
BEYOND PIETY

**Critical Essays
on the Visual Arts,
1986–1993**

Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe

NONREPRESENTATION IN 1988
MEANING-PRODUCTION BEYOND
THE SCOPE OF THE PIOUS

Made to be shown in two separate but adjacent spaces, Roni Horn's *Pair Object III* (1988) (Plate II and Fig. 3) is in that respect not reducible to the phenomenology of minimalism, which is to say to a concern for what is materially present to vision. Each of the sculpture's components is obliquely shaped, a truncated cone, dense but also shiny, slipping away from vision even as one approaches it, with the other half of the work there by not being there at all.

This complication of the language of presence seems to occur not only in Horn's work but in contemporary nonrepresentation in general. Which adds weight to the argument that there's little sense in talking about today's abstraction in the terms established or invoked by that of twenty years ago. The importance of this is inscribed in the fact that a great deal of contemporary criticism is determined to insist upon the reverse. I am obliged to ask why. Why is so much critical writing seemingly indifferent to the difference between nonrepresentation now and nonrepresentation then?

I think it's because so much contemporary discourse is lodged in, or is the product of, a fear of pleasure.

Which is to say, of instability, complexity, arousal without clear moral purpose. This fear manifests itself as disapproval, and what is disapproved of is abstraction's irresponsibility.

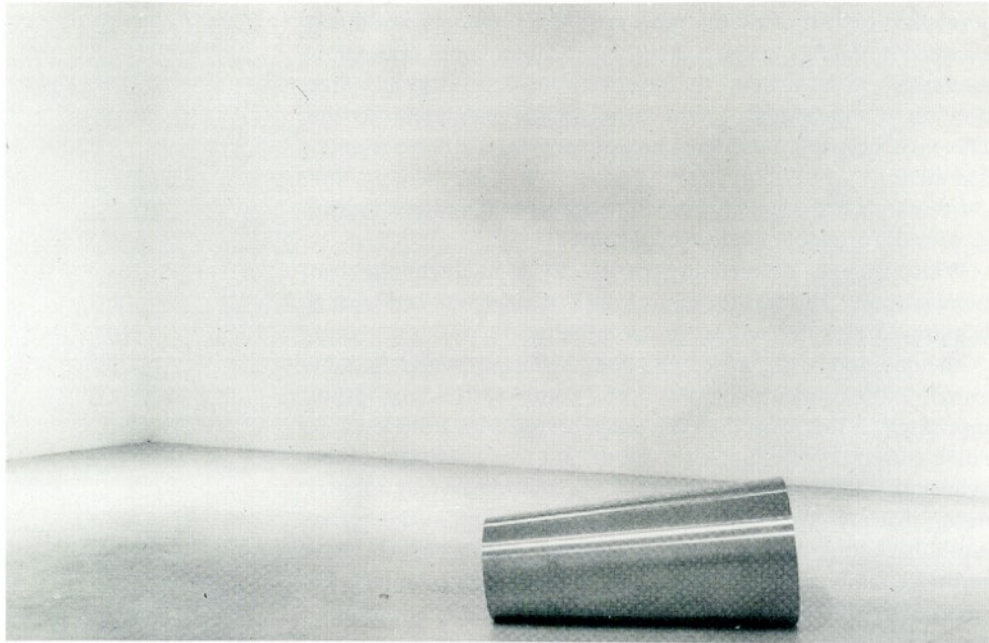
The question is, of course, who does the disapproving? And the answer, extraordinarily but, when one comes to think of it, not surprisingly, is that what does the disapproving is an attitude to art which currently believes itself to be the last living remnant of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. It is extraordinary but not surprising that my generation, those who were young in the 1960s, should have imposed on the world a critical method which pines for the certainty and positivism of an allegedly golden epoch. It's extraordinary because people should know better. And not surprising because it's the easiest way to go – predicated as it is on the

