas, 31 x 25 cm, 1828

Current location: Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Gemäldgalerie, Dresden

Anything that appears before consciousness may be understood in terms of either what is presented, or, of what this appearance represents. While such distinction is necessary to the experience of art insofar as it is on this basis that we are able to separate art objects from that of the ordinary order of things, this distinction does not however qualify the aesthetic aspect of the experience of art. In order to do so, this chapter returns to the Romantic or Idealist notion that the experience of sublimity in a work of art occurs at the moment when and where representation of object to subject collapses. It is assumed that the dichotomy between abstract knowledge and concrete experience may be dissolved in art where there is no disparity between original and simulacrum, and that works of art that function in this way may be considered free from the limiting structures of empirical observation. The role of memory in the production and experience of art is also considered in this context as a means of getting beyond the immediate appearance of things in order to reach their inner essences. This idea is identified with the Neo-Platonic view that memory has an innate familiarity with the Forms or Ideas that constitute absolute Reality. Having established these terms of reference, this chapter argues that representation of the abstract and universal in art is essential to the manifestation of the human spirit, and that the artist's role in this context is not to imitate nature, but to see through it. It is proposed that the language of geometry may express these ideas in painting.

The Romantic attitude towards the sublime was influenced by the Kantian idea that the experience of sublimity occurs in a work of art at the moment when and where representation of object to subject collapses, the one into the other. This is the result of a failure of the mind's reaching towards comprehension of an object, where, in its place, the subject may experience intuition of a transcendent order. Representation of this kind of experience is an ideal to which the work of Friedrich aspires in the context of the ambiguous situation of the subject in view of his or her own place within the scene. The relationship between viewer and viewed is indeterminate in this way, and hence, as Koerner notes, the work becomes a 'symbol of our relation to a transcendent order.'¹⁰⁷

Friedrich's *Trees and Bushes in the Snow*, 1828, (Fig. 2), is an example of this principle. At first glance, this painting appears as the record or image of exactly what

¹⁰⁷ Koerner, op. cit. 121

the title states. These could be any trees in any place in that part of the world. However, for the duration of time that the painter stops in order to record them, these trees and bushes become the centre of the unidentified wanderer's world. The situation of the wanderer before his subject is indeterminate. There are no specific coordinating formal elements that may allow us, as beholders of the painting, to imagine ourselves in the place of the painter. The foreground is abruptly truncated, and the depth of field is limited to, and by, the intricate elaboration of bifurcating forms. This is a painting not so much a representation of a specific place and time, but one of the painter's fascination with the free play of abstract form. This is a painting about the painter's thinking, not about a mimetic representation of what is before him. There is a sublime moment here where representation of subject to object and visa versa collapses into each other. In this way, this painting anticipates much of what was to be explored later throughout the development of abstract art. Upon consideration of this work it is hard to consider Pollock's achievement for instance without acknowledging an historical debt to Friedrich.

My painting stands similarly transfixed in the moment of collapse between subject and object. This sensibility is most evident in my *Black Desert* series of paintings, where the distinction between linear figure and ground is neutralised in the context of black against black, where the appearance of the geometry is entirely dependent upon the disposition of the viewing subject and the ambient light conditions under which the work is beheld. Under most ambient light circumstances, the figures that appear in the *Black Desert* paintings cannot be perceived all at once. At first glance they remain largely submerged within the shadows of a black monochrome surface. However, where there is some movement on the part of the beholder, the central geometric figure appears from within the surface's shadows. What is emphasised in these paintings is the importance and centrality of the beholder and their point of view as a constructive element within the appearance of the work. (See appendix)

The subject's constructive role in the appearance of things in art is an important element of Schiller's aesthetic theory. Schiller argues that 'actuality' derives from Nature and that 'appearance' derives from 'Man'. The point of distinction that he makes here is that unlike Nature, in which *actuality* is given according to its own laws, a percipient subject constructs *appearance* according to his or her own laws. As such, in contemplation we are absolutely free to construct whatever appears by

way of will and imagination, even where this represents no real claim on actual existence.¹⁰⁸ It is in this context that Schiller states: ‘The reality of things is the work of the things; the appearance of things is the work of Man, and a nature which delights in appearance no longer takes pleasure in what it receives, but in what it does.’¹⁰⁹ Qualifying this statement, he states:

To strive after absolute appearance demands greater capacity for abstraction, more freedom of heart, more vigour of will than Man needs if he confines himself to reality, and he must already have put the latter behind him if he wishes to arrive at appearance. How ill advised he would be, therefore, if he sought to follow the path to the ideal in order to spare himself the path to actuality! [...] As soon as he begins at all to prefer shape to material and to hazard reality for appearance (which, however, he must recognize as such), his animal sphere is opened and he finds himself upon a track that has no end.¹¹⁰

Schiller identifies the pursuit of appearance with the power of abstraction as a necessary departure from reality. Nevertheless, he cautions against a total rejection of the real and actual in favour of appearance. As a painter, I am more concerned with appearance than with actuality. I consider that my paintings are propositions that rely upon an active engagement of the will and the imagination in order that they may appear as works of art at all. I recognise that their actual existence does not necessarily elevate them from the ordinary order of things.

As a development of Schiller’s idea, Hegel makes an aesthetic distinction between the real as it is presented, and its image as it is represented. He proposes that the reality of an object corresponds to its form, and its image to its content. In this context, formal imitation or representation in art ought not be considered its true content, but rather, art’s true purpose or end is getting beyond the limitations of formal imitation in order to stimulate the disclosure of the content of Mind, or Spirit. It is Hegel’s view that the variations of this content are unlimited, and that it is by way of these variations that the human subject may experience a deeper engagement with phenomena in the world. Thus, the content of art is not given by actual experience, but rather by way of artistic semblance, or, deceptive substitutions in place of reality. What is important to Hegel in terms of the viewer’s experience of art is that their perceptions and ideas in relation to the work of art influence to some

¹⁰⁸ Schiller, *AEM*, op. cit. 127-8

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. 125

¹¹⁰ Ibid. 131-2

extent their emotions and will. In this way, it is not important to him whether this is the result of immediate external reality in and of itself, or whether it is the image, symbol or idea that is the affecting content of the representation in the form of external reality.¹¹¹

Hegel believed that the dichotomy between abstract knowledge and concrete experience may be dissolved in a form of art where imitation is no longer its essence, and where there is no dualistic disparity between original and simulacrum. In making this departure from traditional idealist philosophy, Hegel in many ways anticipated an art that could depart from imitation as an end, and thereby foreground its abstract elements as ends in themselves, a view that is evident where he states: ‘Absolutely straight lines [...] satisfy us by their fixed determinacy [...] A similar effect is produced by pure, inherently simple, unmixed colours, a pure red, for example, or a pure blue.’¹¹²

Hegel concludes from this that in any case, art is unable to rival nature as a matter of imitation. Any attempt must appear as a mere aping of the original. As such, he believed that imitation is a mode of abstraction that, in and of itself, has no aesthetic value. By way of example, he compares the general enthusiasm in art for abstract copying with the accomplishments of a man who, before Alexander the Great, was able to throw lentils through a small opening with perfect accuracy. As a reward for his trivial art, Alexander awarded the man a bag of lentils.¹¹³

For Hegel, the sensuous characteristics of a work of art do not present themselves to the mind in the first instance as empirical data. What appears foremost rather, is ‘sensuous presence,’ and this is to be considered free from the limiting structures and processes of empirical observation. What is assumed here is the notion that the sensuous aspect of art produces a ‘shadow-world’ of forms and ‘imaginable ideas,’ which present themselves not only for their own sake, but also for that of the higher spiritual interest of the revelation of Mind, or Spirit. Quite unlike the empirical processes of ordinary life, Hegel understood that the sensuous presence of art was

¹¹¹ Hegel, *ILA*, op. cit. LXVI, 51-2

¹¹² Cheetham, op. cit. 58-9

¹¹³ Hegel, *ILA*, op. cit. LXII, 48-9

able to: ‘call forth a response and echo in the mind from all the depths of consciousness.’¹¹⁴

In my experience, the more determinate and open the figures in my painting are, the more they appear to represent something other to reality. My intention is that this something is an image or representation of the revelation of mind, or of mind enacting itself. In this way, the kind of representation that takes place in my painting is a form of mediation between the abstract and the concrete in which no attempt is made to rival the forms of nature. If there is a degree of artifice in my painting, then this is a function of the medium of painting in relation to itself rather than of a more generalised notion of imitation of the forms of nature. Often, the first point of entry to my paintings is the appearance and manner of their manufacture. Nevertheless, the empirical aspects of my painting fall away very quickly in observation. This occurs because they are essentially frameworks, and the beholder moves quickly to fill them in with some kind of content, to whatever extent they are able or inclined. The orientation of this movement may be considered to be towards a shadow world of forms and ideas.

The appearance of geometry in a work of art plays a mediatory role between what is given to consciousness, and what this is taken to mean. Husserl speaks of the mediated nature of experience as it relates to cognition in the context of the origins of geometry in consciousness, where he makes the point that geometric signs and symbols are sensibly experienceable either individually or intersubjectively in their corporeality. In cognition, they awaken some signification in the passive memory of the subject in the sense that the sign is a given that reactivates memory. This passivity in cognition refers to the general condition of things melting into each other by association whereby meaning ensues. Importantly however, it is the active process of writing-down that transforms the being of the original structure of geometrical self-evidence, and becomes ‘sedimented.’ In this way, Husserl argues that the development of human cognition from its earliest moments through to its maturity follows a passive tendency to move away from original, intuitive life in its self-evident structures, towards the sedimentation and ineluctability of language.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ Ibid. LVIII, 43-4

¹¹⁵ Husserl, op. cit. 164-5

My painting is intended as a form writing down of geometric thinking. If there is a language that I use, then it is one derived from the sedimented history of geometric forms. Representation of these forms is not gratuitous. The process of writing them down in painting is one of the reactivation of memory, not just my own, but of a form of collective memory. There is a kinship between the forms that I am using now and some of the earliest known expressions of geometric form. If I have a defined purpose in this, then it is directed towards my participation in the continuity of this memory. It is an appealing notion to me that there are primordial forms available to me, and that these have been, and always will be, common to all. And yet, insofar as I avail myself of them in writing them down, they become uniquely my own.

The Synthetist artist Paul Sérusier claimed in his *A B C de la Peinture* that our understanding of what he calls the ‘universal language of art,’ or what pertains to aesthetic objects, is innate, and that an academic education is inimical to the understanding of this language. He believed that it is only through memory that we may recover this understanding by way of abstraction and generalisation.¹¹⁶

Cheetham argues that the function of the abstract in art for Sérusier was primarily as a means of transcendence from art’s historical limitations rather than as an end in itself, and that his experiments in abstractive processes in painting may be understood as a response to Plato’s critique of mimetic arts. He suggests that if Sérusier had an end in mind, then it was the production of a new form of mimesis that sought to represent the Platonic ‘idea’ itself rather than its particular manifestations in nature, and in so doing he hoped to produce a new form of representation.¹¹⁷

Sérusier’s insight here is that we may access the essential grammar and syntax of this language by turning our attention towards its abstract elements, and in representing these, the mimetic relationship between image and nature becomes superfluous. I have sought in my own painting to develop my understanding and contribution to such a grammar of abstraction.

This form of Neo-Platonic thinking was widely influential within the Parisian literary circles, most notably amongst the Symbolists including Stéphane Mallarmé and Jean

¹¹⁶ Cheetham, op. cit. 27

¹¹⁷ Ibid. 34-5

Moréas. The emphasis on a return to the self, or soul, within the poetics of Literary Symbolism was a direct result of the influence of German Idealist philosophy, which was due largely to the wide circulation of Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation* within the milieu.¹¹⁸

Within the Neo-Platonic tradition, memory was given a privileged epistemological and ontological status as the key faculty that enabled the artist to approach 'essences'. The assumption here is that memory is a function of the soul that has an innate familiarity with the Forms or Ideas that in fact constitute absolute Reality.¹¹⁹ For Symbolist and Synthetist painters of the era, memory was held to be the most direct means of synthesising the diverse elements of inner vision, the intention of which being to approach a transcendental ultimate source beyond the reach of the individual artist. This understanding of the importance of memory is articulated in a letter that Gauguin wrote to Émile Schuffenecker in which he states:

Do not paint too much after nature. Art is an abstraction; derive this abstraction from nature while dreaming before it, and think more of the creation that will result than of nature. Creating like our Divine Master is the only way of rising toward God.¹²⁰

And in a similar vein, he writes in a letter to Fontainas in 1899: 'I close my eyes to see without understanding the dream of infinite space flying before me.'¹²¹

Maurice Denis asserted that Gauguin, in turning to memory as the primary source of inspiration and revelation, was the one who had liberated a new generation of artists from the mimetic representation of nature, and had, thereby, originated a new form of aesthetic autonomy that was self-consciously abstract.¹²²

These ideas current at the origins of the development of abstract art are equally relevant in the context of my painting practice. Memory in particular plays an important role in the development of my painting in terms of the ways in which I represent ideas in them. While I do not paint memories of particular events, experiences or any kind of reflection of nature per se, I do reproduce images from memory in order to understand them in a way that is as close as possible to their

¹¹⁸ Ibid. 15

¹¹⁹ Ibid. 4-5

¹²⁰ Ibid. 14

¹²¹ Ibid. 7

¹²² Ibid. 22

essence. My assumption here is that I do not really understand a schema, pattern or sequence unless I am able to reproduce it from memory. Without this understanding, I have no access to its essential being. In this way it is important to me that I am able to paint from memory any one of the elaborate forms that I deploy in my work.

In terms of the presentation of my paintings, memory also plays an important role. There is a kind of haptic memory that informs the way in which I produce my paintings. There is a kind of knowing how to make things in a certain way that is based on memory. This haptic memory becomes a reliable mechanism, or technique, with which I am able to make work that is both familiar and reproducible. On the basis of memory and knowledge, technique is also available for further refinement and elaboration.

Neo-Platonic thought was influential within the context of the avant-garde well into the early part of the twentieth century. Its retrospective and introspective aspect are both clearly evident where Johannes Itten quotes Plato's famous dictum: 'thinking is remembering,' in his essay *Analysis of Old Masters*, published in the *Blau Reiter Almanac*, 1921. He went on to say that 'creation is re-creation,' and this corresponded with the basic premise of the Blau Reiter movement that: 'the basic ideas of what we feel and create today have existed before us, and we are emphasizing that in essence they are not new.'¹²³

These statements were made as foundational tenets of the avant-garde in modern art. However, there has been a conceit of the new over the course of the history of modern art that has lost sight of this basic insight. In many cases, this conceit has trivialised the accomplishments of the avant-garde with respect to their own historicity in the sense that the success of avant-garde art may only be measured in relation to historical precedence and necessity that make the work of the avant-garde possible. With this understanding, when I paint, it is never with the intention that I should find something new. But rather, to better understand some aspect of the historical conditions that make it possible.

Apart from the function of memory in the context of the representation of abstract ideas in art, but clearly focused on the introspective and essentialist preoccupations

¹²³ Cheetham, op. cit. 82

of early abstract art, Malevich describes the way in which he arrived at a theory of ‘non-objectivity’ in terms of a kind of fear that he experienced in departing from the: ‘world of will and idea’ that he had previously believed in and lived by, until the time when he came to the understanding that the only thing that is real, is ‘feeling’. He describes the non-objective world of feeling as a ‘desert’ into which he felt ineluctably drawn. In this desert, the empty square represented the quintessence of non-objectivity. In it, representation of the visual phenomena of the objective world was of no importance. The only significant thing was the representation of feeling, and this, independently of the environment from which it emerges.¹²⁴ Malevich proposes that this end may not be reconciled with the representation of the familiar appearance of objects. Thus, objectivity in the non-objective world is meaningless and concepts are of no importance. Here, feeling is the ultimate determining consideration, and its representation in the form of art is, ultimately, non-objective. As such: ‘Every work of art – every picture – is the reproduction, so to speak, of a subjective state of mind – the representation of a phenomenon seen through a subjective prism.’¹²⁵

Given this understanding, Malevich anticipated and rejected criticism directed towards Non-Objective art from an incredulous public who did not appreciate its real content. He states:

If it were possible to extract from the works of the great masters the feeling expressed in them – the actual artistic value, that is – and to hide this away, the public, along with the critics and the art scholars, would never even miss it. So it is not at all strange that my square seemed empty to the public. If one insists on judging an art work on the basis of the virtuosity of the objective representation – the verisimilitude of the illusion – and thinks he sees in the objective representation itself a symbol of the inducing emotion, he will never partake of the gladdening content of a work of art. The general public is still convinced today that art is bound to perish if it gives up the imitation of ‘dearly-loved reality’ and so it observes with dismay how the hated element of pure feeling – abstraction – makes more and more headway.¹²⁶

One of the most basic aspects of my impulse towards abstract painting is my desire to confront fear, and reconcile this with my will towards representation of beauty, freedom and truth. This is not a fear of anything in particular, but a general fear that

¹²⁴ Malevich, op. cit. 67-8

¹²⁵ Ibid. 40

¹²⁶ Malevich, op. cit. 74

attaches equally to what I know, to what I don't know, and perhaps to the difficulty that I have in distinguishing between these two categories. This fear is not very far from awe, and in my case, this derives from an experience of wonder at the mystery of being. My paintings are an attempt to represent this feeling of awe, and they are a direct acknowledgement of my indebtedness to Malevich's crystallisation of the primacy of feeling as the ultimate ground for non-objective expression in art.

Emphasising the importance of representation in art of inner feeling over and above the particularities of individual things external to the essentialising, or universalising aspect of subjective consciousness, Mondrian, like Malevich, believed that representation of the abstract and universal in art is essential to the manifestation of the human spirit, even where it is veiled by the particularities of the world and the individualities of the experiencing subject. This is the point of view that Mondrian takes when he states that Neo-Plasticism achieved: 'a determinate plastic expression of the universal, which, although veiled and hidden, is revealed in and through the natural appearance of things.'¹²⁷

Mondrian suggests that the artist grows and learns to construct appearance by way of abstracting what in nature is only 'vaguely perceptible.' He considered this to be a process of reduction, and indeed destruction of the concrete character of appearance.¹²⁸ Thus, he maintains that it is not the artist's role to imitate nature, but to 'see through' it. In order to see more penetratingly, in order to see nature as 'pure relationship,' it is necessary to see in terms of the abstract and universal, and in this way, the external aspect of things appears only as the 'mirror' of nature, an obstruction from which the artist must be free.¹²⁹ From this point of view, all 'true' art is true because its universal aspect appears more dominantly than the eye may perceive it in nature.¹³⁰

I see my paintings as a series of frames that may contain spirit and mind, but I need to see through their specificity in order to see this more universal, or essential aspect. My efforts as a painter represent an attempt to bring into view the shimmering prospect of the revelation of this spirit. Thus, I begin a painting with what I take to

¹²⁷ Mondrian, op. cit. 31-2

¹²⁸ Ibid. 35-6

¹²⁹ Cheetham, op. cit. 48

¹³⁰ Mondrian, op. cit. 33

be an abstract and universal intuition of truth, or some part of truth. This essential element must then go through a process of translation by way of its encounter with the specific and material aspects of painting a picture. Between these two points of reference, I try to measure the distance between what I can see, and what I can see through; what is presented, and what this represents. On this basis, all that can be known of my painting as objects of art is in the form of their appearance, even if this appears to have but a slippery hold on meaning.

Conclusions

Post-Kantian and Neo-Platonic understandings of the relationship between presentation and representation were highly significant in the context of the early development of abstract art. Insofar as my painting practice is concerned with the historical conditions that make my painting possible, I have returned to these original understandings with the assumption that the ideas that are most relevant in contemporary art have always been relevant, and that the evolution of art only occurs as a matter of shifting emphasis according to the particular character of a given epoch. My most basic conclusion is that the evolving language of art is perennially accessible through its formal, or, abstract elements, and it is on this basis that my painting practice is engaged with the sedimented history of geometric forms, and how these, presented as images of thought, may be represented or written down in the form of paintings. In this context, I consider that the possibility for the appearance of beauty in my paintings results from consciousness' movement away from what it receives towards what it does with what is given to it. As such, the experience of beauty in my paintings is a matter of reflection that represents a form of transcendence of the limitations of formal imitation. While the variations of this content are unlimited, the only significant thing is the representation of feeling understood independently of the environment from which it emerges. In view of these considerations, I do not attempt to imitate anything beyond the image of thought that appears within the frameworks that my paintings represent. My intention in working in this way is to allow the consciousness of the beholder to be able to move away from their empirical or factual aspect of what is presented to them, and begin to fill them with their true content, which is the meaning that they bring.

Chapter 6

Truth and Deception



Fig. 3 *Composuit Zeuxes Iunonem e Quinque Puellis; Parrhasius Velo, Volucris Ceu Fallitur Uva*

Jacob von Sandrart, engraving, 39 x 19cm, 1683, Current location: The New York Public Library

In art, truth and deception go hand in hand. What is and what is not understood as art is decided on the basis of judgements that we make about what does and does not appear to be true. For ordinary things to make the transition from simple presentation to representation, from non-art object to art object, some form of deception is required for us to see them as reflections of something extraordinary, and hence worthy of the status of art. We decide what is beautiful and what is not in this way also, despite the fact that aesthetic judgements may not be proven objectively to be either true or false. Nonetheless, art endeavours to produce the appearance of a truthful beauty, even when the very means that it employs to achieve this end are deceptive. This chapter argues that while truth presents itself to the mind most freely by way of formal necessity, it must be experienced independently of any claim to objectivity. The claim here is that knowledge of art consists in a complex nexus of truth and deception. Beyond these philosophical considerations, this chapter approaches the more psychological aspects of the relationship between artist, beholder, truth and deception. This involves a distinction between the truth of the artist, and the public life of the truth of the work of art. These considerations are intended to qualify my relationship with truth and deception in the context of my own art practice, and the history of abstract painting to which it belongs.

Aesthetic judgements, which for Kant are equivalent to judgements of taste, are subjective judgements. He proposes that the basis for aesthetic judgements begins with the representation of objects to the subject by way of the imagination rather than reason. These objects are qualified in this moment by the extent to which their representation affects either the pleasure or displeasure experienced on the part of the subject. Thus, the determining ground for aesthetic judgements is the subjective experience that occurs as an operation of the imagination.¹³¹ Beyond whatever judgements that we may make about the beauty or otherwise about objects, Kant defines the beautiful per se as an object of universal delight that exists outside of any category of understanding or judgement. As a universal, beauty is absolutely true in and of itself, even if its universal status is an abstraction beyond any possible conception of its truth.¹³²

¹³¹ Kant, *CPJ*, op. cit. 269

¹³² Hegel, *ILA*, op. cit. LXXIX, 64

From this it is to be understood that if we experience beauty in a work of art, that experience itself does not verify the work's participation in any form of universal or transcendent beauty. Nevertheless, the unverifiable nature of beauty does not prevent us from seeking it out wherever we may find it. I understand this principle to be a precondition of my undertaking as a painter in my search for the revelation of beauty in the paintings that I produce and that, moreover, this seeking in the absence of any form of confirmation is a marker of the inherent freedom of the undertaking itself.

Regardless of any absolute confirmation, Schiller observes that material truth, or actuality, presents itself to the mind most freely and harmoniously by way of formal necessity, and that direct contemplation of phenomena unfiltered by the abstractive processes of reflection attends such experience. However, this is not an experience of beauty per se. Like Kant, he believes that the experience of beauty is of a transcendental order, where the actual '*grows small*,' and the seriousness of necessity '*grows light*' upon being referred to the Idea.¹³³ Schiller considers the experience of beauty to be an essential aspect of the human condition. Since the essence of beauty is postulated as a transcendental condition beyond the familiar experience of phenomena, and, inasmuch as its truth exists only as an abstract conception, it becomes necessary for anyone seeking beauty and truth, or the beauty of truth, to look beyond 'actuality.'¹³⁴

When we look at the form of something, there is a kind of preliminary perception of truth that corresponds to the givenness of that form. Our eye is directed along certain necessary paths that correspond to the truth of its formal properties. Before we start to imagine what such a form might mean, and before we make any kind of judgements about it, certainly in relation to beauty, there is a certain kind of freedom of thought in simply registering the formal qualities of things. The experience of beauty however comes later by reference to some idea of truth that transcends things themselves, in which case, the initial experience of truth, or actuality, begins to fall away. With this principle in mind as my painting develops, I hope to deepen my understanding of what is given immediately in concrete form, and what is the abstract content of this vis á vis truth and beauty.

¹³³ Schiller (AEM), 78

¹³⁴ Schiller (AEM), 59-0

Proposing a more complex understanding of our relationship with truth in an aesthetic context, Hegel claims that while art endeavours to produce the appearance of a truthful beauty, the means that it employs to achieve this end are deceptive. The problem for Hegel here is that if the end of art is to be real and true in itself, the means for the accomplishment of this end must also be true, since: ‘only what is real and true, not semblance or deception, has power to create what is real and true.’¹³⁵ In this way, Hegel argues that truth is not abstract, but rather located within the concrete particulars of the world.¹³⁶

Following Hegel’s proposition, the basic deception that the artist performs is to take something that is itself not art, and then to make it into something that is. In this way, a work of art conceals that part of itself that is not art, and this is the deception to which Hegel refers. In the context of my own practice as a painter, I begin with materials that are not themselves art. They have real and verifiable characteristics, and yet once these are used and become paintings they enter into a more complex relationship with truth, the result of which being that while an engagement with truth is fundamental to the way that I approach making art, my approach requires that I begin with the self-evident, and arrive inevitably at a point where this self-evidence becomes ambiguous in the form of my paintings as art objects and what status these have in relation to truth.

Leaving aside the prospect of the attainment of transcendent truth, there is the alternative possibility of the subjectivity of truth that may qualify our experience of art and beauty. Hegel attributes Fichte with the establishment of the subject, or the *I*, as an abstract and absolute principle of knowledge, reason and cognition; the corollary of which being that all ontological, epistemic, aesthetic content values, etc., are given subjectively. Hegel is critical of this point of view to the extent that if the abstraction of mind is to an absolute status, then there is no objective basis for the determination of value, or of the real and actual nature of things. In which case, the individual subject, or mind, is to be taken as the supreme measure and master of everything. If so, once everything else is taken away, the only remainder of the mind is its own subjectivity, and this must ultimately recognise any other measure as

¹³⁵ Hegel (ILA), VI, 6-7

¹³⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, trans., Shierry Weber Nicholsen, The MIT Press, Cambridge, 1993, 34-5

invalid. In this case, the mind becomes insufficient even to itself and it may no longer verify its own substantial and essential interests. Thus, Hegel believed that a conflict arises where the subject strives towards penetration of the truth and objectivity but is bound within the isolation of its own inward abstraction, and that this unsatisfied yearning turns away from real action in fear of the loss of inward harmony. It is for this reason that art plays such an important role for Hegel, since, unlike philosophy, art is not obliged to defend itself against absolute claims, even where it aspires to the accomplishment of absolute ends.¹³⁷

Much influenced by this kind of thinking, Victor Cousin's philosophy of 'Eclecticism' was important in terms of bridging Neo-Platonic Idealism and German Idealism in a French way. He hoped to define an epistemology that sought truth and knowledge independently of the objectivity of scientific method. In so doing, he developed a method that he called *l'abstraction immédiate*, which was intended as an approach to the idea of beauty by way of simple shapes and colours. He believed that the process of abstraction that this involved enabled the disentanglement of the absolute and relative, and hence lent itself as a method for approaching knowledge of the truth of Ideas.¹³⁸

Being influenced in this way, the early pioneers of abstract art hoped to create a pure and true art form that would be the apogee of an historical trajectory that required its inception. While our current historical condition no longer requires abstract art to play this role, it still has a function in terms of the production of a certain kind of knowledge and experience of truth that is distinct from that which is yielded by way of scientific method. In this context, unlike Cousin, I do not suppose that there is a condition of entanglement between absolute and relative values that requires undoing. But rather, I consider that both values are so enmeshed with each other that it is impossible to understand them independently of each other. When I make a painting, it is not to demonstrate either what is absolutely or relatively true; it is to represent an equal engagement with both absolute and relative truth.

My understanding of the interdependence of truth-values is more in line with Adorno than with Cousin where he argues that since art involves thought, it requires

¹³⁷ Hegel, *ILA*, op. cit. LXXXVII, 70-3

¹³⁸ Cheetham, op. cit. 15-6

philosophy. Here, he does not assume that philosophy's involvement with art requires distinctions to be made between what is true and false, since knowledge of art is not produced by following the lines of ordinary philosophical logic. Adorno describes art as a kind of knowledge that consists in a 'complex nexus of truth', where the art object's relation to truth is a corollary of a truth that is external to it.¹³⁹ This point of view assumes that aesthetic experience is concurrent with all other experience and knowledge of truth, and that it is verified in confrontation with phenomena.¹⁴⁰ It is in this context that Adorno states:

Art is directed toward truth, it is not itself immediate truth; to this extent truth is its content. By its relation to truth, art is knowledge; art itself knows truth in that truth emerges through it. As knowledge, however, art is neither discursive nor is its truth the reflection of an object [...] If artworks strive after an objective truth, it is mediated to them through the fulfillment of their own lawfulness. That artworks fulfill their truth better the more they fulfill themselves: This is the Ariadnian thread by which they feel their way through their inner darkness.¹⁴¹

Art consists in the ideas that we may have about an art object, and it is these ideas that are engaged with a nexus of truth that is external to the material facts that an art object possesses. Nevertheless, these ideas cannot escape the object entirely; they are bound in some material way to the object's facticity. An art object has a place. It is a point to which ideas must necessarily return after their peregrinations, and the truth of this place, its materiality, is a foundational element that must be taken into consideration within the nexus of truth with which the artwork as a whole is engaged. In my painting, in general, I seek to begin with something that I take to be at least conditionally true. This may be a sequence of numbers, or some kind of essential agreement between formal elements. I then try to translate these into paintings that fulfill the basic requirements of the truth of their expression.

From a more contemporary perspective, Alain Badiou asserts that the proper employment of philosophy is not in positing truth, but rather in the provision of the conceptual framework wherein the conditions for truth may be apprehended. He believes that art on the other hand is concerned with the appearance of truth, or at least what appears to be true. The assumption here is that in art, the appearance of

¹³⁹ Adorno, AT, op. cit. 341

¹⁴⁰ Ibid. 348-9

¹⁴¹ Ibid. 362-3

everything that *is*, is constituted from the general availability of ‘eternal truths,’ even where the configuration of truth in the form of art is made only with the materials of the world. In this way, the production of a work of art is to be understood as a process of ‘localisation,’ in which truth appears *as* being plus its place. A work of art in this sense is the circumscribed set within which being and place are superimposed.¹⁴²

Referring Badiou back to Adorno on this point, I would suggest that art can be as concerned with the conditions for truth as it is with its appearance. While art manifests these in a very material context, philosophy must always stand as a reflected form of whatever is its object. Once philosophy passes over a threshold of action, it becomes something else, whether this is art, politics, religion or some other thing. For me, painting is a way of stepping out of philosophical reflection and into action, and in this way, it is a way of making a place for certain philosophical ideas to become real, and to some extent this is a form of localisation of truth. Nevertheless, this is not a one-way operation. The experience of art can immediately return to the conditions of truth that are of an order of philosophical reflection.

Beyond its strictly philosophical aspect, the revelation of truth in art has a psychological function. For Jacques Lacan, the artist’s gaze always manifests itself in the work of art. A painting as such represents a relationship with the truth of the artist’s gaze, not so much as a ‘trap’ for the beholder’s gaze, or a willingness on the part of the artist to be looked at, but rather, it invites the beholder to see what the artist sees, which Lacan considers to be an opportunity for him or her to ‘lay down arms’ in view of the painting. There is something of a trick, or *trompe-l’œil* in the form of this invitation. Lacan compares this experience with that of love, where the lover solicits the regard of the beloved, and yet remains unsatisfied to the extent that, from the point of view of either the lover or the beloved: ‘You never look at me from the place from which I see you.’ He goes further to suggest that: ‘What I look at is never what I wish to see.’¹⁴³

¹⁴² Alain Badiou, *Matters of Appearance*, Artforum, V. 45, No. 3, November 2006, 246-50

¹⁴³ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis (The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book 11)*, W. W. Norton & Company, 1998, 100-2

This function of trompe-l'œil as it relates to the picture finds its classical model in the tale of Zeuxis and Parrhasios. In his encyclopaedic volume, *Naturalis Historia*, 1st century BCE, Pliny the Elder reported a contest that was staged four centuries earlier between Zeuxis and Parrhasius to decide which of the two was the greater painter. As the story goes, when Zeuxis unveiled his painting of grapes, they appeared so convincingly real that birds flew down from the sky to peck at them. Parrhasius then asked Zeuxis to pull aside the curtain from his painting, which he attempted to do, only to find that the curtain itself was a painting. Thus, Zeuxis was obliged to concede defeat. Pliny cites him as having said: 'I have deceived the birds, but Parrhasius has deceived Zeuxis.'¹⁴⁴

Lacan observes that Zeuxis' successful deception of the birds does not require that the depiction of the grapes was a perfectly mimetic reproduction of their appearance, and here he gives as an example the fruit in the basket held by Caravaggio's *Bacchus*, (Fig. 5.1) the verisimilitude of which he believed would be unlikely to deceive the birds. Lacan suggests that Zeuxis's painting would have needed to be more 'reduced' and closer to the 'sign' or Idea of grapes in order to successfully deceive the birds.

By contrast, Parrhasios' deception of Zeuxis requires the presentation, or representation of a veil, since it invokes the question of what is behind it. In this way, the illusion, or trompe-l'œil, is not so much a matter of mimicry of something that is, but in the representation of something that pretends to be *other* than what it is.¹⁴⁵

My paintings are carefully executed, and in this sense my gaze is very present in the manufacture of the work. I paint pictures because I want to see them, and also because I want them to be seen by others also. Like Lacan, I consider that this is a desire bound up in an anticipation of the gaze of others, not to see my paintings as sets of material facts, but as a way of seeing me through what I see and what I desire. Whether trick or not, I am familiar with the experience of finding myself beguiled, or, seduced by a work of art and being given the impression that I can see something of what the artist has seen. Art and love have a lot in common in this sense. For me,

¹⁴⁴ Gaius Plinius Secundus, *Natural History*, trans. John F. Healy, London, Penguin Classics, 1991, 330

¹⁴⁵ Lacan, op. cit. 111-2

an invitation to see what I see is a natural proposition, even where this may only be possible, ultimately, in a frustrated way.

One of the most common responses to my paintings is disbelief that they are in fact paintings. It is often assumed for example that my line-work is tape rather than paint. When I see people coming close to my paintings to understand how they are done, I think of the example of Zeuxis and Parrhasius. It is not just a line as a line that I am representing; it is a painting of a line. My attention to the erasure of the signs of my mark making, bleeding and the like is, I think, some attempt at *trompe-l'œil*. In this general sense, I try to cover many of my tracks as a painter; there is at least as much that I don't want the beholder to see, as there is that I do. This is, I expect, a matter of suppressed, or indeed repressed desire in the Lacanian sense.

A work of art has an interior life that involves a relationship with a truth that is qualified by the psychological conditions of the artist that determine the manner of its production, and an exterior life that is independent of this, where the truth of the work becomes a matter of public interest. Nevertheless, for Kandinsky, a 'true' work of art arises from 'out of' the artist, and is in a sense 'released.' In this way, once a work of art has a public life, it takes on its own identity and becomes self-sufficient. Understood as such, Kandinsky believed that the artwork is a 'spiritually breathing subject' that has its own material life and its own being, and hence, may not be considered as either a 'chance' or 'indifferent' phenomenon. An artwork that exists in this way, like any living being, is in possession of 'creative forces' that play a part in the creation of the 'spiritual atmosphere' of the age in which it has come forth.¹⁴⁶

My reading of Kandinsky on the subject of the internal and external aspects of the truth of a work of art is to some extent influenced by the Lacanian notion of the reciprocity of the gaze between artist and beholder in view of a work of art. While my painting invites a relationship with the public, and while I entertain this prospect as I go about making my work, I acknowledge that once my work makes it out of the studio and into the public domain, it takes on its own life. The public makes what it will of the work, and it must stand or fall on this basis. Nevertheless, regardless of its public identity or currency, my painting has a private life in which a drama of the

¹⁴⁶ Kandinsky, op. cit. 210

relationship between truth and deception is played out. I would like the beholder to see this, but I understand that such disclosure is necessarily withheld in order that the work may be what it is in the way that it is. Were such a drama to be explicit in my painting, not only would the work be unrecognisable to me, I would no longer be able to recognise myself in it. For me, my painting is an invitation to the beholder to see through the work and its deceptive external aspect, and by way of intuition, discover to whatever extent possible, the interior world of the painting and thereby, the artist also.

A work of art is essentially a product of the mind, but one that exists within the limits and conditions of the material world. As such, its truth has interior and exterior aspects that entails negotiation of the relationship between mind and matter. The role of the art object in the context of this negotiation was of primary concern in the early development of abstract art. In the case of Malevich, matter in and of itself is timeless, unchangeable and lifeless. He considered that it is our consciousness and feeling that creates the illusion of the variability of matter as the result of what he calls the: ‘interplay of distorting reflections.’ In this context, the way in which we perceive and conceive reality is entirely changeable, and as such, our ideas and concepts of reality are in no way a true reflection of a true reality; the real truth of which must remain perpetually withheld from our understanding.¹⁴⁷ In this way, Malevich was concerned with the changes in what he calls the ‘manifestations of the perceptible,’ which he understood from a formal point of view as being the illusion of reality in which we believe, to which we accommodate ourselves, and to which our senses strive in order to find an appropriate response.¹⁴⁸

Such negotiation in the context of contemporary abstract art is no less relevant than at the time of its inception, since the most basic function of abstract art remains as a way of reckoning our place in the world. In terms of the way that this form of negotiation is carried on in my own painting practice, I assume that mind and matter reflect each other. Understood thus, the paintings that I produce are not true reflections of a true reality, and yet they are reflections of a sort, and they have a reality. They require the eye of the beholder to do something in order to reveal the

¹⁴⁷ Malevich, op. cit. 18

¹⁴⁸ Ibid. 20-1

interplay of distorting reflections. In terms of my own experience of these, I recognise that the material of the work is not stable precisely where it seeks stability. And as for my mind, and what of it is contained within the paintings, the more rigid the form with which I am working is, the more changeable my own consciousness is.

This way of thinking about the stability, or instability of the truthfulness of formal structures is not aligned with that of Mondrian, who considered that the importance of a newly conscious art form was that it could manifest a spiritual feeling where the emotions and the intellect of the artist become ‘equilibrated.’ He believed that consciousness in art was a key characteristic of the new art of his time, and that a conscious artist as such could no longer act blindly on intuition as he suggests had been the case in previous modes of art production. As such, Mondrian hoped that what had formerly been ‘vague and diffuse’ in works of art could become clear and ‘determinate.’ The new artist that Mondrian described is one who is conscious that a work of art grows ‘spontaneously,’ and one who is a conscious defender of the laws of growth, the basis for which being the notion borrowed from Spinoza that: ‘Truth reveals itself.’ Mondrian suggests that the artist who is conscious of this idea in the production of their art is like a farmer who cultivates a field before and after growth. He believed that consciousness of the laws of growth strengthens intuition to the point of certainty, and the work of art itself becomes more clearly defined as a result.¹⁴⁹

While this is a seductive way of thinking about the artist’s relationship with truth, in my own experience I have had to concede that, as an artist, I cannot make truth the way I will it. Unlike Mondrian, I am not prepared to make the claim that an equilibrated expression of the revelation of truth has ever appeared in my painting. This is both a humbling and liberating realisation for me; on the one hand humbling in the sense that the conditions for truth are always in advance of my own will, and that my desire is always subject to these; and on the other, liberating in the sense that I do not have to make truth, and yet truth is available to me to work with when and where it reveals itself. Distancing myself from any such claim, I hope that nevertheless my work stands open to the prospect of such revelation.