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idea that the present is a degenerate version of a possibility offered by the past, it provides the opportunity for the kind of pathos dear to historicists. We find it in its purest form, perhaps, in essays like Thomas Crow's "These Collectors They Talk about Baudrillard Now," where the author yearns for "the original equation between artistic seriousness and public purpose that took definitive shape during the eighteenth century."¹

It seems worth recalling that by and large the Enlightenment was, especially with regard to visual arts but not only with regard to them, by no means an unequivocally good thing from any point of view which one might nowadays describe as enlightened. The eighteenth century sought to replace the aristocracy with the bourgeoisie, after all, through a doctrine which would render the body entirely subject to the rational. The aristocracy's claim to power through blood was to be replaced by the bourgeoisie's claim to power through reason. Aside from the elimination of the aristocracy, this no longer sounds like a particularly good idea. As Foucault was at pains to observe, ideas which seem horrible to us were immensely popular with those who brought us the Enlightenment² – Jeremy Bentham's model of the panopticon, for example, an architectural scheme whereby all inmates would be entirely deprived of privacy, while being kept separate from one another but

FIG. 3. Roni Horn, *Pair Object III* (for two rooms): *The Experience of Identical Things* (detail), 1986–8, two solid machined copper forms, 17-inch diameter tapering to 12-inch diameter, 36 inches long, 1,900 pounds. [Collection: Don Judd, Marfa, Texas; Courtesy of the artist.]



subject to scrutiny from above. It may have become the model for the administration of capitalism, but as such it is a straightforward product of the ideals which originated it, not a distortion or deformation or misrepresentation.

And, similarly, Enlightenment art theory can hardly be said to have produced much more than an extremely elegant argument for repression. For example, Diderot's idea, brilliantly explicated by Michael Fried, that looking should be a didactic, actually auto-didactic, activity, so that looking at pictures would be good for you in the sense of making you a better social being, produced David.³ Does David's repression of Fragonard, in whose work looking offers a kind of gratification which might not be good for one in an unambiguous sense, really seem like an unequivocally good idea from the vantage point of 1988? Surely not.

Rather, it is surely the case that the passage from the tight and ascetic and gray moralism of David's *Oath of the Horatii* to the loose and fat and brown moralism of Courbet's *Funeral at Ornans* is a passage which defines painting entirely in terms of a project which prevents it from addressing any fundamental question having to do with what it might be like to actually be alive, in an immediate as opposed to an historical sense. That is to say, in the sense of actually being alive as opposed to being a fact in a book – a historical fact, a moment in a past, an operative nonbeing. It is not until Manet that the secular religious impulse found in Enlightenment thought is subverted by a project which is as much anti-Enlightenment as it is of the Enlightenment, and which might, in the terms set by this discussion, be described as the revival of Fragonard to subvert David.

Why would one want to subvert David?

Because one of the things that art can do is doubt as well as affirm. And our thought, Western, scientific, modern, is in practice speculative rather than, as is the case with theological thought and theocratic practice, a search for hope and affirmation.

It is for this reason that I shall have no recourse here to the Presbyterian rectitude of Tom Lawson, the Episcopalian certainty of Hal Foster, or the Lutheran conscience of Benjamin Buchloh. Theirs are theories which are simply preoccupied with leaving out, or, as we say, repressing, essentially everything which interests me about art.

And this brings me to their dependence, which is to say the dependence of what one might call the Enlightenment faction, or perhaps the New Pietists or something like that, on a definition of abstraction derived from the insights and prejudices of the 1960s.

In keeping with the spirit of the Enlightenment and of the 1960s, this is a crowd which valorizes history as the locus of any

kind of moral project and accordingly divides things up into the relevant and the irrelevant – that is to say, those which produce and are the product of goodness and those which decline to be productive. Producing badness can be all right because such people are dialectically minded and can therefore see something like David Salle's misogyny as negatively exemplary.

This is understandable. But what is revealing is the group's affection for the rhetoric attached to minimalism by, specifically, Don Judd. I think the significant connection is to be found in what must be one of the dumbest statements in art history, namely Judd's rejection of European painting.⁴ One knows, I think, to what Judd is referring and it's not European painting as a whole, it's Matisse and French painting in general. And what's wrong with Matisse is that he's what puritans call hedonistic, his work does not celebrate the suppression of the body by the concept of the rational.