¹⁴⁹ Mondrian, op. cit. 40-1

The prospect of the availability of truth was a key aspect of Mondrian's emphasis on the 'reasonableness' of clarity of Neo-Plasticism and its importance in the context of the art of his era.¹⁵⁰ In making this emphasis, he draws a parallel between the spirit of Neo-Plasticism and the logic of science. This kinship manifests itself as a tendency towards what he calls the 'wisdom of pure reason' that brings with it 'increasing exactness.' He is critical of old religions and their obscurantism, dogmatism and mystery, and advocates rather a clear relationship to the universal, at least to the extent that it can be known and made clear.¹⁵¹ The universal that Mondrian refers to is essentially a universal, immutable truth, and Neo-Plasticism is intended as a manifestation of this truth. This is not to say that it represented a new truth, quite on the contrary. Mondrian understood that what is universally true, is true for all time however diversely it may be formulated artistically throughout the ages.¹⁵²

Unlike Mondrian, I consider that my painting is reasonable only up to a point. For me, clarity is only a means whereby I may approach what is ultimately and endlessly ambiguous. It is the perplexing aspect of exactness that I find most appealing. Exactness is not itself truth; it is only a limited measure of the appearance of truth. And while in some way I seek truth, I have nothing like conclusive evidence of its appearance in my work and I make no claim to this.

Notwithstanding these differences, I accept unreservedly Mondrian's view that: 'clarity of thought should be accompanied by clarity of technique [...] between philosophy and art...which most painters deny.'¹⁵³ In the early development of my painting practice, 1996-2006, it was very important for me to work out what I could do as a painter. My background in classical music led me to an understanding of the importance of technique in order to find one's own musical voice, and I wanted to establish for myself a repertoire of things that I could rely on as a painter, a visual or technical repertoire that could afford me as many choices as possible, and on this basis, some sense of the measure of truth and deception relative to my own understanding. I wanted this repertoire to be a formal language akin to the one that I had become familiar with in music; essentially abstract, non-representational, or non-

¹⁵⁰ Ibid. 41

¹⁵¹ Ibid. 43-4

¹⁵² Ibid. 44

¹⁵³ Cheetham, op. cit. 44

objective. And so I began looking at the history and theory of abstract painting as the development of a kind of grammar that I could use to help me develop a visual analogue of my understanding of music.

Conclusions

Art is concerned with the appearance of truth, or what appears to be true. What appears to be real is changeable within the subjectivity of consciousness, and thus, the appearance of things is not a true reflection of a true reality, the full revelation of which is beyond our understanding. Insofar as the appearance of truth of beauty is bound within the isolation of an inner subjective abstraction, the tension between this and the objectivity of the observable world produces a disharmony of consciousness that seeks resolution. It is necessary, therefore, to look beyond the actuality of an art object to find the beauty of truth, or, a truthful beauty. Thus, art is directed towards truth, but it is not itself truth, even where the revelation of truth may be its ultimate content. In this case, art may only seek the appearance of truth by way of deceptive means. A successful deception in art is not so much a matter of the mimicry of something, but rather the representation of the transcendence of such appearance.

My painting process usually begins with something that I take to be only conditionally true; for example, the immutable laws of geometry. As a guiding principle, my task as a painter is to translate the conditional truths of geometric propositions into paintings that can fulfill the requirements of the truth of their expression. I understand that the ideas with which I begin a painting are not themselves art. It is necessary therefore that my painting process involves a deceptive transition from self-evident non-art propositions into ambiguous art objects, where that which is not art in the original idea is concealed in order that that which is may be revealed. Thus, while I am unable to paint an absolute image of the truth as such, this does not diminish my desire to seek it in forms that represent an equal engagement with both absolute and relative truths. In this way, I approach truth in art with the understanding that its propositions refuse any conclusive definition. Nevertheless, art not only produces a certain kind of knowledge and experience of truth, it *is* itself a kind of direct knowledge that transcends any given set of material facts.

Chapter 7

Form and Content

Looking at a work of art involves, on the one hand, what we perceive to be its form, which is immediately given in the form of the external elements of the work, and on the other, the significance that we attach to this form, which we take to be the content of the work. However clear such a distinction may seem in theory, it is often unclear where form and content begin and end in a work of art. The reason for this ambiguity is that while our consciousness is free in contemplation of the world, the truth of a work of art may only proceed from an absolute idea that must ultimately transcend our experience of it. Notwithstanding the absence of a clear distinction, this chapter suggests that harmony may be achieved in a work of art where the relationship between form and content strives against its own completion. Moreover, it is argued that the relationship between form and content becomes most apparent where the form of the work attempts to distance itself from its content. In this context, it is understood that if art's content is to be revealed, then its language-like formal characteristics must become evident in their articulation of meaning, and perhaps non-meaning also. The primary purpose in making this case is to characterise the way in which I approach painting geometry as one that is engaged with a history of formalist idealism in art, but one that valorises the importance of art's subjective content, even where it seeks to distance itself from the specificity of this.

For Schiller, freedom of consciousness consists in our ability to give form to the formless. This form-giving function acts as a riposte against a conscious resistance towards things that have uncertain boundaries. Thus, consciousness rises above Nature by giving form to it, and in so doing makes it an object to itself. As such, form softens the brute sense data of life and makes the transition from sensation to concept possible. Schiller suggests that it is in this way that contemplation yields beauty in its movement away from the concrete world of the senses and into the world of ideas and abstraction. He concludes that it is ultimately in beauty that contemplation may achieve logical and moral unity as a result of sensuous accord.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁴ Schiller, *AEM*, op. cit. 117-22

The emphasis here is on the formalist view that beauty in art is to be found in its form rather than its content. Developing this idea, Schiller argues that form appeals to the ‘wholeness’ of experience, whereas content appeals to experience in only a partial or individual way, and therefore: ‘However sublime and comprehensive it may be, the content always has a restrictive action upon the spirit, and only from the form is true aesthetic freedom to be expected.’¹⁵⁵ Despite this emphasis, Schiller concedes that form cannot exist without content, stating that: ‘As soon as Man is only form, *he* has no form, and his person is extinguished with his condition.’¹⁵⁶

The dominant feature of my painting throughout my PhD candidature has been an engagement with boundaries, most directly in terms of my engagement with line and the ways in which lines may become frames, and the ways in which these frames may be elaborated as a formal language of abstraction. I consider that the function of the frame in this context is to act as the point of transition from pure sensation to concept. It is my intention that its apprehension in the form of a painted line affords a place of transitory rest within the flux of phenomena, and perhaps beauty also. In the context of this formal language, beauty is posited as an absolute and transcendent ideal. It is neither a property of form nor of content, but it is experienceable in a partial and fleeting way in the relationship between the forms that I employ and the content that may be attached thereto. As such, the idea that beauty is a quality of form and not of content is one that I find difficult to reconcile with my own understanding. I do not understand the necessity of this separation and beauty’s identification with form exclusively, since, as Schiller himself concedes, form cannot exist without content. When I make a painting, I consider that its form is a container that contains my subjectivity, or that of the beholder, and it is this subjectivity that becomes the form’s content. And where there is some measure of agreement or resonance between form and content, then it is to this extent that the work has successfully participated in a beauty that ultimately transcends both the form of a work of art and its content.

Arguing from a less formalist perspective, for Hegel, the act of looking at a work of art involves two aspects: namely, what we see and perceive to be its form, which is

¹⁵⁵ Ibid. 106

¹⁵⁶ Ibid. 72

immediately presented as the external elements of the work of art; and then there is also what may be considered to be its content, or, significance. Any such significance derives from the assumption that there is something beyond external appearance, or, something inward beyond its external, formal elements. For Hegel, this inward content is the spirit that the work of art has been invested with, by virtue of which it is imbued with value and meaning. As such, the work of art is not exhausted by its formal elements, but rather, they act in the service of the revelation of life, spirit and mind that is the ultimate content of the work art.¹⁵⁷ Given this assumption, the form of a work of art may not consist in absolutely arbitrary formal elements. The form of a work of art must serve the interests of the revelation of spirit. Hegel's assumption here is that all suitable content has a corresponding and determinate suitable form.¹⁵⁸

Hegel believed that imperfect form arises from imperfect content. This is not so much a comment on the technical accomplishment of a work of art, but rather, the result of an inadequacy of the Idea to its representation, or of the representation to the Idea. It is assumed here that the appearance of an Idea in a work of art is defined by way of its concrete totality, through which the determinate character of its external appearance and phenomenal existence may establish a kind of bridge between the universal and the particular. For Hegel, only a truly concrete Idea can produce a true shape or form, and the correspondence between a true Idea and a true shape corresponds to representation of the Ideal in art.¹⁵⁹ It is in this context that Hegel asserts that the idea of Mind or Spirit itself is the true content of art, and that it takes its form from images that are available to sense through the plasticity of the medium in which they are represented.¹⁶⁰

My painting process usually begins with some idea about the relationship between the formal elements of composition. I consider the content of this idea to be the revelation of Mind and Spirit. On this basis, I develop various formal schemata that are intended as coherent formal propositions that may reflect their inner content. Then I progress to the question of how these essentially abstract propositions may be

¹⁵⁷ Hegel, *ILA*, op. cit. XXXII, 22-3

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.* XXII, 15-6

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.* CIII, 80-2

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.* XCV, 76

translated into a painting and find unity with their concrete expression. In this way, my paintings become sensuous representations of the ideas with which they begin.

While Hegel's notion of a possible, and perhaps necessary, reconciliation between form and content represents a direction forward in the context of my painting practice, his suggestion that the content of a work of art must be worthy of representation is more problematic for me. Following Hegel's model, I must judge my own subjectivity, or that of another, to be worthy of the status of art. It is preferable to me to reverse Hegel's formulation and consider that I have a mind, a spirit and an idea; and therefore, I may then question whether or not the form of a work of art is worthy of this content.

In my view, the forms that I paint are in essence containers. Their inner meaning is not only the content of my own mind and spirit, but also the subjectivity of the beholder that is contained in them, and this is endlessly variable. Whatever judgements I make about the form or content of my paintings are provisional and subject constantly to revision. If I think that I have approached an Ideal form, I recognise that this revelation is limited by my own imperfect understanding. In this sense, the forms with which I work are intended to test the boundaries of my own understanding.

Geometry represents the formal language with which we may approach the Ideal most directly, and the question of how geometry may appear in the form of a work of art plays a significant role in the development of my painting practice. As a way of deepening my understanding of the nature of this question, and how its significance may come to inform my work, I have pursued my interest in the origins of the appearance of geometry in human consciousness. Husserl notes that even though the historical circumstances of the first humans to conceive geometrical ideas is unknown, it is certain that from within the world of concrete things, the necessities of practical life would have brought certain 'particularisations' of shape to the fore. He suggests that the realisation of these shapes through practice would have been a matter of preference and gradual improvement such that these forms would have become increasingly refined. Most obviously, surfaces become more distinct from their undifferentiated environment where their imperfect, irregular edges are evened out by way of the labour of polishing to become smooth. In this way, the points and

lines of shapes appear more purely, and they present themselves more readily for practical purposes. Husserl believed that it is on this basis that, as a matter of natural progress within a culture, it becomes possible to measure and grade difference between shapes from 'primitive' to 'higher perfections'.¹⁶¹

Husserl suggests that geometry is available to us through tradition as: 'a total acquisition of spiritual accomplishments which grows through the continued work of new spiritual acts into new acquisitions.' Every form that we now know is handed down to us as the repetition of, or by reference to, some previous form. It is assumed however that there must have been some first 'acquisition' of each of these forms as the result of creative activity, and that furthermore, the totality and validity of geometry may only persist as the forward movement and synthesis of one acquisition to the next. It is on the basis that the validity of the first formal acquisition ensures the validity of each subsequent acquisition.¹⁶²

The identification of a new geometric form occurs in the first instance as an internal, subjective experience of its inventor. This is an entirely personal psychic phenomenon, and as such, it remains an ideal object. In order for a geometrical form to have any objective reality in the world, it must become available by way of mediation to all who understand geometry. As such, Husserl states:

All of geometry exists only once, no matter how often or even in what language it may be expressed. It is identically the same in the 'original language' of Euclid and in all 'translations'; and within each language it is again the same, no matter how many times it has been sensibly uttered, from the original expression and writing-down to the innumerable oral utterances or written and other documentations.¹⁶³

In this way, the geometric content of a shape must be indisputably what it is, unchanging in its essence amidst all conceivable variation in order that it may attain the status of an ideal 'construction' that is true, unconditional, reproducible, understandable and capable of being communicated within the continuity of intersubjectivity of consciousness for all time.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶¹ Husserl, op. cit. 177-9

¹⁶² Ibid. 159

¹⁶³ Ibid. 160-1

¹⁶⁴ Ibid. 179

It is with the intention to develop such a formal language that my painting practice is directed towards gradual refinement both of technique and of understanding. To begin, I do not suppose that the forms with which I am working are new in and of themselves. They have been handed down to me as a matter of traditional inheritance, which is to say that they are available to me for use – for repetition and elaboration – and in this way, what I do with them also becomes part of the forward movement of these forms. Even though the forms that I use are essentially ancient, the ways in which I use them, or, the context in which I deploy them, is uniquely my own. Insofar as I avail myself of them, they become my own in a sense, and to a certain extent, they become me over the course of the passage of time in which I am engaged with them. It is possible that I am putting some basic formal ideas together in a way that has not been done before – at least not in exactly the same way – and if this is the case, I consider them to be uniquely my own. In terms of the way in which I try to represent this language, I have tried to make my paintings as smooth and regular as possible; I sand, wipe and rub away painterly gesture and irregularity in my work. Brushwork and bleeds are erased to the point where it is not obvious that the forms with which I am working are painted forms. My intention in this approach is to present the Idea of the work first and foremost, and then only secondarily the evidence that this is after all painting.

In a manner that is not unlike Husserl, Adorno considers form to be ‘sedimented’ content. What he means by this is that collectively established aesthetic forms often derive from previously established forms that have purposive meaning beyond the sphere of art. He suggests that while the origins of these forms may have once had a purposive function, they have long since become purposeless in an aesthetic context. These forms may be found in mathematics, astronomy or magic for instance, however the origins themselves may be from anywhere. What is important for Adorno in this regard is that the form of an artwork is a form of awakening of sedimented content that carries with it the trace of its origin, and indeed its success is measurable by the extent to which it is able to do this.¹⁶⁵

Adorno suggests that art deceives itself when it: ‘directly equates its own forms with those of mathematics, unconcerned that its forms are always opposed to those of the

¹⁶⁵ Adorno, *AT*, op. cit. 184-5

latter.’ He notes also that while the logical unity of artworks may be considered analogous to the logic of normal experience, it is nevertheless far from the kind of logic that orders our experience of empirical reality, since the logic of art functions paradoxically as: ‘a syllogism without concept of judgment.’ In this way, reason functions in the work of art in opposition to empirical existence, and as such, the logic of artworks is not to be taken literally. Its operation is more akin to the logic of dreams where the sense of consistency is bound to that of contingency. And so, as Adorno states: ‘Through its retreat from empirical goals, logic in art acquires a shadowy quality of being at once binding and slack.’¹⁶⁶

I understand that the forms that I use in my painting are not mathematical. From Adorno’s point of view, I may consider that these forms are in fact directed against mathematics insofar as they actively suspend mathematical or logical conclusiveness; they resist any claim on them to function as proofs of any kind. And yet the paintings are consistent and they have order, even if this is a contingent order. If there is a binding aspect of the work, then this must be of an order of inner intuitive necessity that speaks of a resonance between its formal aspect and the ways in which subjectivity is contained therein. Nevertheless, the most obvious origin of the forms that I use in my painting is geometry. This is not to say that the forms that I use *are* geometry - they are not – in my view they simply have a geometric aspect. I understand that the ends of geometry, as a branch of mathematics, are distinct from those of art. There is no sense in which I understand the geometric characteristics of my work to represent theoretical proofs of any kind. On the contrary, my interest in them is directed towards their appearance in the context of art, which is essentially purposeless, and the ways in which their historical resonances provoke certain ways of thinking. It is this appearance of geometric form that I take to be constitutive of the content of the work.

Adorno also speaks of the importance of a ‘countermovement’ in a work of art that creates a dialectical relationship between form and content. In this relationship, content becomes most apparent in its distance from form, and form in turn gathers content through the content that it negates.¹⁶⁷ He suggests for example that if the

¹⁶⁶ Ibid. 181

¹⁶⁷ Ibid. 184-5

concept of ‘vagueness’ is the inherent content of a work of art, then that which is vague in it must be made distinct in the way that it is expressed formally. It is not sufficient that the formal boundaries between the work’s constitutive elements become obscured, but rather, the form of the work must at least imply clarity in order that it may be negated.¹⁶⁸

According to Adorno’s logic, the clearer the formal representation of a frame, the less it appears as a frame. It becomes something else, and perhaps this is the negation of the frame, and the content of this may be freedom. It is with this understanding that I have been so engaged with painting frames. Following the same logic, Adorno argues that harmony in a work of art survives where it strives against its own completion. As such, any proportional relationship in a work of art must be inclusive both of its establishment and subversion, without which it becomes impossible to speak of a proportional dynamic. Adorno identifies the proportional dynamic of a work of art with the notion of ‘unreconciled reality’ that seeks reconciliation, and he believes that it is this that becomes its content value.¹⁶⁹ He stresses the point however that the mere elaboration of this dynamic is not, in and of itself, sufficient to the status of art. If a work of art is to become productive as art, which is to say, more than mere information, it must strive against the tautological representation of mathematical ideals of symmetry.¹⁷⁰

We only need to consider the way that harmony develops in a piece of music to understand Adorno’s point of view; all harmonic development within the tonal tradition involves a departure from some fundamental note, the return to which is delayed by way of various formal elaborations of the nature of this departure. In this way, the harmony of a piece of music is measurable in terms of its striving against completion. I would argue also that there is an equal striving in art towards completion, without which any subversive strategy must ultimately lose its sense of direction. The most emphatic completion of any departure is achieved by a return to the same fundamental note from which the piece of music began. From my point of view, it is the work of the beholder in their seeking and subversion of completion that represents the proportional dynamic of unreconciled reality of a work of art.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid. 376

¹⁶⁹ Ibid. 372

¹⁷⁰ Ibid. 207

Adorno considers that form is the central concern of aesthetics, and that the aesthetic content of art progresses at the point where forms become ‘eloquent.’¹⁷¹ In order that art’s content may be revealed, its language-like formal characteristics must become evident in the manner of their syntax, both in their articulation of meaning and of non-meaning.¹⁷² Even where artworks reject the semblance of meaning, this does not entail the loss of their language-like nature. By way of consistent negation, a work of art may articulate meaninglessness with a determinacy equal to that with which it can articulate meaning.¹⁷³

My painting is concerned with the principles and processes of the manner of their own construction. I intend that my paintings should reflect as directly and naturally as possible the thought processes that are constitutive of the idea of each painting. If they are successful in this way, then they may be considered eloquent. There is the possible critique in this sense that to some extent my paintings represent a form of decoration. If this is the case, then I would hope that this representation may be understood in the context of what Adorno calls *decorazione assoluta*, or ‘absolute decoration,’ which, in the context of the Baroque, is absolutely free from purpose and operates on the basis of its own formal laws. In this sense, decoration does not decorate anything, because it is nothing *but* decoration.¹⁷⁴ By contrast with the Baroque, Adorno makes the case that Modernist artworks seek resolution of their constituent elements at equidistance from a notional midpoint. Seen from this point of view, anything accidental carries with it the suspicion of being superfluous and ornamental. He sees the self-critical attitude that requires composition without superfluity as one of the greatest challenges of the modernist project, since what it presents most directly is the ‘immanent chaos’ that is a precondition of all art production.¹⁷⁵

Despite this possible affiliation with the Baroque, my painting is nonetheless clearly identifiable with the basic Modernist attitude towards resolution and non-resolution. Adopting rigorous reductivist strategies, I have sought to articulate as clearly as possible the notion of equidistance from a common midpoint in the *Gestell Series* of

¹⁷¹ Ibid. 371

¹⁷² Ibid. 268

¹⁷³ Ibid. 201-2

¹⁷⁴ Ibid. 376

¹⁷⁵ Ibid. 200

paintings in particular. These paintings are essentially recursive forms that formalise equidistance as a strategy for the negation of the accidental. In this way, according to Adorno, these paintings engage directly with the immanent chaos that they negate.

For Adorno, technique is that which reveals to consciousness the hand that leaves the trace. In this way, technique is constitutive of a work of art insofar as it represents an essential condensation of human experience in the form of a human product. Yet technique in and of itself is not the content of the work; technique is not itself consciousness. The essential content of a work of art turns on an abstraction that separates the technical from what transcends the technical. In this sense, technique is that which reveals content. However, both elements are productive of each other in important works, and both are united in the form of the work.¹⁷⁶

The strong emphasis on the formal aspect of my paintings has meant that I have had to put a lot of thought into the technique with which they are rendered. The purpose of technique in this regard is to overcome to the best of my ability the technical limitations of the medium with which I am working. My hope is that consciousness, my own and that of the beholder, may move freely within the paintings, uninhibited by any struggle with its technical aspect. This freedom is ultimately what becomes the content of the work.

The structural, or language-like character of formal expression in art was a significant preoccupation within the early development of abstract art. It is in this sense that Kandinsky appeals to Goethe's notion of a future possibility of a 'thorough bass' of painting, where composition as such amounts to a kind of grammar of painting, or a definable system of laws that is the origin and foundation for harmony in a work of art. This is a hypothetical notion in the context of visual expression, but one well understood in the context of music in its relation to the physical laws of harmony. Kandinsky believed that Cubism was an attempt to define such physical laws of harmony in a visual form. However, what he relied upon in his own work were the laws of internal necessity that he understood to be of a spiritual rather than physical nature. In this context, the basis and purpose of any harmony achieved in Kandinsky's work was ultimately intended to 'touch the human soul.'¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁶ Ibid. 280

¹⁷⁷ Kandinsky, op. cit. 176

Making a further parallel between music and painting, Kandinsky suggests that every external form has an inner ‘sound,’ and that this sound has essential qualities that are identical with that form, however abstract or geometrical the form may be. The more free and abstract the external form, the more pure and primal the inner sound that corresponds to it.¹⁷⁸

Like Kandinsky, I seek to develop my painting practice through the establishment of a harmonious relationship between form and content, and this, as a matter of inner necessity. I assume that the subjectivity of the beholder is a constitutive element of the harmony that is established between form and content, and that this is realised in accordance with the influence of a universal law of harmony. It is reasonable to suppose that what holds formally true in terms of what we hear, may also hold true for what we see. The parallel between music and painting is significant here to the extent that the communicability of both is predicated on such a system of laws of harmony. Thus, I consider that my paintings act like musical chords where the lines that I paint have a visual resonance that is determined by formal laws of harmony, and that this formal resonance is resolved within the consciousness of the beholder in accordance with the same laws.

With an understanding of visual art’s affinities with music similar to that of Kandinsky, Mondrian held that composition was the real content in his painting, and that this was expressed in the form of elements such as ‘rhythm,’ ‘proportion’ and ‘equilibrium.’ And also, embedded within the ideological framework of Neo-Plasticism is the notion that in order to achieve the greatest possible ‘inwardness’ of a visual expression, the artist must seek to ‘equilibrate’ the relationships between formal elements in accordance with the laws of harmony.¹⁷⁹

It is significant that Mondrian identifies composition and content with ‘inwardness.’ The emphasis here is on subjective experience as the content of a work of art and how this is intrinsically connected to its compositional aspect. My own painting is essentially an expression of composition in this way, and as such, it also has much in common with musical composition. Rhythm, proportion and equilibrium are very basic concerns in everything that I paint. I consider that if I have been successful in

¹⁷⁸ Ibid. 163

¹⁷⁹ Mondrian, op. cit. 39-0

achieving a resonant harmony of these things in a painting then I have achieved the promise of my intention as a painter.

Conclusions

Beauty in art is a transcendent ideal that is experienceable only in a partial way in the relationship between the form of a work and its content. This beauty is, in the first instance, a product of form rather than of content, and yet it cannot exist without content. Thus, representation of formal beauty is not a sufficient end of art. It is the revelation of spirit or mind that is the ultimate content of art, and the form of a work of art must serve to reveal the idea of this content in order to distinguish itself from the order of things that are not art.

The revelation of form is a revelation of spirit, the content of which is available to us as a cumulative inheritance of spiritual achievements, since all known forms are handed down by repetition, elaboration or variation of some original form. The validity and continuity of any future forms consists in the synthesis of original forms that become sedimented as content in art that carries with it the trace of its origin.

The identification, rendering and contemplation of form allows consciousness to make a transition from the perception of mere sense data to concept, and this function acts to mitigate our fears about the uncertain boundaries of things. The rendering of form in art requires not only an objective conceptual foundation; it requires a practical, faithful and reliable means of expressing this. Technical achievement in art represents an essential condensation of consciousness in this way. Technique is not the content of the work however. It is not itself consciousness, but rather, that which reveals content.

A sufficient end of art must involve a harmonious relationship between form and content. If this end has been achieved in my painting, then this may be measured by the extent to which it participates in a beauty that ultimately transcends both the form of the work and its content. Notwithstanding the notion that imperfect form arises from imperfect content as the result of an inadequacy either of the Idea to its representation, or of the representation to the Idea, I consider that I have a mind, a spirit and an idea, and I do not wonder if this content is worthy of a form in art, but

rather, if a form is worthy of this content. The geometric forms that I use are essentially ancient, but the context in which I deploy them is uniquely my own.

The gradual refinement both of technique and of understanding in my painting is directed towards the presentation of the Idea of the work. The intention of this is to reflect as directly and naturally as possible the thought processes that are constitutive of the idea of each painting. The care that I take to paint lines clearly is intended to allow consciousness to move freely within the limits of the painting, uninhibited by any struggle with its technical aspect in order that this freedom may become the content of the work.

Chapter 8

Finite and Infinite

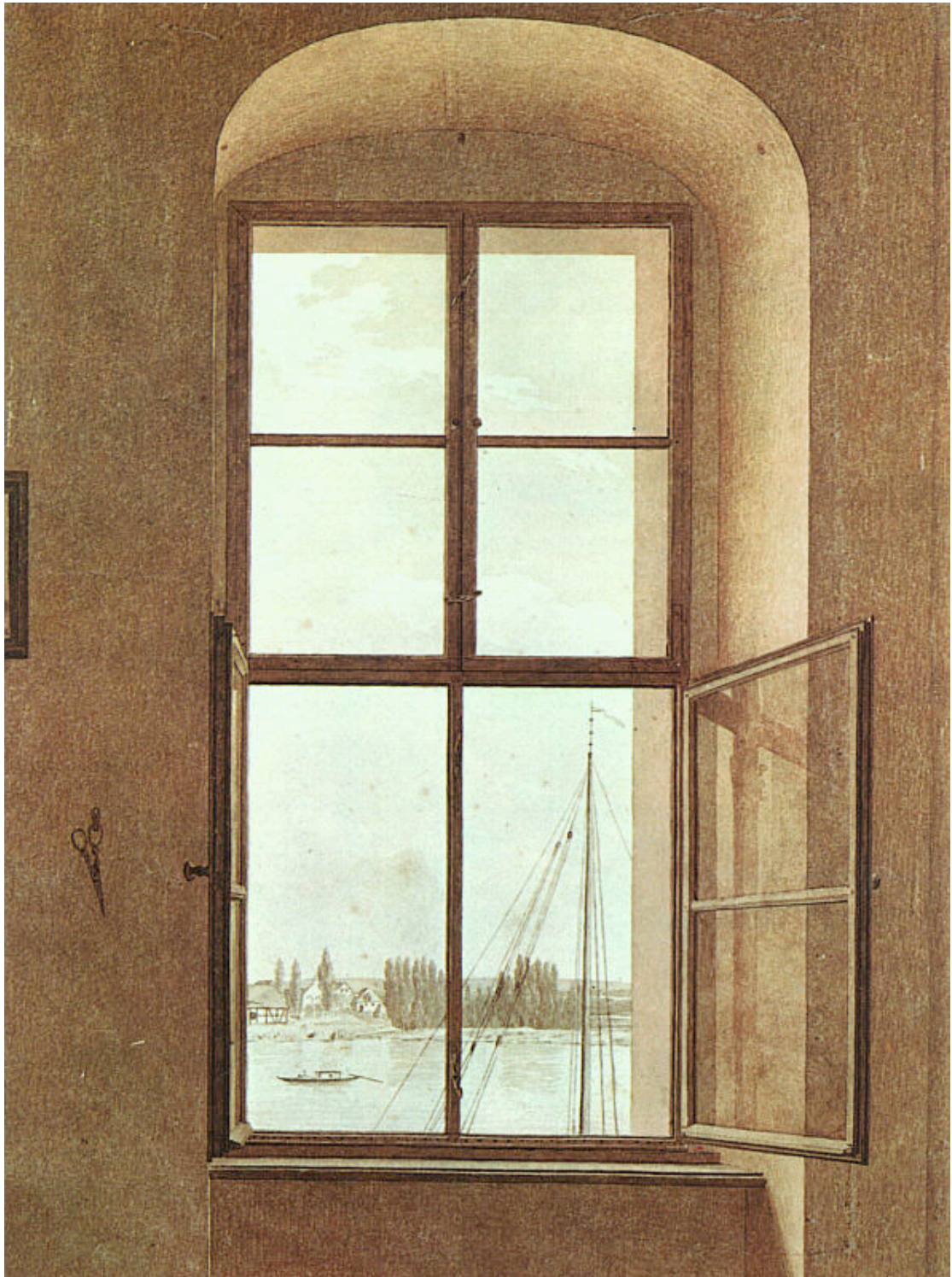


Fig. 4 *View from the Artist's Studio, Window on the Right*

Caspar David Friedrich, graphite and sepia ink on paper, 1805-06

Current location: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Contemplation of the relationship between the finite and the infinite performs a basic role in our reckoning of being and place within the universe, not least in the context of art. In contemplation of a work of art, the self moves freely where it reaches towards the infinite, and remains limited only in relation to the objective world. Assuming that the infinite begins with a finite point, this chapter considers how works of art may point us in meaningful directions beyond the finite limits of things towards an infinite beauty that exists beyond the formal perimeters of a work of art. There are two basic premises for this assumption; namely, that no individual work of art represents a totality in and of itself, but rather, a partial and inadequate presentation of its own perpetually unfulfilled potential; and also that openness and completeness stand together in opposition at the limit point where the work of art is received. In this context, it is argued that while a work of art represents a fixing of an infinitely available and inexhaustible number of forms, colours, combinations and effects, its external form is in fact a finite expression of the object's inner and infinite conceptual nature. Whatever claim a work of art has to successful composition as such, is as a result of the relationship that it is able to articulate between expansion and limitation. My painting practice is intended as an articulation of this principle.

Once something has assumed the status of art, that thing necessarily involves something that reaches beyond the limits of presentation. If art does not represent something, it is not art. As such, a work of art reaches beyond the finite and the known into the infinite and the unknown with all faculties of the intellect. In this way, a work of art becomes not only a record of the self having taken its place in the universe, but also a producer and a product of this taking place. Understood as such, it appears likely that the artist shares more in common with the transcendental philosopher than with the Cartesian physicist, since the artist cannot merely state or restate the material finitude of things. This point of view is evident in Schelling's statement:

Descartes the physicist said: give me matter and motion, and from that I will fashion you the universe. The transcendental philosopher says; give me a nature made up of opposed activities, of which one reaches out into the infinite, while the other tries to intuit itself in this infinitude, and from that I will

bring forth for you the intelligence, with the whole system of its presentations [...] The self is but the ground upon which the intelligence, with all its determinations, is delineated.¹⁸⁰

For Schelling, the self moves freely when it reaches towards the infinite, and remains limited only in relation to the objective world.¹⁸¹ He claims that the origin of the self is infinite and infinitely active, and that the self is the producer and product of its own reality. Nevertheless, the self comes up against limits when it encounters something determinate, or objective, that is in opposition to it.¹⁸²

This notion is relevant to my painting practice insofar as it informs my understanding that when I begin a painting, it is with the sense of infinite possibility, and the process of painting represents an encounter with this infinite prospect. Reaching into the infinite in this way is a process of making real something that would otherwise be no more than a potentiality. The great satisfaction of painting in this way is the recognition of the infinitude of the self within the finitude of the painting that is the product of the infinite activity of the self's reaching. This is an encounter between the free and infinite movement of self with something that is determinate and objective, which represents an opposition, or resistance to, the infinite movement of the self. This encounter plays an important function in terms of the self's orientation in the universe; without knowledge of its opposite, the infinite cannot recognise itself; without knowledge of boundedness, freedom cannot know itself.

For Schelling, the infinite display of the finite *is* beauty, and a successful work of art is a reflection of the experience of an infinite tranquillity. In the case of a successful work of art, it is unapparent whether this infinity resides within the artist, or the work of art, whereas in the case of a so-called false work of art, the purpose and method of reflection are self-evident, in which case, the art appears to be limited as a mere representation or reflection of the artist's conscious activity, and thus, the infinite may find no rest, and this results in the absence of beauty.¹⁸³

I try to not make any explicit reference in my paintings to my purpose and method. My intention is to allow as much space as possible for the beholder's consciousness to find residence, and hopefully beauty and tranquillity also. In effect, the schematic

¹⁸⁰ Schelling, *STI*, op. cit. 72-3

¹⁸¹ Ibid. 177-8

¹⁸² Ibid. 36-7

¹⁸³ Ibid. 225-6

origins of the work are not self-evident, and the way that I apply paint to a surface is not immediately obvious. While I cannot absolutely deny evidence of my conscious activity in my paintings, the specific content of this consciousness is obscure in terms of what is immediately presented to the beholder, and as such, it does not stand in the way of the free movement of consciousness in view of what the work represents.

The possibility of freedom of consciousness within the limits of the pictorial frame has been a key concern of my painting practice throughout the course of my PhD candidature. The point of contact between the limits of my will and understanding, and the materials that I employ, is critical in this respect. In his influential essay, *The Question Concerning Technology*, the German philosopher, Martin Heidegger, argues that our urge to master a thing intensifies to the same extent that our means, or technology, to achieve this end diminishes. To control a thing is to circumscribe it, which is to make a frame for it, to make a line around it, and thus to limit it. Yet, as he suggests, a thing does not stop at its boundary, but rather, it is here out of which a thing begins to be. The circumscribing line is reduced to the status of a point of departure in this way – an unlimited point of departure – insofar as the infinite begins with a finite point. Thus, the completeness of a thing is merely its beginning.¹⁸⁴

This point is fundamental to my understanding of the relationship between the finite and the infinite in relation to my painting. While my paintings may appear as totally circumscribed propositions in the sense that they attempt to make the circumscribed nature of their own recursion as explicit as possible, the intention in this is not to provide the viewer with an image of completion, but rather a finite point of resistance to the free movement of their infinite selfhood.

Even where the defined edges of my paintings represent some form of their completion of finality, I recognise that this limit point does not by any means reflect the totality of the work. For Adorno, no individual work of art represents a totality, but rather, it is but a partial and inadequate presentation of its own perpetually unfulfilled potential.¹⁸⁵ He argues that what separates the particular details of a work of art from the indifferent, and gives them meaning and significance, is that which in them strives for transcendence. It is the very striving of individual details towards

¹⁸⁴ Heidegger, *QCT*, op. cit. 5-8

¹⁸⁵ Adorno, *AT*, op. cit. 274

wholeness, even where a total achievement of this end is impossible, that is an immanent precondition of their integration and synthesis. In this context, Adorno understands an artwork's striving to be a 'death drive' that is bound up inextricably with a life force, where the opposing tendencies towards 'dissociation' and 'unification' coexist as a matter of necessity. In this way, all details must be considered relative to the whole; it is not sufficient that they be simply posited. The more details that are absorbed within the whole, the more the whole itself begins to appear as a detail, as one of many singular elements.¹⁸⁶

In the painting that I am doing now, every line that I paint has a determinate place within the figure to which it belongs. There is no superfluity in this regard, and as such, it plays a well-defined part within the figure as a whole. But this wholeness is a conditional limit point. As I make my work, I understand that even where one of the figures in my paintings appears to be complete, it is only one permutation of an infinitely variable set. There is always a tension in my work between the paintings being exactly and finitely just as they are, and the infinite prospect of their elaboration and variability. The act of putting something down in a coherent form represents a cut in an otherwise undifferentiated field of possibility. In making this cut, I hope to draw attention to the unity between the actual and the possible.

For Adorno, a work of art is the result of a process whereby the material means employed in its execution become subsumed within the object itself, or conformable to its inherent limitations. However, in terms of its inner nature, the art object is, at least implicitly, a concept. The material 'shape' that is given to the art object is in fact a finite expression of the object's inner and infinite conceptual nature. What may be considered therefore as the objectivity of a work of art is merely the semblance, or cover that conceals the concept of a work of art.¹⁸⁷

A concept is infinite until it has been brought into the objective world. A work of art endeavours to maintain a reflection of a concept's infinite nature in the shape and form of an art object. If a work of art loses its infinite aspect as the result of an overworking of the material means employed in its making, it becomes mere information. In my painting, I have seen this failure take place as the result of a

¹⁸⁶ Ibid. 385

¹⁸⁷ Ibid. 92-3

disjunction between the means of expression and the basic concept of a work. This may well be the case with some of the paintings that I made at the beginning of my PhD candidature. They display a heavy mannering of the basic concept that they seek to express, and perhaps lack deftness and levity as a result. As such, their basic concept appears to be secondary to the means of expression, and they remain bound within a finite reality that is inimical to any kind of infinite transcendence. It is for this reason that in my more recent work, I have endeavoured to reduce the means and manner of expression that I employ to represent the conceptual essence of the ideas with which I am engaged.

A clear ideological line mine may be traced from Schelling, Heidegger, Adorno and Eco on the subject of the limits of the pictorial plane in art, where he asserts that ‘openness’ and ‘completeness’ stand together at the limit point where the work of art is received, and where, as a product, it is out of the hands of its author. At this point, the individual addressee of the work enters into a play of stimulus and response as the result of a sequence of communicative effects, the validity of which being in proportion to the multiplicity of ways in which it may be understood. Against this background, the poetics of the open work may be understood as that which encourages freedom of consciousness, where acknowledged universal truths are replaced by an order of ambiguity. Art may be understood in this way as: ‘an infinite contained within finiteness.’ Hence, the finite aspects of the open work are neither parts nor fragments of it, but rather each part contains the totality of the work, revealing it merely from a given point of view. In this sense, where the work of art begins and ends is a totally open question, and this question may only be responded to within the continuous movements of consciousness.¹⁸⁸

To paint an open window provides no guarantee, in the first instance, of the openness of the painting. On the contrary, the rendering of such an image may in fact represent a closure to the conceptual possibilities of the idea of openness to the extent that it becomes circumscribed by the limits of the image of openness itself. From my point of view, it is more natural to approach the idea of openness, and of the infinite, beginning with an articulation of finitude. Most typically this is in either a recursive or modular form that may be infinitely extendable. In so doing, I hope to throw into

¹⁸⁸ Eco, *TOW*, op. cit. 3-9

relief the question of what is, and what is not, in the work. Kant assumes that there is a clear distinction between what is intrinsic and what is extrinsic in relation to the beauty of a work of art. Derrida observes that making this distinction necessarily involves the identification of what is framed, what is excluded as frame, and what is outside the frame. The Kantian frame as such is a ‘parergon,’ or, something that is supplementary to the work itself, and yet one that is constituted as a hybrid of what is outside, and what is inside the work.¹⁸⁹ For Derrida, the ‘truth’ of the frame is that it is a fragile construction. He suggests that the production and manipulation of the frame in a sense: ‘puts everything to work in order to efface the frame effect, most often by naturalising it to infinity.’¹⁹⁰

I have endeavored in my painting to render lines as deftly as possible in order to make the fragility of their construction most apparent. These lines constitute an elaborate system of frames, and frames within frames, to the point where the frame no longer frames something that is other to itself; but rather, the frame becomes that which is itself framed. There is a natural orientation towards the infinite in this way that unfolds as the beholder works to find their place within frame. Ultimately, it is this movement of the beholder’s consciousness that becomes enframed, and in this way, the infinite becomes enframed within the finite.