In invoking Judd in order to subvert him, Peter Halley was bound to arouse the ire of those of the religious left who thought that by embracing Judd they had brought abstraction under control. Which is to say, who thought they had succeeded in killing it. The skin and bones of the corpse, it was thought, had been wholly subsumed into the substructure of a purified and wholly didactic conceptualism largely based on telling people what they shouldn't do and how they should think. The works this attitude has produced include an actual reconstruction of the *Funeral at Ornans*, Haacke's *Metromobilitan*. At its most extreme, it is an attitude which reaches a dizzying prissiness in Yvonne Rainer's proposing to make a film which has no women in it in order that it might obviate the moral ambiguity redolent in the male gaze – an instance of a good artist taking on board a lousy theory, Laura Mulvey's notion of scopophilia, and being damaged by it. Cinema is indeed our great public art, but this is a formulation of it which has only one thing to say. And that thing is "No!" – one hypothesizes the ultimate Barbara Kruger, a picture of a chocolate mousse, perhaps, accompanied by the words, "You expect to enjoy me at my expense."

Peter Halley's painting (Fig. 4) resists being subsumed into the language of the good thing by making fun of Judd's faith in the literal. And in doing that it playfully transgresses against the stern father in whom the New Pietists see a precursor for themselves. It succeeds in this transgression because Halley is in fact very close to Judd in the chunkiness of the work, its deployment of a geometric impassivity which is in this respect just like Judd. Thus it is that Halley throws into question what it was that minimalism was supposed to mean. He continues to get minimalism's impassivity to do something, and it's something it wasn't supposed to do. If it

ity of the rectangle. Once again a movement sealed off by movement. A multiplicity of movements, the passages between which may hardly be described, but which in effect define the whole work as the space of the not fixed. As the sign of a multiplicity of movements which are experienced as in some sense one thing, and which envelop rather than penetrate, the wind is a pretty good concept: it is literally the only invisible force which is materially present. One would add to this that the extreme brightness of Boochever's painting, and the absolute whiteness of Ryman's, are themselves intensifications of the invisibility which structures vision itself. Namely, the idea of light, which really as well as theologically both defines and dissolves.

And it is to dissolution that I should now like to turn. Writing about Christian Haub's work (Plate IV), I have said about it, among other things, that if one could make a painting out of emphasizing objectness, then one could conceivably make one out of dissolving it, or something like that.⁸ Contrasting it here with a painting by Tishan Tsu, *Scanner* (Fig. 6), I'd put the matter slightly differently. Tsu's painting seems to possess a depth which is like that of the page or the television screen, while Haub's seems to be based on