Consciousness of this way of thinking about the function of the frame in relation to its finite and infinite aspects made an immediate transition from theory to practice in the early nineteenth century. Koerner suggests that the work of Philipp Otto Runge is an important example of what he calls the ‘leakage’ between the work of art itself, and the ‘instruments of its enclosure.’ For instance, the framing of Runge’s first *Morning*, 1808, is treated as a continuation of the pictorial field. Reflecting the thematic content of the work, the painted frame represents a series of beginnings, which may be seen for example in the depiction of the first light of the rising sun, or in the pairing of bulbous roots and flower. In the upper corners, the angels of night begin to vanish at the point where narrow black mouldings separate the painting from the frame, and then the painted frame from the surrounding world. The

¹⁸⁹ Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1987, 63-4

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.* 73

symbolic suggestion here is that the dawn replaces night, and by extension, the boundaries and limits that are inherent to the enclosure of the work of art itself.¹⁹¹

The notion that the frame is the point at which a work of art begins to open is absolutely fundamental to the way in which I understand my painting. The beginning of the frame itself within a work of art is equally important. Runge may not have been the first to understand the nature of the frame in this way, but his work does mark an important shift in thinking about the frame from the Kantian view that had wide currency at the time that Runge was working.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Kandinsky had developed this way of thinking to the point where he recognised that the inner content of a work of art represents a fixing of an infinitely available and inexhaustible number of forms, colours, combinations and effects. He suggests that whatever form is settled upon within a given frame represents a delimitation of its infinite possibilities, it only becomes purposeful through the revelation of the inner content belonging to that form.¹⁹²

I consider that the inner content of my painting is always the freedom of an unlimited consciousness that emerges as it finds its way within the limited frameworks that my paintings represent. This consciousness may be qualified to some extent, but to do so is to immediately place a kind of limitation upon it, and this is something that I try to avoid, at least not in any definitive way.

The framing function of art was also of interest to Mondrian who considered the relationship between expansion and limitation within the picture plane to be fundamental to the composition of his paintings. Rather than establishing closed boundaries with the perimeters of a painting in the form of contours, he preferred ‘tensed’ straight lines that produce a more direct expression of expansion as they extend towards the edges of the pictorial field. The positioning of the perpendicular within the composition acts as a principle of limitation, or delimitation, in relation to the extreme opposite principle of expansion. While the planes that result from this

¹⁹¹ Koerner, op. cit. 148

¹⁹² Kandinsky, op. cit. 165

action are defined by colour, they are delimited within the perpendicularity of their situation, and remain nonetheless, open within it.¹⁹³

The relevance of this principle of composition in the context of my own painting practice is that neither expansion nor limitation may be understood in the absence of the other; it is the tension created through the force of resistance to that which is negated in either direction that gives my painting's their particular character. An expansive or limited formal gesture in and of itself is not enough to guarantee the expansion or limitation, since this does not include the subjective element that I consider to be largely constitutive of its content. My painting may on the one hand become expansive when the consciousness of the beholder strives against a limited formal structure, and on the other, limited when it meets no resistance to the openness of an expansive formal gesture. This is not to say that resistance between the outwardly limited and inwardly expansive is the only way that my work may become expansive; the only suggestion here is that it is possible and that it is on this basis that I posit the expansiveness of my painting.

While it is not the intention of this inquiry to provide an account of recent historical examples of the ideas that are of fundamental importance to my research project, it is perhaps useful here, and particularly apposite, to provide at least one example of a late twentieth century artist whose work is directly engaged with these. In particular, it is noteworthy that the intellectual provenance of US/Japanese artist, Shusaku Arakawa's concept of the universe begins with his reading of Edgar Allan Poe's quasi-philosophical treatise *Eureka*, a work that references Pascal's statement describing the limits of the universe as: 'a sphere of which the centre is everywhere, the circumference nowhere.' Poe explains that: 'while we find it impossible to fancy an end to space, we have no difficulty in picturing to ourselves any one of an infinity of beginnings.' In the same way, Arakawa's pictures act as ordering systems, each being a finite point, yet extending in parts, infinitely. As such, each system functions as a 'temporary centre' that may be described either as a 'beginning,' or as a 'waiting place', within the infinitude of space. As such, its singularity may be intuited or 'anticipated.' Arakawa's process, or system of picturing implies the movement of the self from an objective, and hence limited perception of the extent of

¹⁹³ Mondrian, op. cit. 38

the universe, to the subjective point of view where the unity of the universe is perceived in its infinity. This is a subjective moment of intuition that cannot be represented. In this way, his work playfully suggests the perceptual and conceptual framework wherein such intuition may be given, and thereby: ‘both the self and the cosmos become more ‘conspicuous’ as they become more unified.’¹⁹⁴

I consider that an engagement with my painting represents a momentary centre of the universe. This may begin anywhere; a painting may be approached from anywhere and left off at any point. However determinate it may seem, its entire being is wholly contingent within the indefinite limits of the universe. If I hope to achieve something definite in my paintings, then this is because it is this definitiveness that functions most immediately as a beginning within the context of indefiniteness.

Notwithstanding his indebtedness to conceptualism, Arakawa, as a painter, has worked systematically though respectfully against the Duchampian move away from painting, his belief being that he might better understand the limits of painting from within the medium itself. Within the limits of this frame of reference, he believes that it is possible to test the limits of where one stands as a painter, and that by doing so one tests the limits of the universe also. For Kuspit, the importance of Arakawa’s painting is that, in its very ambiguity and its playful articulation of existential terror, and by his strategic subversion of the function of picturing, he takes the twentieth century’s tendency towards self-consciousness about picturing and its bad faith in the spontaneity of picturing to a conceptualist extreme.¹⁹⁵

If there is some evidence of existential terror in my work, I do not think that this is the result of any kind of bad faith about picturing, or of the history of representation in painting. This terror is rather a more general terror that has to do with my place within the universe. My painting is a beginning; it is a place for me to begin to recognise my own being in the universe and to some extent, a measure of the conditions of this being. It has always been my intention to expand my understanding of painting and what I can do as a painter. While this may be a definite frame of reference, I do not believe that this represents an inherent limitation to the possibility of conceptual thought. On the contrary, I consider that the point of resistance that a

¹⁹⁴ Donald Kuspit, *Arakawa*, *Flash Art*, No. 133, April 1987, 64

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.* 67-8

painted plane represents forces an expansion of conceptual thought insofar as the desire for freedom of thought is more acute. In this way, I am able to imagine that the limits of painting are in essence both the form and content of my work.

Conclusions

If we assume that the centre of the universe is everywhere, and its circumference nowhere, then it is not possible to imagine an end to space. Nevertheless, we may imagine that it has infinitely many beginnings. And while a frame is a form of end point insofar as it is an attempt to define the limits of a thing by putting a line around it, it is also possible to imagine that things do not so much stop at their boundaries as begin. In this way, where a work begins and ends is an open question.

Each partial aspect of a work of art may be its own totality from a certain point of view. Thus, a work of art may always suggest infinite possibilities contained within finitude. If, however, the infinite aspect of an art object's conceptual origin is lost in the working of the material, then the work becomes mere information. In order that the details of a work of art become more than information, gathering meaning and significance, they must strive for integration and synthesis within the totality of the work, even where absolute transcendence of their particularity is impossible.

As the result of this striving, the final form of a work of art represents a delimitation of infinite possibilities, just at the point where it fails to fulfill them, and as such, it only ever represents some part of its own perpetually unfulfilled totality. On the basis of this infinite prospect, it becomes possible to test the limits of painting from within the limits of painting, the limits of oneself as a painter, and perhaps the limits of the universe also.

I approach the relationship between the finite and the infinite in my painting beginning with an articulation of finitude using forms that are either recursive, modular, or otherwise infinitely extendable. Any figure that I use is only one permutation of an infinitely variable set. As such, each painting represents a point of tension between the immediate finite representation of a figure and the possibility of its infinite elaboration. In the presence of this tension, my paintings articulate the circumscribed nature of their own recursion in order to provide the viewer with a finite point of resistance against which consciousness may orient itself towards the

infinite. My purpose in painting in this way is to create a place of residence for the free and infinite movement of consciousness that emerges as it finds its way within limited frameworks. The assumption here is that we cannot know freedom without knowledge of its opposite. Thus, the lines that I paint are intended as frames, and frames within frames, elaborated to the point where it is not clear what is frame and what is framed. I consider that any consciousness within and around this enframing ambiguity is oriented away from the particular towards the whole, away from the finite towards the infinite, and that in this way, one may begin looking at my painting anywhere in such a way that any particular path that may be found there can lead in multiple directions. In this way, within the limits of my painting, reaching towards the unknown, one may begin to recognise the unlimited place of one's being in the universe within the infinite aspects of selfhood.

Chapter 9

Space and Time

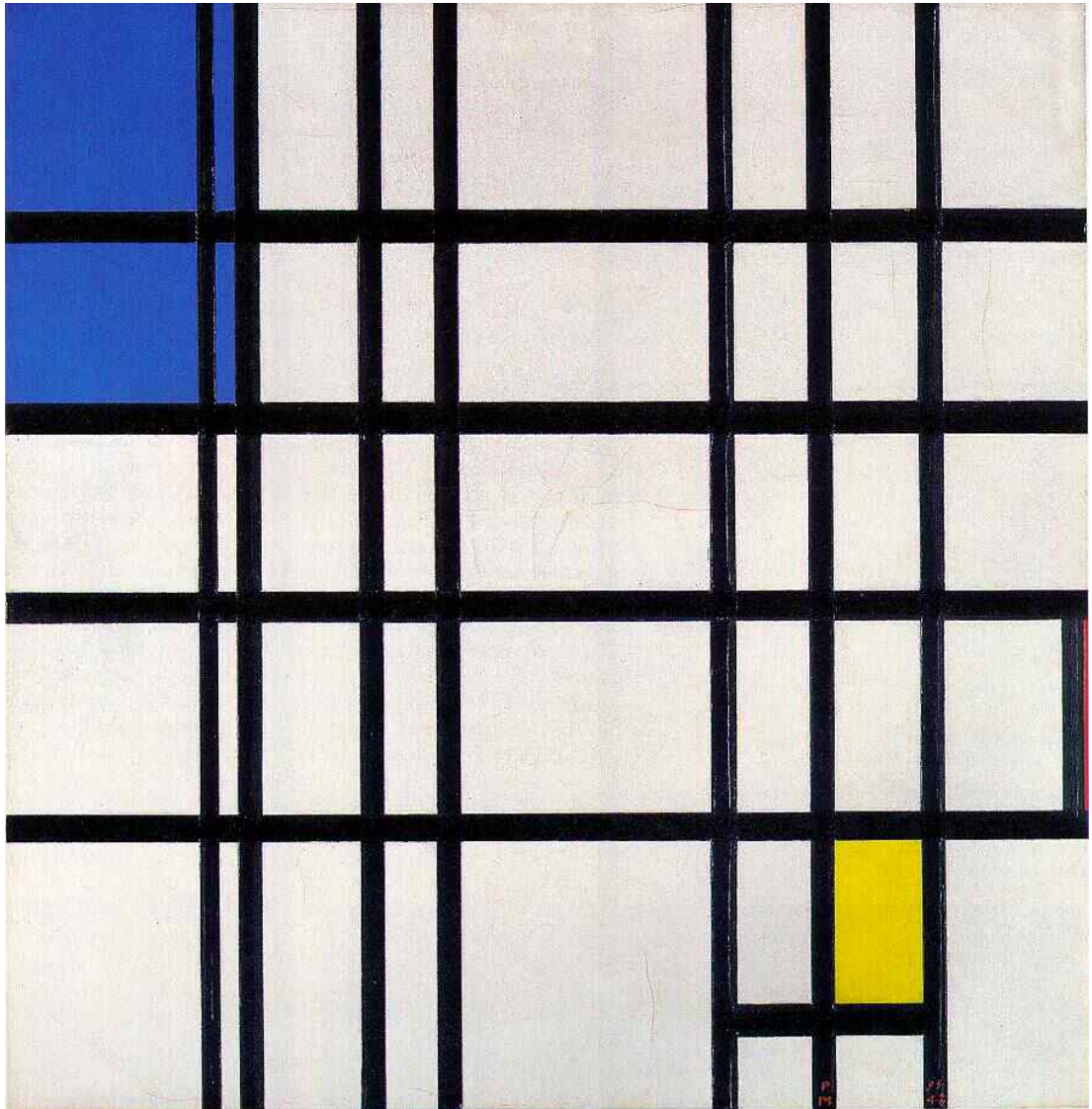


Fig. 5 *Rhythm of Black Lines*

Piet Mondrian, oil on canvas, 72.2 x 69.5 cm, c. 1935/42

Current Location: Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Dusseldorf

In infinite space, countless glowing spheres, around each of which revolve some dozen smaller illuminated spheres, hot at the core and covered by a congealed cold crust on which a mouldy film has given rise to living and cognizant beings: this is empirical truth, reality, the world. Nevertheless, it is an unfortunate predicament for a thinking being to be standing on one of these countless spheres, free-floating in boundless space, not knowing where he has come from or where he is going, and being

only one of innumerable similar beings who press, drive, and torment themselves, restlessly and rapidly arising and passing away in a time without beginning and end.¹⁹⁶

This chapter begins with the assumption that consciousness is bound within the limits of space and time, and that in the absence of objective spatial or temporal coordinates, the thinking subject cannot differentiate itself from an otherwise undifferentiated ground. It is proposed here that beyond these limits however, an art object may function as an indicator towards what lies beyond its own spatio-temporal limits. By way of development of this idea, it is understood that the concepts of ‘endurance’ and ‘alteration’ define the absolute limits our being and becoming, and that our consciousness of these is the result of our shape-making capacity, which occurs as a matter of the rhythmic divisions that we make in space and time in the contemplation of works of art. The underlying motivation for consideration of these ideas derives from a basic concern in my painting practice for the suppression of a feeling of being ‘lost’ in the universe, without orientation in space or time. This concern is qualified in the context of the notion that all art is an expression and reflection of the age in which it is conceived, but that nevertheless, and often by way of conflict, the spirit of the times must always seek an end and purpose beyond the immediate reflection of the time and place in which a work of art appears.

A concrete object has its being in a specific place and time, whereas abstract objects have no particular space or time, and yet may be instantiated in any place or time. For instance, any given painting is concrete in its particularities. It has a particular spatial and temporal location in which it is given to us by way of sense data. This is, however, meaningless information in and of itself until it is referred by way of a process of abstraction to the general idea of what a painting is. One must already have an abstract idea, or intuition of what a painting is in order to identify an object as a painting. This is an important idea in terms of my own paintings insofar as I consider that negotiation between its abstract and concrete qualities requires a direct engagement, through contemplation, with the relationship between space and time. Central to my painting practice is the notion that that the movement of the eye through space in time corresponds to the movement and expansion of consciousness. With this understanding, I have attempted to develop painted forms that strategically

¹⁹⁶ Schopenhauer, TWWP, Vol. II, op. cit. 2

direct the eye in such a way that its movement in space and time, together with the consciousness that it informs, becomes self-evidently the content of the work.

This way of thinking about the alignment of consciousness with perception in space and time, and our reckoning of place in the world, is not new. A similar notion is evident in Schiller's suggestion that time is the ground for all becoming, and that in this way the concepts of 'endurance' and 'alteration' define the absolute limits of the 'person' and their 'condition.' In terms of our experience, there are two primary impulses that characterise our personal being and becoming within the limits of the human condition; namely, the 'sensuous' and the 'rational.' In the first instance, the sensuous impulse proceeds from the physical nature of our enduring self and grounds us within time. Yet this demands alteration in order that time should have content, or reality that occupies time. This content may be called sensation, and physical existence proclaims itself in its finitude thereby. This grounding in the material tethers the upward seeking of the rational impulse, which by contrast belongs to our absolute nature, and seeks liberty, truth, justice and harmony in the many manifestations of selfhood through change across time and circumstance. As such, it establishes abstract laws in respect of judgement, knowledge, will and action.¹⁹⁷

By way of illustration of this principle, one that lends itself particularly to the condition of painting, Schiller observed that making a shape in space entails setting limits to infinite space. And similarly, the rhythmic division of time in music entails the division and limitation of the totality of time. He argues that in the absence of such coordinates in either space or time, there is no space or time, and that in this way, the whole is determined by the part, and the part by the whole, the unlimited through the limited, and the limited through the unlimited.¹⁹⁸

Following Schiller's principle, painting for me is an exercise in the structuring of a relationship between the sensuous and the rational. It is also a testing ground for what endures and what alters in relation to the condition of my own being over a period of time. The act of painting is a kind of tethering of abstract ideas to a material reality, and yet at the same time, this is an elevation of the material reality of the paintings out of time to the extent that they appear to participate in the abstract

¹⁹⁷ Schiller, AEM, op. cit. 60-7

¹⁹⁸ Ibid. 91-2

ideals that are the content of my consciousness. As such, I consider that my paintings represent shape as a limit point in both space and time, and that this shape represents both a division and an alteration of space and time, and that from this finite point, the infinite nature of the spatio-temporal continuum may be intuited.

Approaching the same subject from a different point of view, Schelling proposes that space is ‘intuiting without concepts.’ He suggests that while our consciousness of space arises through processes abstraction, it is not an abstract concept in the way that categories are, nor is it empirical in the way that specific concepts are. It is not countable in the way that specific spaces are since it is unlimited. It is pure undivided intuition into the infinite. It has no boundaries in and of itself, and hence it is infinitely divisible. Schelling understood that this property of space is the ground for all geometry.¹⁹⁹

It is with this sense of the importance of geometry as a meta-language of form in the context of painting that I have sought to expand my consciousness of the relationship between space and time. As such, I consider the appearance of a geometric figure in my painting does not constitute the appearance of space, or of time, but rather a division of it. The forms that I use are largely intuited forms that function as that which divides space. They are in a sense a resting place suspended above a pure field of undivided intuition that is the necessary ground for their being and becoming.

Concepts of space and time emerged from the realm of myth with Aristotle’s account of this relationship in his *Physics*, which may be considered to be the first scientific attempt to treat this subject. One of the first premises of this foundational document is that time stands together with ‘location,’ and ‘movement.’ As an evolution of this traditional understanding of time, Hegel made the case in his *Philosophy of Nature* that space and time stand together, as he states: ‘outside-of-one-another.’ This is not to say that space and time stand apart from one another, but rather that they function transitionally through each other. In this way, space *is* the truth of time, and time is the ‘truth’ of space, which is to say that the being of space reveals itself in time.

¹⁹⁹ Schelling, *STI*, op. cit. 140

Ultimately, Hegel thinks of space as time, and of time as ‘intuited becoming’ in which neither ‘arising’ nor ‘passing away’ has precedence.²⁰⁰

While a painting is not space or time, it behaves as a reflection of their conjunction. I consider that my own paintings represent locations within space and time, and they are intended to stimulate the free movement of consciousness. I assume that in a painting, time becomes apparent through space, and space through time. To some extent, as a matter of the free movement of consciousness, the spatial aspect of a painting tests the truth of time, just as its temporal aspect tests the truth of space. This may occur as a series of perceptual entries of consciousness into the painted plane at a particular place in space or time, but this point of perception cannot endure, since our perceptions of the spatio-temporal continuum are in a constant state of movement. There is no clear or determinate direction of this movement, just freedom of consciousness.

Worringer presents an understanding of the relationship between space and time in the form of a work of art in a more psychological than philosophical way. He suggests that the urge towards transcendence of the world of phenomena as they are experienced resides in our very primal ‘spiritual dread’ of space.²⁰¹ He argues that the development of reason in Western civilisation was the result of an urge towards the suppression of the feeling of being ‘lost’ in the universe. By contrast with this Western tendency, he suggests that Eastern civilisations in general remained more conscious of what he calls: ‘the unfathomable entanglement of all the phenomena of life,’ and were able to sustain their thought-world at a distance above the so-called: ‘shimmering veil of Maya.’ This basic instinctual consciousness of relativity did not so much negate the spiritual dread of space in Eastern expressions of art, but rather, the sublimation of this fear manifested itself as a seeking for tranquillity from within the flux of phenomena in the outer world. In this way, he believed that Eastern spiritual seekers and artists did not seek to find ‘happiness’ through a projection of themselves into the world and its objects, but rather sought to remove individual objects from the arbitrary chaos of the world, in time and space, by a process of

²⁰⁰ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans., John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Blackwell, London, 1962, 481-4

²⁰¹ Worringer, *A & E*, op. cit. 15

abstraction that was one of purification and reduction to absolute values of peace and beauty in the world.²⁰²

My painting is to some extent a personal riposte to some basic spiritual dread of space, or a fear of being lost or without place within the universe. I do not seek to claim a place for myself in my work, and by extension the universe, so much as make one. I may find a point of entry in a painting, and this may become a place of rest, or of waiting, in an otherwise undifferentiated flux of phenomena. There is a place for reason in the way that I approach painting, but ultimately rational ends are suspended at the propositional level in my work. My painting does not seek any rational conclusions, and it is for this reason that I do not think that there is an attempt to suppress the fear of space, or of being without a place in the universe. Rather, it seems that this fear is suspended and that this is an active part of the content of the paintings. This is really a process of abstraction from the phenomena of the world, but one that is conscious of the relativity of its own condition within its entanglements.

From a significantly contrasting point of view of the role of art in establishing the place and freedom of individual consciousness, Adorno held that the historical promise of aesthetics has always been the self-negation of the thinking subject, which he understood to be a freedom from, or transcendence of, time and space.²⁰³ To this end, he believed that there is a basic impulse in our experience of art to objectivate the ephemeral, and that this impulse expresses itself in opposition to the enduring character of objecthood. In this way, he believed that the inherent conflict the artist's will to capture whatever it is that is his or her object, and the ultimate impossibility of this, is an essential element of the temporal foundation of art. He suggests that the general move in the nineteenth century towards the subjectivisation of art, together with advances in modes of technical production, brought the temporal aspect of the art object into far greater focus than had previously been achieved.²⁰⁴

The impulse to make what passes in time an enduring object of art is a fundamental aspect of art's search for beauty and transcendence. Time's arrestation in the form of

²⁰² Ibid. 16-7

²⁰³ Adorno, AT, op. cit. 345

²⁰⁴ Ibid. 286

the art object entails a forgetting, not only of the endurance of the art object, but of the subject's perceptions of this endurance. From Adorno's point of view, transcendence from the normal conditions of space and time may be experienced when and where a work of art is able to release the subject from their normal expectations and predications of *when* is when, and *where* is where in it. If this may be achieved, then the self is released from its own selfhood in the experience of forgetting as the boundaries between the self and its perceptions become indistinct. While I accept these basic philosophical terms in the context of my painting practice, it is necessary for me to consider the more immediate psychological conditions of the subject's experience of space and time in view of a work of art, and how this may be characterised by a terror of an absence of place within the universe. In this regard, Worringer, Schiller and Schelling provide theoretical grounds that are more immediately aligned with the concerns of my painting practice than does Adorno. Nevertheless, Adorno presents a more ideal condition of painting to which I aspire.

Beyond internal the internally referential aspects of an artwork's engagement with the relationship between space and time, these qualities may also be considered in the context of their social, cultural, political and historical condition. In respect of these, Kandinsky proposed that every work of art is the 'child of its time.' He believed that at any epoch, a culture produces its own unique art.²⁰⁵ As such, the artist must be considered as a servant of art, and therefore, must give expression to what is uniquely and eternally the essence of art within the particular cultural circumstances of the time and place in which he or she lives. Despite this outward looking perspective, the assumption here is that this essence resides immanently within every individual, every culture, anywhere and at any time. He argues that from within this essence, art progresses to the extent that it is able to liberate itself from individual and temporal style. It is in this way that what he calls 'implicit' harmony becomes 'explicit,' and this allowance enables 'spirit' to progress in the world also.²⁰⁶

In his own cultural context, Kandinsky believed that there was an awakening of 'spirit' that sought an end beyond the location of materialistic appearances within particular spatio-temporal instances.²⁰⁷ He felt that ultimately, 'expression' of this

²⁰⁵ Kandinsky, op. cit. 127

²⁰⁶ Ibid. 173-4

²⁰⁷ Ibid. 128

new spirit in art was needed to get beyond superficial or stylistic appearances in the pursuit of timeless essence.²⁰⁸ It is to this end that in 1920, distancing himself from the basic materialist tenets of the Communist Party, Kandinsky made an address as president of the Moscow Institute of Artistic Culture, in which he stated: ‘Man does not stop before the unanswerable: an invisible force attracts him toward the eternal. The Institute will aspire to find the eternal in the transient.’²⁰⁹

In the simplest terms, I do not consider my work to be separate from the historical and cultural continuum from which it has emerged. My painting practice has been carried out at this specific point in time with the understanding that it represents a residuum of my own being in this time, and this involves necessarily the cultural context that affords this possibility. Much of my emotional life is bound up in this activity, even where, or perhaps precisely where my work attempts to distance itself from explicit emotional content. In any case, my work is heavily reliant upon an historical consciousness that is engaged with ideas that inform the work that I make. It is no doubt arguable that my work has something of a Classical quality that may be identified with many stylistic moments throughout the history of art, not least in the history of Modern art. This quality is perhaps a seeking of timelessness of expression that is motivated by my enduring fascination with the ultimately unanswerable question of the mystery of being within a spatio-temporal continuum.

While my practice is engaged with history and culture in this way, it is impossible for me to make a claim to any historical or cultural significance of this engagement, since I am unaware of what any future consciousness will judge to be of enduring interest in it. Nonetheless, such consciousness is demanded by Mondrian who, like Kandinsky, believed not only that all art is an expression and reflection of the age in which it is conceived, but also that the only true and living art is that which is able to give expression to a future universal consciousness within a limited contemporary context.²¹⁰ Since I do not consider myself to be a visionary, I do not make such a claim. I believe rather that what is and what is not a sufficient expression of any given historical moment may not be determined at the moment of creation, least of all by the artist. Such decisions must necessarily be made in retrospect, and are

²⁰⁸ Cheetham, op. cit. 67

²⁰⁹ Ibid. 70

²¹⁰ Mondrian, op. cit. 30

perpetually subject to review. It is more useful to me as an artist to be concerned with the questions and problems of what is more immediately at hand.

Approaching the relationship between space and time in more practical and specific terms that are more aligned with my own, Mondrian proposed that compositional rhythm in a work of art emerges when and where the artist is afforded greatest subjective freedom.²¹¹ He assumed the basic principle that rhythm is essentially a division of either of time or space, and that the interiorisation of rhythm in his painting could achieve a ‘plastic unity’ through a continuous process of negation and opposition between position and size that transcends the particularity of repetition, and is able to express a universal, or ‘cosmic’ rhythm that flows and inheres in all things.²¹² He held that repetition is a species of rhythm insofar as it is a form of division, or instantiation, either of space or time. As such, the continuous process of giving to and giving back between spirit and nature, inward and outer, tends to suggest that life and art are both forms of repetition. He suggests that this reciprocal process between opposites is an evolutionary process, or an upward reaching development away from the natural, and increasingly towards the abstract. This process of perpetual recurrence entails the maturation and upward movement of the spirit towards an increasingly pure vision of life and art, the end of which may be understood to be a ‘true’ conception of the relationship between inward and outward, spirit and nature.²¹³

Time carries on with rhythmic continuity in a painting through the movement of the beholder’s eye and consciousness as it retraces the movement of the painter through the space contained within the painting. This movement is akin to the continuity in music, in which we may hear and feel a common movement towards a shared place within the stream of time. In the rhythmic repetition of line and other compositional elements, we experience a sense of continuity and containment in sight and sound alike. In either case, there is the possibility of release from phenomena that are extrinsic to the experience of rhythmic continuity, since continuity carries with it always the suggestion of the infinite. As for Mondrian, these are basic assumptions that I make when I go about elaborating forms of rhythmic repetition in my painting.

²¹¹ Ibid. 31

²¹² Ibid. 40

²¹³ Ibid. 48

Malevich was interested not only in the specific practical function of rhythm in art, but also the historical continuity of this. The fundamental importance of abstract thought as a defining feature of modern human consciousness, the visual articulation of rhythm being evidence of which, had already been identified by Malevich in his early statement of the principles of Suprematism in *The Non-Objective World*, where he compares the Suprematist square and its related forms with what he calls: ‘the primitive marks (symbols) of aboriginal man.’ What was of particular interest to Malevich, more than any academic concern for the social function of ornamentation, was the notion that the combinations and elaborations of these abstract forms were representations of a ‘feeling of rhythm.’²¹⁴

The importance of Malevich’s coupling of feeling with rhythm in the context of mark making, whether ancient or modern, is that it presents the interior world of the subject and the manifold dimensions of thought and experience as the substantial content of an abstract expression. As such, the representation of such feeling situates the thinking subject at the centre of an abstract universe that becomes understandable as a divisible continuum of space and time that involves a complex interrelationship between self and world. In this way, intentional mark making in its most primal sense is the reflection of the moment of self-consciousness. It is a representation of the moment of intention, or the moment of concept formation. Thus, the mark represents a direct intentional correlation between conception and perception, each relying on the other in order for definition to be established. It is this definition that becomes the content of consciousness, and that which allows the thinking subject to remain suspended in reflection above the objective particulars of the world. If this zero point of consciousness may be considered to be the foundation of the Suprematist project, it is no less the foundation for modern thought that originated at least 70,000 years ago, but perhaps much earlier in the obscurity of time.

The idea of rhythm and its organisation is self-consciously articulated in my work. I assume that the rhythmic division both of space and time, proceeding on a defined trajectory, or, turning upon a central axis in the forming and following of a figure, becomes the epicentre of a private universe. I consider this to be an act of self-reflection and recognition in the performance of self. As such, the self becomes a

²¹⁴ Malevich, op. cit. 76

central point in its self-identification with the rhythmic movement of the figure. My intention is to suggest a form to the eye that becomes the determinate ground across which the self may enact itself, and in this way, the picture plane becomes the stage upon which the eye performs the act of being itself.

For Malevich, the objective world is inherently unstable, even when it appears to be so within our consciousnesses. Every familiar and ostensibly established thing, or order, is as such to be reconsidered as being radically contingent and impermanent.²¹⁵ It is with an awareness of the contingency and impermanence of things that I seek to make my paintings as compositionally stable as possible. Interestingly, the more stable my paintings appear to be, the more I find that my eye is obliged to move within the painted plane, and so the idea of permanence becomes slippery. I find that the eye's resistance to permanence is also a resistance to the claims of space and time, even where movement through space and time is the means whereby the eye evades allocation.

I am concerned with the passage of time in my painting, most particularly with the time that the eye and consciousness takes in their movement through space across a picture plane. What happens in this movement is a passage of mediation between opposites, not just between space and time, but also finite and infinite, form and content, truth and deception, presentation and representation, subject and object, ideal and real, abstract and concrete. It is interesting to me subtle shifts in the arrangement of things shape our experience of time. To some limited extent, this is what I take to be the symbolic essence of the work.

Conclusions

The nexus between space and time may be understood as the ground for all becoming in which consciousness endures and alters according to the limits of its condition. Consciousness has no boundaries in and of itself, and hence it is infinitely divisible, which it does by making shapes of different kinds. It may be understood in this sense that the coming into being of things in consciousness is a form of shaping of space and time. Such shaping, or delimitation of the infinite, countervails the

²¹⁵ Ibid. 84

feeling of being lost in the universe. In this context, rhythm represents a form of division, but one that is able to express a universal continuity that inheres in all things. This continuity results from the movement of spirit towards an increasingly pure conception of the relationship between inward and outward, spirit and nature.

The frameworks that my paintings represent serve to locate my perceptions of being within time. I understand by this that my painting process acts as a form of testing ground for what endures and what alters in relation to the condition of my own being. My intention in this is that my paintings serve as a place of rest within the otherwise undifferentiated flux of phenomena, and thereby, establishing a place wherein consciousness may move freely.

The free movement of consciousness in its perceptions of a work of art has an inherently rhythmic aspect. Insofar as we experience a sense of continuity and containment in the rhythmic repetition of compositional elements in space and time, this continuity may release consciousness from the flux of phenomena that is extrinsic to it. In this way, rhythm places consciousness at the centre of an abstract universe, understandable only as a divisible continuum of space and time.

In this context, I consider that my painting becomes the epicentre of a private universe where consciousness may follow the eye as it proceeds along the defined trajectory of a central axis towards the production of a rhythmic division of space and time. This is an act of self-reflection in the performance of self, where the self becomes the central point in its self-identification with the rhythmic movement of the eye. In my experience, it seems that the more rhythmically stable my paintings appear, the more the eye and consciousness are obliged to move, and so the idea of permanence becomes slippery. This movement of the eye corresponds to an expansion of consciousness where being and meaning is revealed also.

While it may be that only genuinely progressive art is able to express a future consciousness, it is not important to me if my painting is able to do this. What is important to me is my understanding that whatever it is that I am doing as a painter, this is not separate from an historical and cultural continuum. I understand that I am working in a specific time and place, however the specific complexion of this condition does not preclude my seeking forms of timeless expression in my painting that are only answerable ultimately to the mystery of being in the universe.

Chapter 10

Conclusion

If there were one unified statement that could define the outcome of my research, both in written form and studio practice, it would be that a synthesis between the ideals of abstract and concrete art is necessary to the vital continuity of such art practice. In order to present a full understanding of this outcome, this concluding chapter brings together the conclusions of each of the chapters in order to show how they support this thesis as a whole. In this way, I have shown that painting geometry in particular can reflect the abstract inner being of the world in concrete form, and that such reflection may produce a harmony between opposing qualities that participates in beauty, truth and freedom. Thus, I have demonstrated that the ideal forms of geometry can have an aesthetic and metaphysical dimension that extends to the most essential part of our being in the world, an end that is closely aligned with the ideals of philosophical reflection.

In conclusion therefore, the primary goal of my approach to painting geometry is the realisation of concrete forms that produce a resonant harmony with the abstract ideas that they express. On the basis of my research, I have considered how my approach to painting geometry shares much in common with the early stages of the development of abstract art, the intended goal of which I have argued was to serve as a conduit that could enable the evolution of abstract thought towards outer sensuous form as a manifestation of the necessity of inner subjective feeling. In this way, the inner necessity of spirit leads contemplation away from the abstract towards the concrete.

I reject the notion that the necessity of inner feeling in painting is an injunction to represent a visual equivalent of the emotional experience of the artist, an idea that is commonly, and often misguidedly associated with the production of abstract art. In the context of my painting practice, which I understand as synthesis between the ideals of abstract and concrete art, this idea relates to the inner essences of experience, the transcendental nature of which may only be mediated to a limited extent by way of all faculties of consciousness; and this includes reason, imagination, intuition as well as emotion.

I have argued throughout this thesis that this notion is at least as relevant to art practice now as it was in the context of early modernism in the sense that, where formerly the influence of positivism represented the greatest threat to the progress of art, the current climate of sensationalism and commodification threatens to turn culture away from the inner necessity and autonomous life of the human spirit, towards the merely external aspects of our experience. Thus, I conclude that in its insistence upon the revelation of feeling and inner life that stands against its external aspect, abstract art continues to play an important role in shaping our historical existence.

Nonetheless, as the result of having undertaken this inquiry, I acknowledge that while my painting process is directed towards the expression of an ideal form of beauty, truth and freedom, the possibility of achieving this ideal is necessarily bound within the limits of a concrete reality. Thus, my painting practice requires a form of negotiation between the abstract and concrete aspects of the paintings that I produce. This is a form of consciousness that involves simultaneously and equally, a forgetfulness of the external aspect of phenomena, and a seeking for an internal necessity within the material. The purpose of this experience is the refinement and revelation of spirit in the world.

On the basis of this understanding I recognise that, far from confirming the ideal status of my work, the cultural and historical context within which I am working may be characterised by its reluctance towards any engagement with transcendent ideals in art. In order to countervail the dominant materialist aesthetic values of the epoch in which I live, my painting practice emphasises the importance of transcendent ideals in art, most particularly those identified with abstract art. In this way, one of the most basic intentions of my painting practice is to lead consciousness away from the empirical or factual aspects of their appearance towards meaning that reaches beyond the real, and thereby, towards the revelation of spirit, the ultimate goal of which being the revelation of beauty, truth and freedom.

In direct response to the centralisation of subjective experience in post-Kantian thought and Romantic art, early abstract art sought to give outer objective expression to the abstract character of inner subjective experience. It was understood in this context that the disclosure of the inner content of mind must transcend the limits of

formal imitation if it is to represent inner feeling. As a direct response to this new philosophical position, early abstract artists believed that they were obliged to represent the potentially infinite variations of feeling through the elaboration of abstract forms that were available to them.

Like the early pioneers of abstract art, I am motivated to paint by an abstract impulse in which I recognise my self as an object. There is a freedom of spirit in this that is unlike the ordinary order of experience in the world. Within this freedom, my painting practice acts as a form of contemplation of the absolute values of beauty and truth, and the possibility of my selfhood finding, to some extent, unity within these.

I have argued throughout this thesis that the history of art is defined as a matter of changing emphasis rather than of the displacement of its most basic ideas, these being of a linguistic nature, the grammar and syntax of which are now, as always, accessible through its formal, or, abstract elements, regardless of the epoch or style with which they may be most commonly associated. It is for this reason that the basic insights revealed during the early stages of the evolution of abstract art may not be considered irrelevant in view the preoccupations of contemporary art practice. On the contrary, I have argued here that it is precisely because contemporary art is so beleaguered by the reflective processes of its own administration and consumption that an art seeking to step back from these processes remains necessary. Now, more than ever, culture requires an art that seeks to turn away from representation of the objective world towards the inner necessity of the revelation of spirit. With this purpose in mind, my painting practice is most directly engaged with geometric forms, and how these may be represented as paintings. My intention in working in this way is to avoid imitation or representation of anything other than the image of the ideal forms that appear within the frameworks of my paintings.

I have argued that while philosophy and science attempt to postulate the conditions for the revelation of truth, art begins with the basic presumption that truth appears precisely where there are no such assurances. Truth becomes available in art in a limited way, when and where it reveals itself, without confirmation, and without conclusive definition. In this way, art is directed towards truth and its revelation without actually being truth, or even truthful. And hence, art seeks the appearance of truth by way of deceptive means, even where the desire for revelation of truth is its

ultimate content. In this way, our experience of the appearance of truth in a work of art is a matter of subjective consciousness, and thus, I do not make a claim here to the appearance of truth in my painting per se, or knowledge thereof, only that it does represent a kind of knowledge and experience that is engaged with truth.

I acknowledge that in order that truth and beauty may appear in a work of art, its form must serve to reveal spirit, or mind, which may be understood as the ultimate inner content of art. I propose that it is from within the relationship between such form and such content that art is able to set itself apart from the ordinary world of things that are not art. I conclude that if my paintings are able to achieve harmony between form and content, then this may only be revealed to the extent that the work is able to participate in beauty.

I have argued here that the universe has no end, but infinitely many beginnings. A frame may be an end, but it is also a beginning. Consciousness is most free when it reaches towards the infinite. In so doing, the frame effect of the objective world may be negated. Where a work of art begins and ends is an open question. Each part may be its own totality, and may in its own way represent a possible beginning or ending for the work of art as a whole depending on the point of view of the beholder. If it is to gather meaning and significance as art, then its parts must strive towards integration and synthesis as a whole.

My painting practice approaches the immanent chaos of the universe most directly by way of painted lines that form the boundaries of geometric forms. These boundaries become containers for the infinite variability of subjective consciousness. Through elaboration of linear and planar relationships, I construct frameworks for the free and infinite movement of consciousness. When I paint a frame, it is with an understanding that there exists an ambiguity between what is frame and what is framed. From within the finite limits of my painting, I reach towards the unknown infinite in an attempt to test the limits of my place, not only within the painting, but in the universe also. The forms that I employ in my paintings are intended to represent images of thought that can act as frameworks within which the consciousness of the beholder may move freely, bringing with it its own content and meaning.

The care that I take to realise a painting is a way of forgetting the world beyond the perimeters of its frame, and the consciousness enframed therein. This process is a meditation on the prospect of the absolute and the extent to which my selfhood may find unity in this, and as such, it is an impulse towards the ideals of the abstract and of beauty, and the freedom of spirit that participation in these represents.

I have argued here that consciousness allocates a place for itself within the universe through its rhythmic divisions and shaping of space and time. On this basis, I consider that my painting practice acts as a testing ground for the endurance and alteration of consciousness within the rhythmic unity between space and time that defines the condition of my own being. This ground is a place wherein consciousness may move freely in opposition to the otherwise undifferentiated flux of phenomena. In this way, I understand that a painting may serve as a provisional centre of an abstract universe, one of infinitely many possible beginnings.