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IN 1988

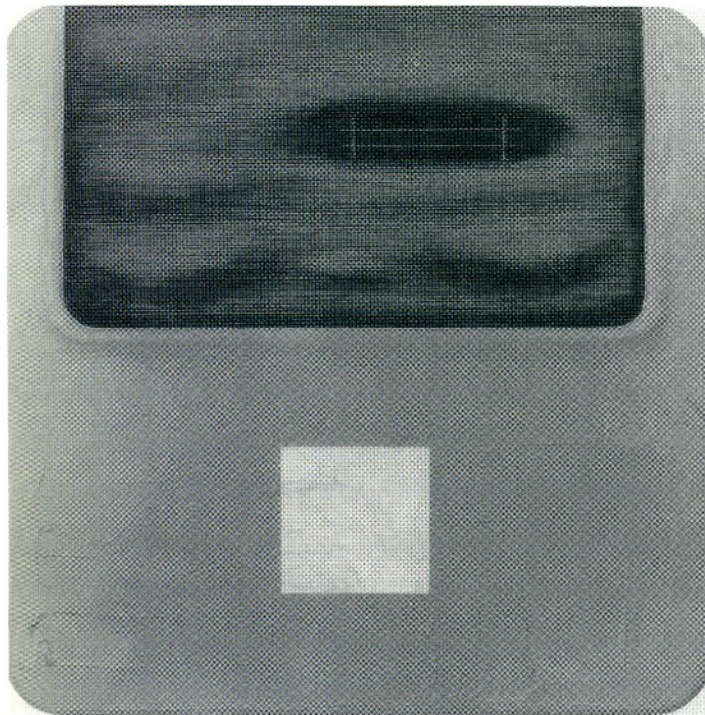


FIG. 6. Tishan Tsu, *Scanner*, 1987, acrylic(?) alkyd, oil, and vinyl, on wood, 60 × 60 inches. [Courtesy of Pat Hearn Gallery, New York.]

the assumption that whiteness will open the object up. One thinks of Deleuze, to whose work this essay is indebted at more than one level, and his observation that whiteness brings with it the concept of the dark and the opaque. And that this is not a dialectical relationship. Rather, whiteness, or light, is itself nothing more or less than a principle of dissolution and is as such implicit in, not in contradiction to, that solidity which it dissolves and that gloom which it eliminates through illumination.⁹

If one is to talk about space in painting, one must expect to talk about it in terms of a passage from here to there. In other words one must describe its limits, and of course the infinite will always constitute one such limit. And again one might ask, whence does the thinking subject, the viewer, derive this concept of infinity, if not from some idea of the fathomless interiority which she or he believes to define that completeness which is her or his sense of her or his self. David Shapiro has talked of Haub's reactivation of the idea of the painting as a window, and though I don't think that's quite right, it's certainly right to the extent that one looks through, and more particularly out of, windows, rather than at them.¹⁰

Looking out of windows is to look beyond one's own immediate exteriority. Looking *in* to windows is always a weird idea, the penetration of a container which defines someone's exteriority, has been defined by them as such. Looking into television sets is, on the other hand, quite another matter altogether. And I think one should take quite seriously the proposition that one looks at Tishan Tsu's painting as one looks at a television, as opposed to how one looks through a window, in order to see what's *in* the space by being *on* the screen.

What's on the television screen is the space of a dream. Specifically, I should think, a daydream. Mallarmé's idea of desire as a force occupying spaces contiguous, but in that both mutually exclusive and continuous, has in a sense become a commonplace in the era of television. One thinks of the popular song: "Get out of my dreams, get into my car." If the frescoes of Mother Church can give us a theory of an infinite exteriority, that provided by the whiteness of the wall, then the plastic boxes of Father Capitalism can certainly give us a model of an interior which is infinite and multiplicitous.

I take it, then, that it is the rectilinearity of Haub's painting which guarantees that one will read it as a passage to an exteriority, just as the rounded corners of Tsu's painting describe, not the rectangle's convergence of countervailing and infinite direction, repeating at the periphery the incompatibility of the vertical figure with the endlessly prone horizon, but a turning back, a continuity,

a seamlessness. In Haub's painting one has the notion of line, therefore of traversal through and of division, but not of seamlessness. One has a whiteness which bulges into, displaces, and in that attributes an immense depth to, darkness, a darkness which contains color. One could say that darkness here works in exactly the opposite manner to lightness in Boochever.

One has underpainting, which proposes a polarity of here and there which is materially present in the surface and which can only problematize, through emphasis, the conventional and hypothetical capacity of the line to specify and locate. And one has these squares. Collectively, they mark out the extremes and variety of lightness and darkness for the painting as a whole, and introduce into it the idea of more than one white, therefore of white as an uncertainty. They occur for the most part at the edges, and tend to dissolve, to become identified with it or otherwise to substitute the *idea* of a square for an *actual* square, when they meet the white which makes up most of the painting. They are a displacement to the extremities of the condition of the center, rather like fingernail polish, which redeploys the mouth at an extremity by painting nails, which are a little like teeth, a row of sharp whitenesses, the color of lips. At the periphery, where the object reaches out into the world, the movement at the center is reconvened as a surface.