It is appropriate that this conclusion should end with statements that relate to space and time insofar as these points of reference define the historical condition of my painting practice. In this context, I recognise therefore that while I am working in a specific place and time as a painter, this activity is not separate from an historical continuum, and that to an important degree, I must be accountable for the position that I take as an artist. Up to this point, I have tested the limits of my understanding of the ideas that are most essential to my approach to painting, and attempted to give adequate expression of these ideas in the paintings that I have produced. Beyond the necessity of my accountability for this work to date, as I continue to work as a painter, I will seek forms of expression that are answerable ultimately to the mystery of being in the universe.

Notes on the Catalogue of Work Presented for Exhibition

To some extent, the paintings that I have presented for examination are the concluded form of my research findings. When reading the following descriptions of individual works, please refer to the numbered images that appear in the catalogue that follows.

In my *Black Desert* series of paintings, geometric forms emerge chimerically from within fluid moments of light and shadow. My black monochrome, *Tetraktys* (1) is a

geometric figure that derives from the holy Pythagorean series of numbers 1-2-3-4, a series that may be understood as an ideal form. Under most lighting conditions, the this figure cannot be perceived all at once, since it remains largely hidden within the shadows of an undifferentiated surface. My intention in painting black lines on a black ground is to represent something like a shimmering veil suspended between opposites. By way of its illusiveness, this work attempts to suspend abstract thought above the ordinary order of concrete things in order to create a place of freedom and of contemplation.

Pavane (2) involves the ascending rhythmic repetition of a cruciform figure across a plane that, while not being intentionally imitative, is not very far removed from the abstract forms represented in the ochre engravings of the Blombos cave. There is a natural ancestral kinship between the rhythmic patterning of the Blombos Cave engravings and those that are presented in my painting. In making this observation, I acknowledge a basic continuity of representation of abstract thought to which my painting belongs. Citing a dance form as its point of departure, this work is a meditation on the condition of dance as the movement of a body across a plane. I entertain the notion that the eye, in view of a painting, performs something like a dance. In this way, time is involved in the enactment of the rhythmic continuity of a painting through the movement of the beholder's eye around a spatial form. This movement is akin to the continuity in music, in which we may hear and feel a common movement towards a shared place within the stream of time. In the rhythmic repetition of line and other compositional elements, we experience a sense of continuity and containment in sight and sound alike. In either case, there is the possibility of release from phenomena that are extrinsic to the experience of rhythmic continuity, since continuity carries with it always the suggestion of the infinite.

Emerald Fathoms (3) also belongs to the *Black Desert* series. Here, I submerge a recursive figure based on Fibonacci numbers under multiple layers of emerald paint in order to make its appearance obscure. This hidden figure is re-surfaced by way of sanding and polishing, and with it, the evidence at the edges of the accretive layering process of painting itself. Like the image of Atlantis, this inconstant figure appears, not only as an image of the sedimented history of geometric forms, but of painting itself. This layered approach to the representation of abstract geometric thought in

concrete painted form is intended to realise ideal forms that can, to some extent, participate in the universal language of beauty, truth and freedom.

Cave Painting (4), also from the *Black Desert* series, refers to Plato's *Allegory of the Cave* in a way that seeks to emphasise the importance of the search for the essences of things. In this painting, there is a leading geometric line that may be traced from the perimeters of the work to the white square at the centre. This destination square appears unchanging from almost any point of view. One may approach it and notice that its texture contrasts with that of the surrounding black surface, which I have sought to dematerialise through evening out, polishing or neutralising processes. The black that frames the white acts as an equal and opposite counterpoint to the white square that has been painted in such a way that the materiality of the paint itself is revealed as concretely as possible. My intention is that this painting may reflect the progressive revelation of truth in Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*, where what is taken to be true or real at any given point must defer to higher truth as it is revealed in the approach towards the Idea itself that transcends the particularities of common experience.

Square Dance, (5), is closely related to *Pavane* in respect of my interest in developing ideas of rhythmic continuity between space and time within the context of a painting. Rather than emphasising the clarity of an infinitely extendable line, the intention of this work is to propose a more ambiguous geometric relationship where the correspondence between two superimposed layers of contiguous squares is not immediately evident. However one looks at this work, it is difficult to determine how the two layers coincide. The result is much more complex rhythmic movement that is suggested to the eye, and hence, a very different kind of dance. Perhaps more lively than the regally processional quality of movement that *Pavane* suggests.

View from the Artist's Studio (After Friedrich), (6), by way of reference to Friedrich's work of the same title (see Fig. 4 p. 96), represents an image of what lies beyond the inner limits of my studio practice. In an immediate and practical sense, the painting has departed the perimeters of a canvas or board and is applied directly to the wall on a much larger scale. Together with this wall painting, this work includes a floor piece that acts as a counterpoint to the other pieces in the exhibition. In this way, it may be understood as a kind of exit from an habitual way of painting

geometry that points towards other possible ways of representing geometric ideas in space. The dominant geometric form is the painted triangle on the wall, one that is echoed in the triangular form of the floor piece. This form is emblematic of Kandinsky's model of spiritual attainment in art. My unalloyed use of this form is intended as an echo of my art practice's reaching towards the spiritual, ideal or essential promise of art.

Hours of the Day (7), is a response to the work of both Runge and Palermo on this subject. While only nine panels have been presented for examination, the work as a whole consists in a series of twenty-four permutations of a given series, each permutation representing one of twenty-four hours of the day. While the basic pattern remains unchanged in each of its iterations, the order in which the colours sit changes, the result being a subtly different gestalt for each permutation. In a sense, each hour of the day, of every day, is exactly the same, but subtle shifts in the arrangement of things shape our experience of being in time. This is what I take to be the symbolic essence of the work. In this way, I am concerned with the passage of time in my painting, not so much in terms of the earth's position in relation to the sun and the effect that this has on the sunlight and colours that we perceive, as with the time that is taken in movement through space across a picture plane in order to locate ourselves within it. All that happens in this movement I consider to be a passage of mediation between opposites, not just between light and dark, but also between space and time, finite and infinite, form and content, truth and deception, presentation and representation, subject and object, ideal and real, abstract and concrete.

The intention of my *Gestell* series of paintings (8, 9) is to create simple yet complex frameworks that invite the beholder to enter or exit at any point. The movement of the eye is coordinated, but not determined within the elaboration of these forms. In this way, my intention is to suggest the possibility of the moment of the enframing of consciousness that results from the formal elaboration of framing devices, within which, the beholder may also experience the objectification of their own selfhood. The care that I have taken to realise these paintings as articulately as possible is a means of forgetting the world.

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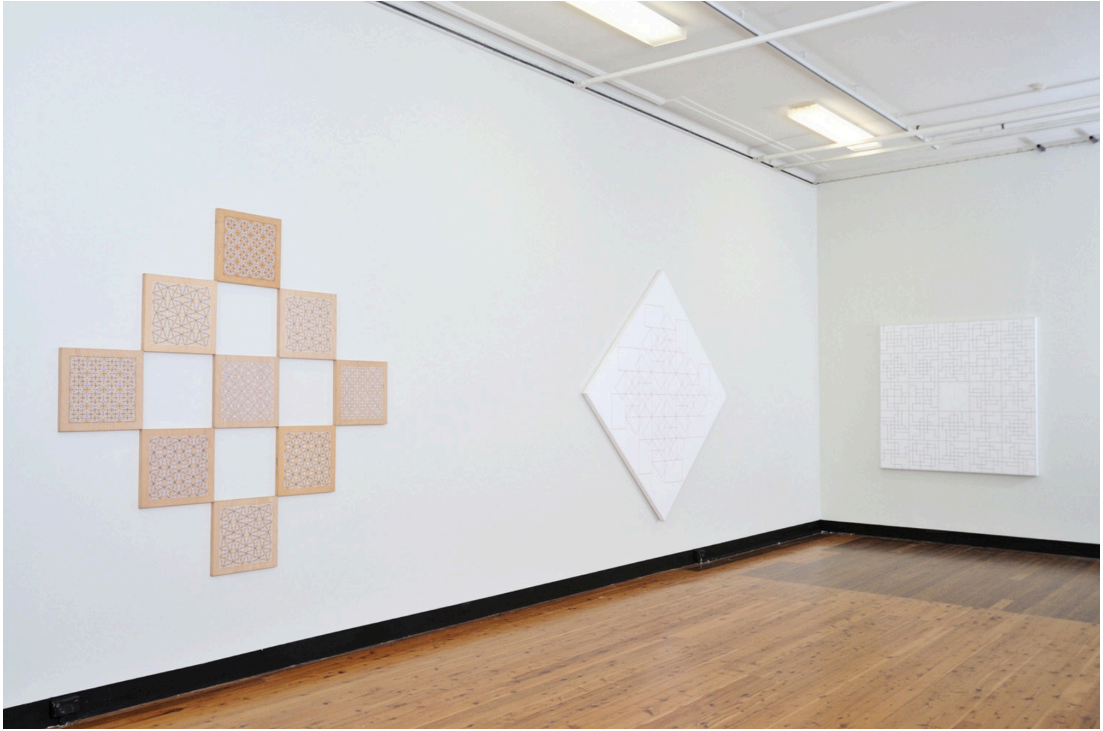
Catalogue of Work Presented for Examination



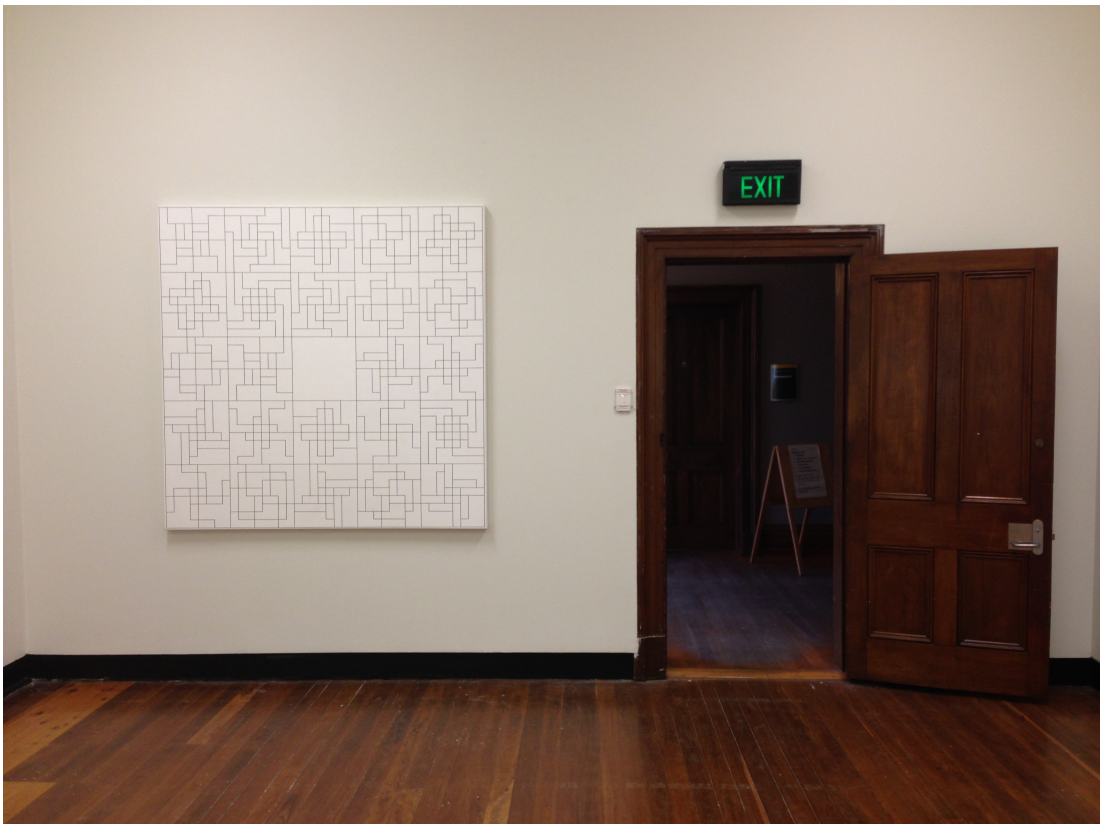
Graduation Exhibition - Installation View



Graduation Exhibition - Installation View



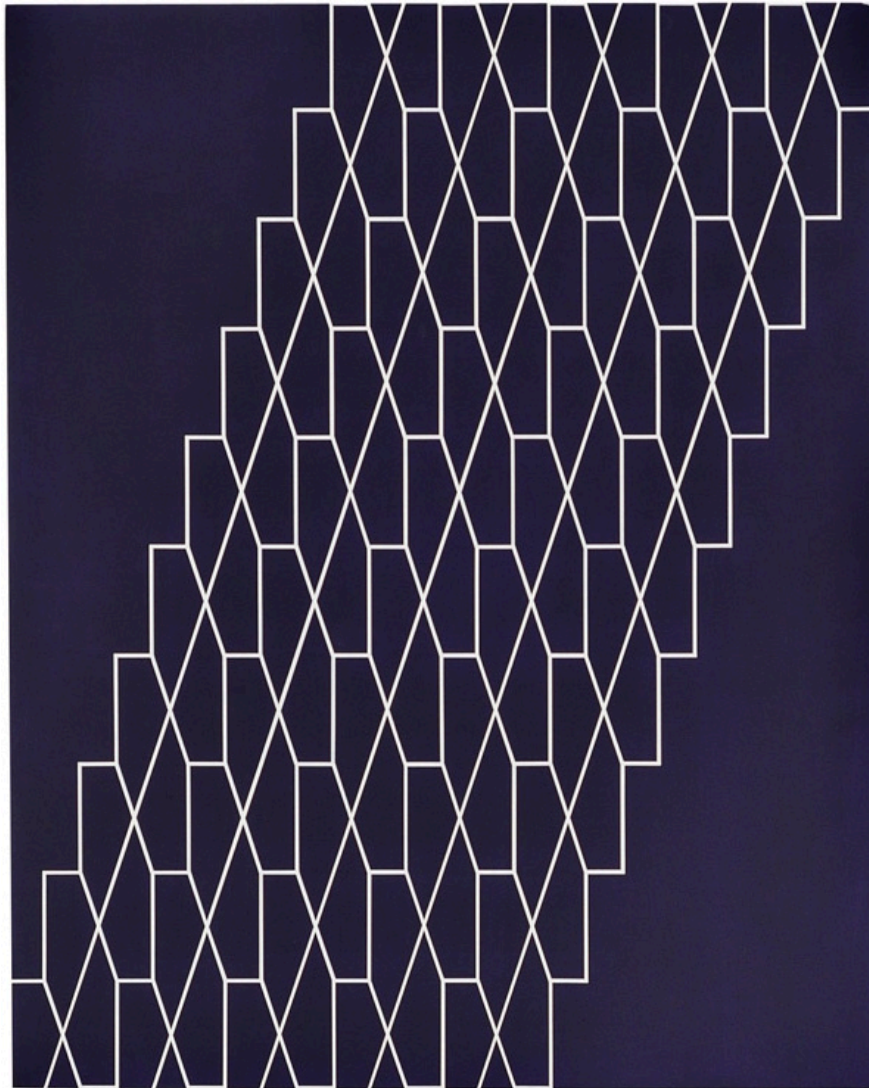
Graduation Exhibition - Installation View



Graduation Exhibition - Installation View



1. *Black Desert Series (Tetraktys)*, 76 x 76cm, acrylic on Claybord, 2009



2. *Pavane*, 61 x 76cm, Flashe on Claybord, 2010

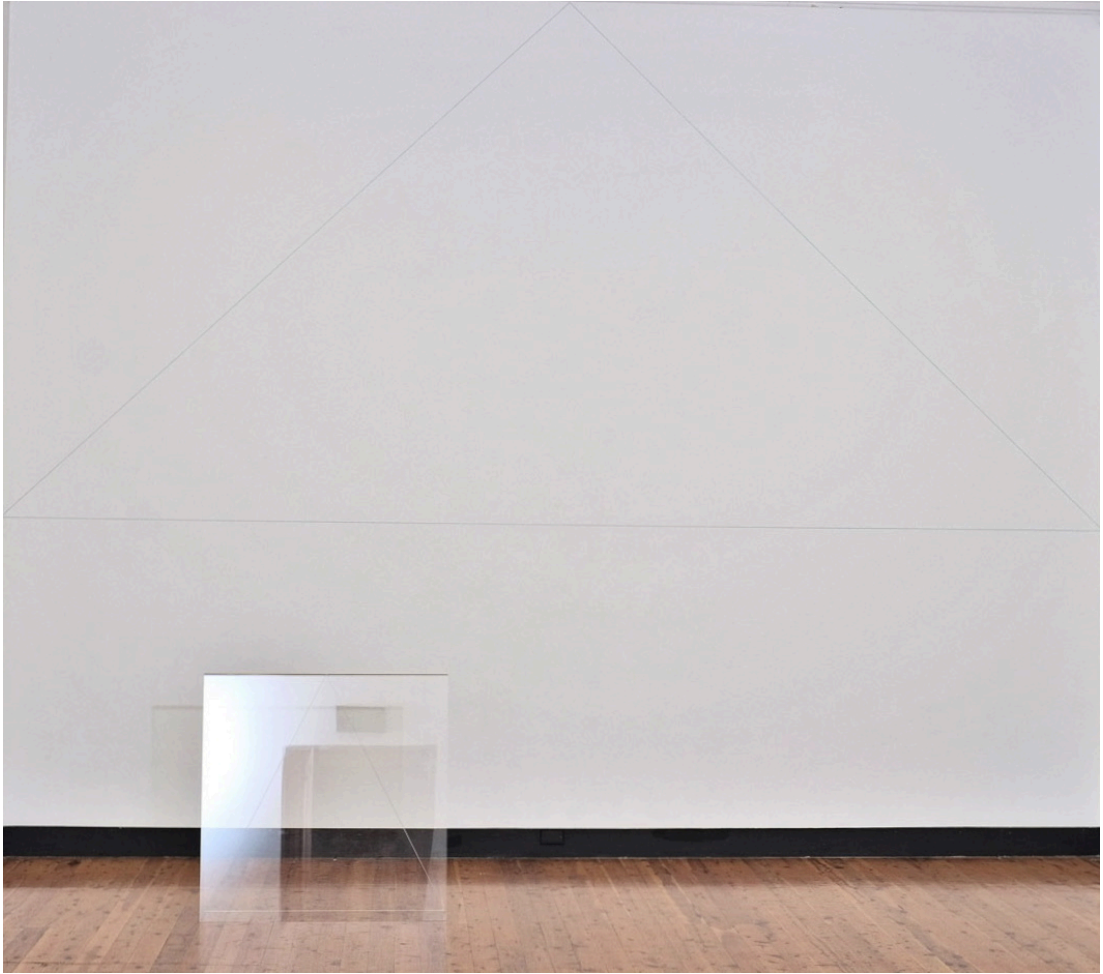


3. Above: *Black Desert Series (Emerald Fathoms)*, acrylic on Claybord, 40 x 40 cm, 2010

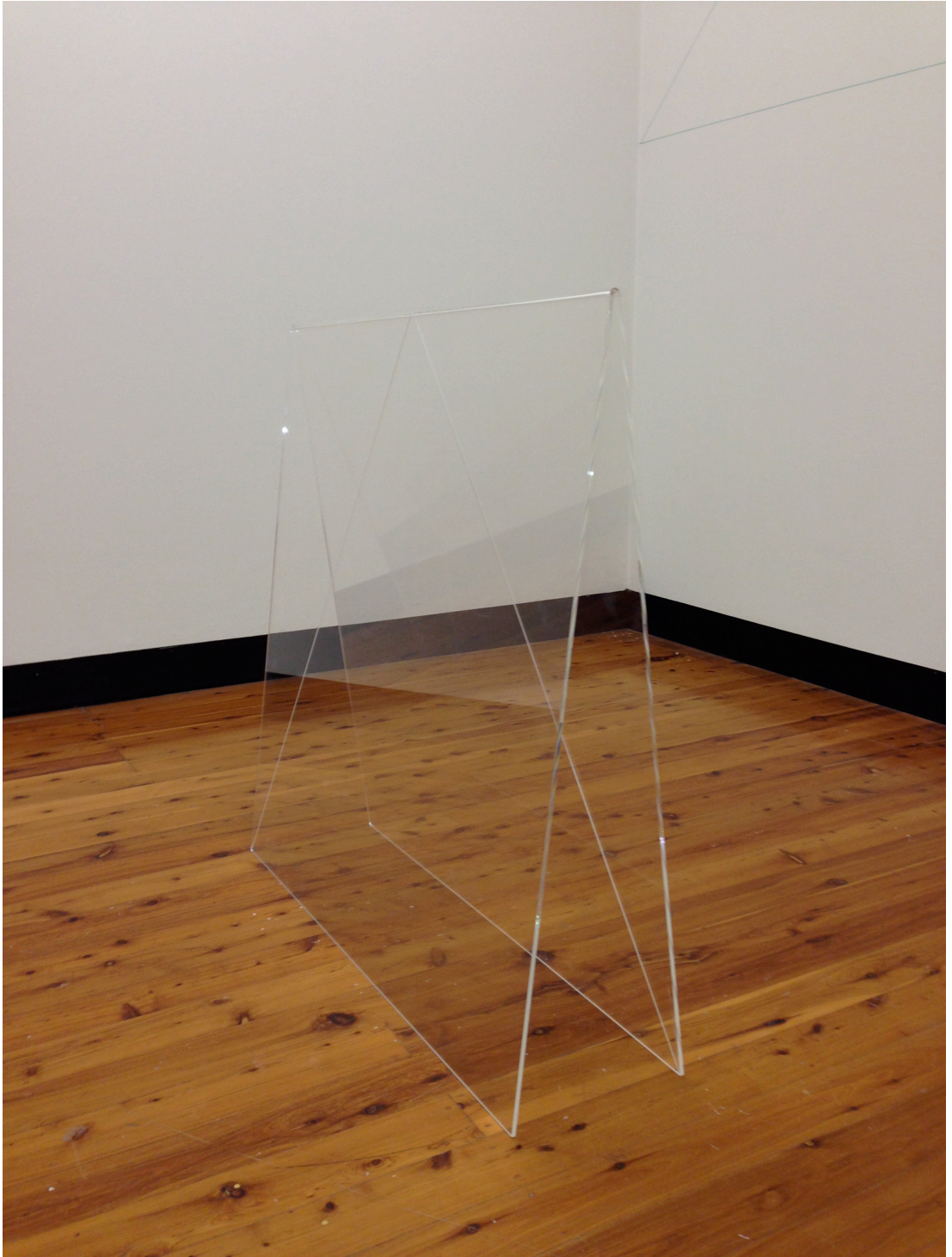
4. Below: *Black Desert Series (Cave Painting)*, acrylic on Claybord, 40 x 40 cm, 2009



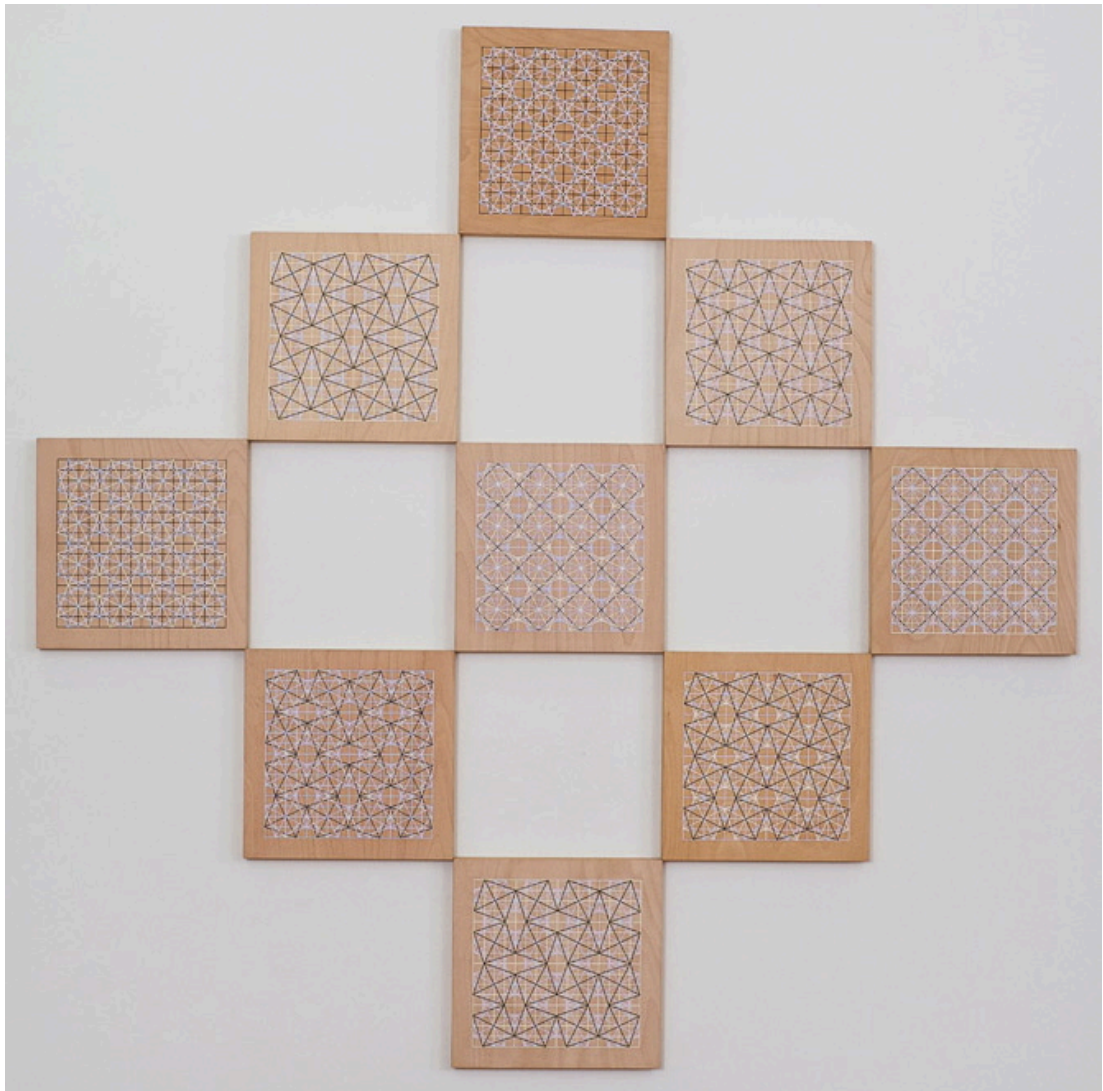
5. *Square Dance*, 91.5 x 91.5cm, Flashe on Claybord, 2012-3



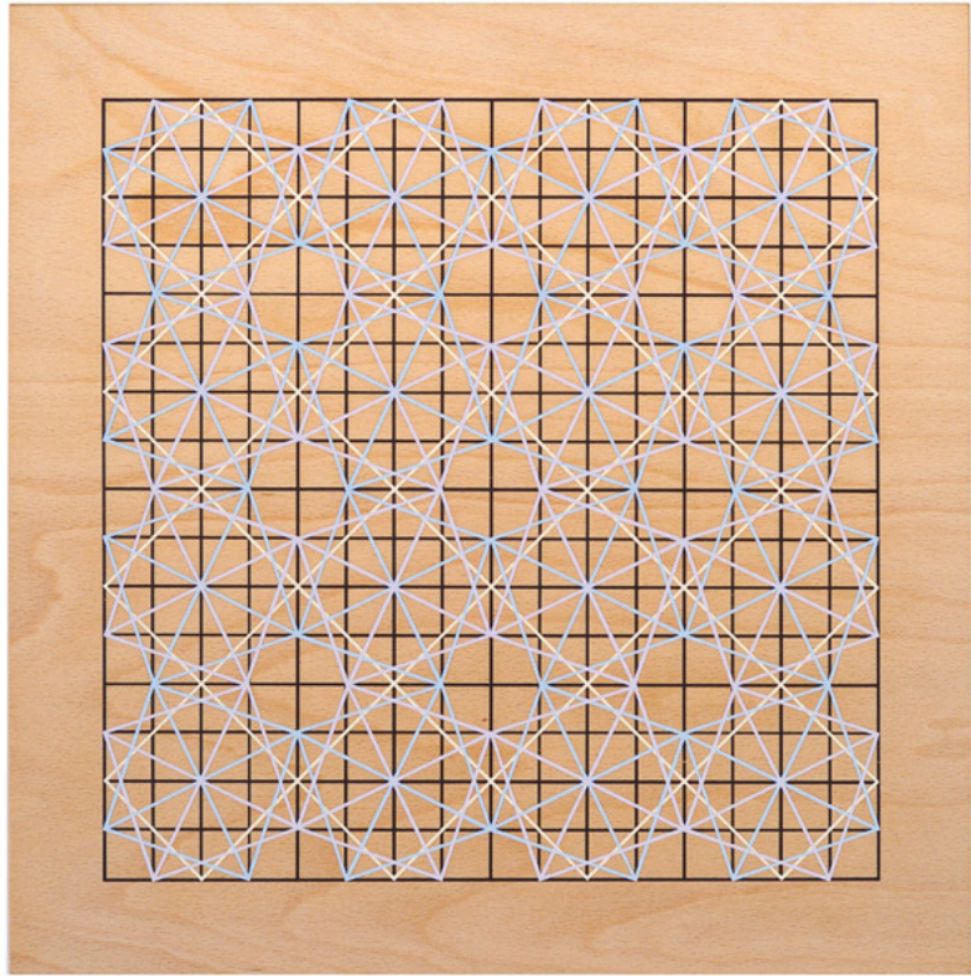
6. *View from the Artist's Studio (After Friedrich)*, acrylic sheet and acrylic on wall, 100 x 100cm, 2013



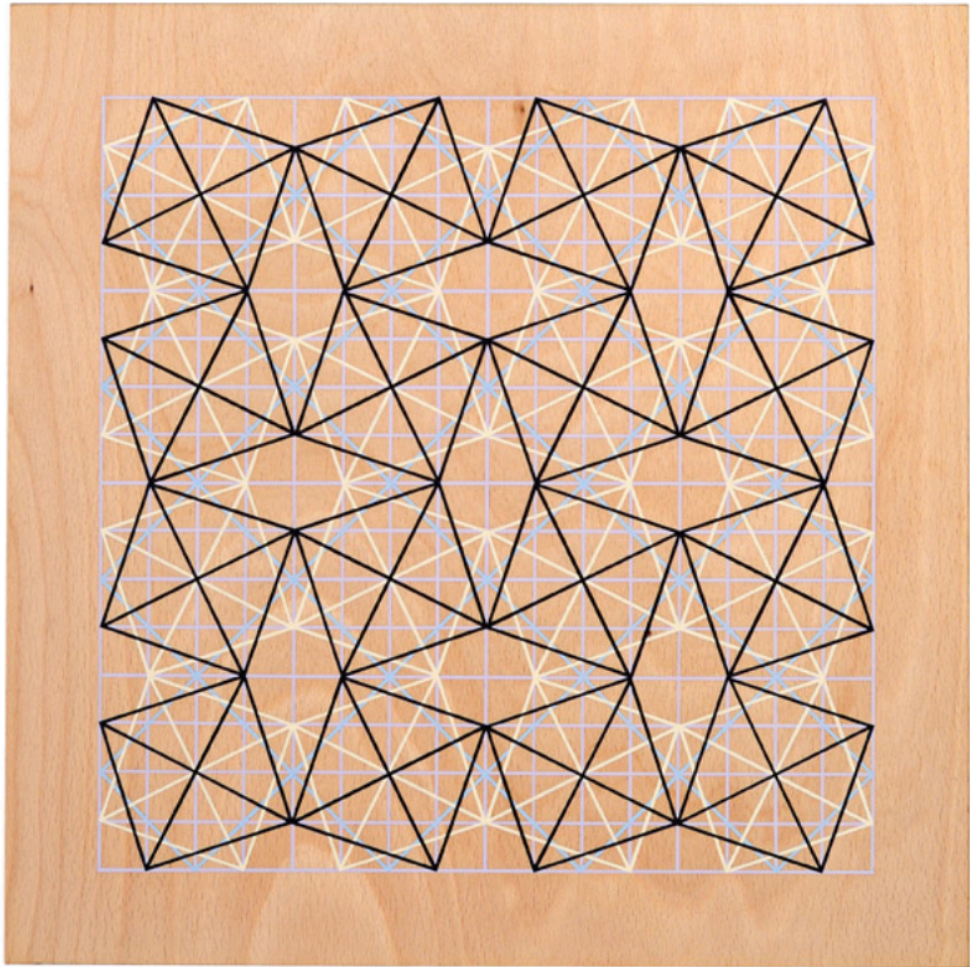
Detail: *View from the Artist's Studio (After Friedrich)*



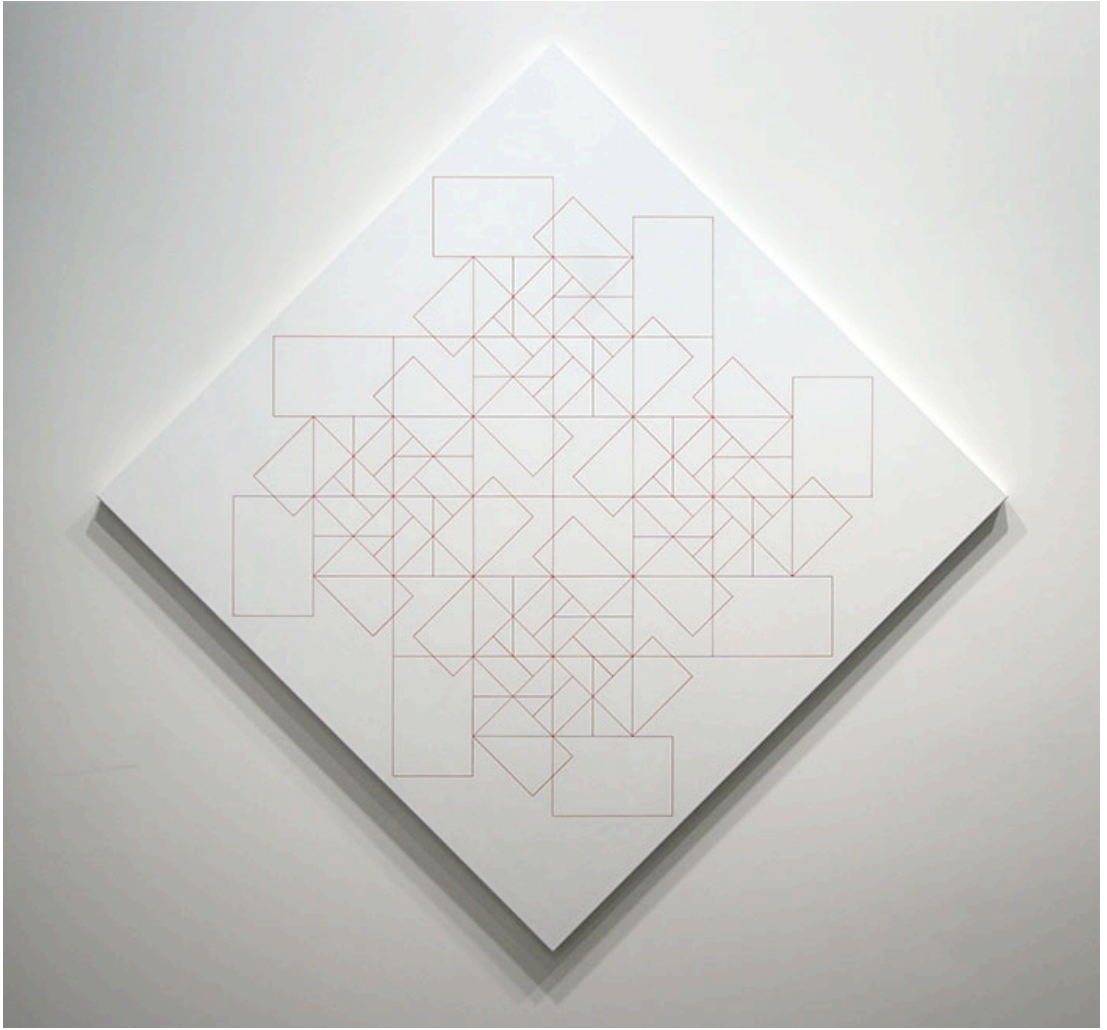
7. *Hours of the Day*, 9 x (40 x 40cm), acrylic on ply, 2012-3



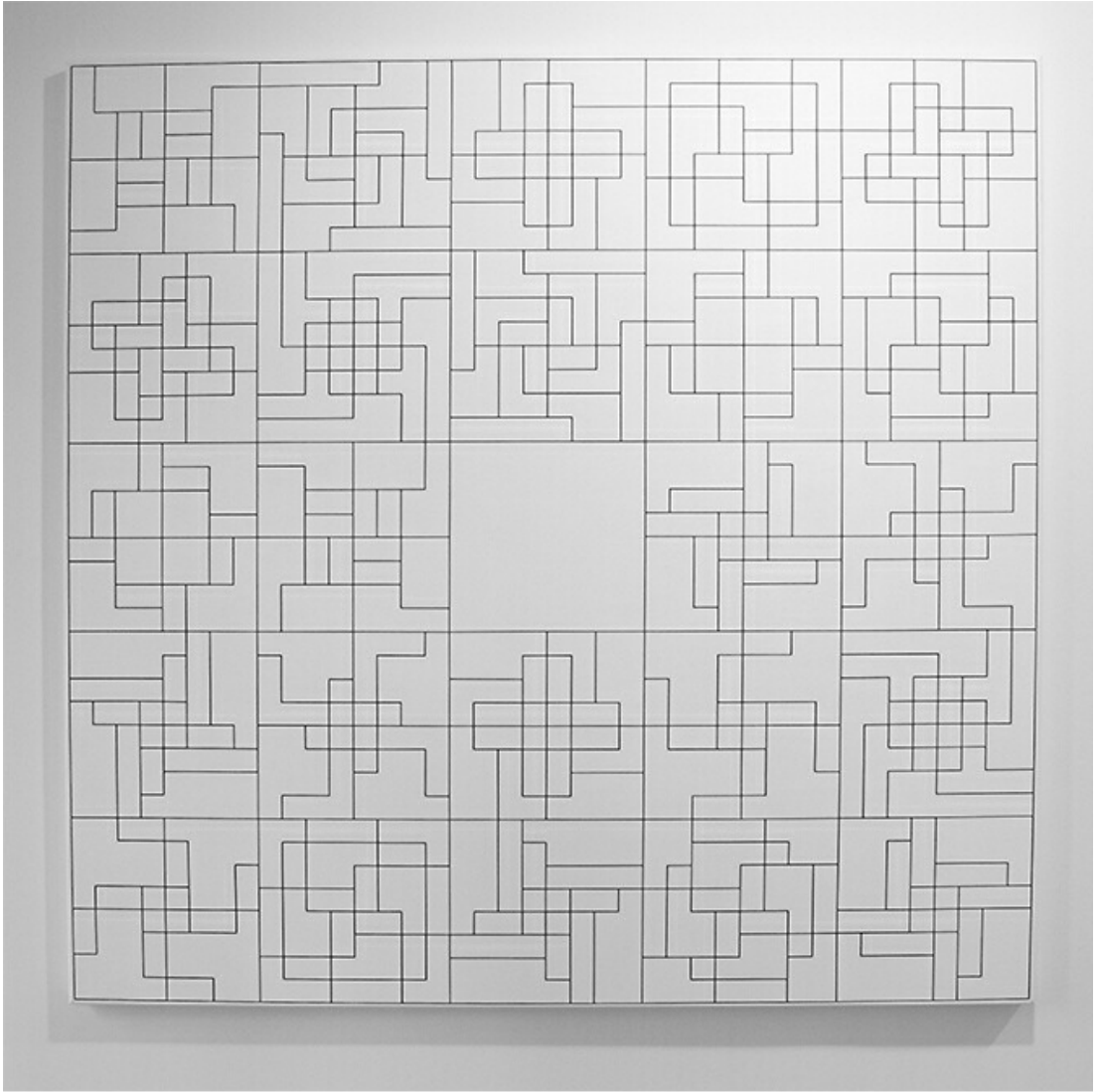
Detail #1: *Hours of the Day*



Detail #2: *Hours of the Day*



8. *Gestell (Elaboration #1)*, acrylic on canvas, 160 x 160cm, 2009



9. *Gestell (Complete Series)*, acrylic on canvas, 162 x 162cm, 2009