Tsu's painting is gray, the color of the television screen when it's turned off, and contains two shapes, one a white square, the other possibly interpretable as a cropped and smaller version of the whole, given its rounded edges. The dark color beneath the green works in the same way as does the underpainting around the line in Haub. One looks at it and through the little grill-like image, at the green and into it, at the surface as a whole and into it.

I'm not at all sure how one reads the white square. Perhaps one may see it as a closed and expanded version of the grill. But otherwise it has little to do with the kind of space one finds elsewhere in the painting, sitting on the surface as much as in it, centered like the green shape above it, but, unlike it, not presenting itself as particularly redolent of an interior. In its dissimilarity, the white shape would then seem to be the place within the work where one meets the principle of discontinuity. And it is to discontinuity that I shall now turn, by way of a comparison of Nancy Haynes's *Untitled*, 1988 (Fig. 7) with David Reed's *No. 251*, 1987 (Fig. 8).

Haynes and Reed propose two dramatically different way of articulating the concept of discontinuity, and it is interesting that both employ darkness as its condition. Darkness slows attention, concentrates it, disperses it into unclarity instead of luminosity or the immaterial. In some senses one has a harder time theorizing what one sees where dark surfaces are concerned than one does

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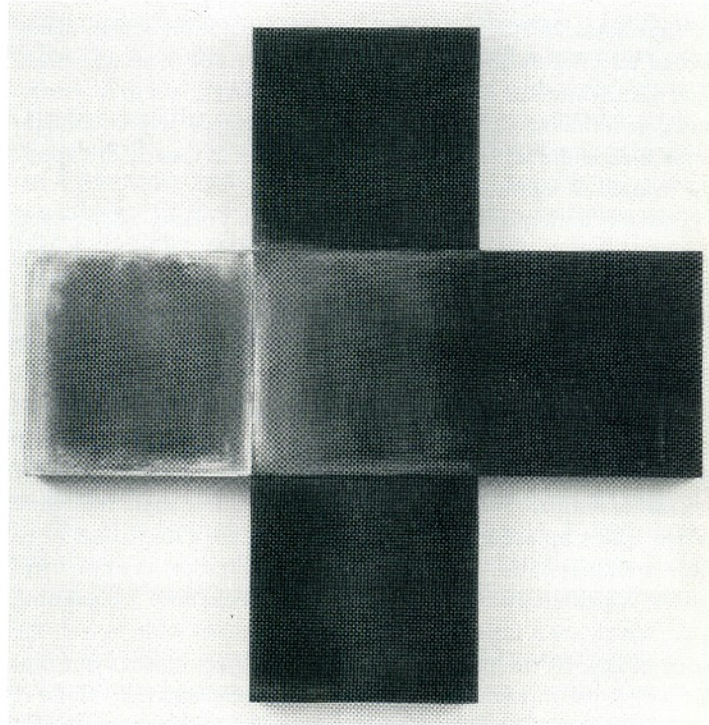


FIG. 7. Nancy Haynes, *Untitled*, 1987, oil on slate, 23 × 23 inches. [Courtesy of John Good Gallery, New York.]

with white ones. White surfaces dissolve, become light itself. Spaces filled with light. Black spaces don't just do the opposite.

Black which is not shiny may be either porous, like charcoal, and like Haynes's painting, or it may propose a depth like that of the outside at nighttime, as is I think the case with Reed's painting. Darkness begins, perhaps, closer to the body than does daylight. Where black places start, relative to who's looking at them and what contains them, seems problematic in a different way than light spaces, and I think that this has something to do with the fact that light always comes *from* somewhere while blackness does not.

In one sense it seems true that in the Haynes painting you have more space to the extent that you have less black. In some old-fashioned way there is more spatiality, which turns out to be something like more visible atmosphere, in the panels which are lightest. But it seems very difficult to attribute *less* of anything to the three more or less totally black panels. Perhaps one should say that one sees them as being more densely without light than the other panels are partially filled with it. One has no trouble thinking of the center panel as emerging from the panels around it. But how much space, relative to the one at the center, do these other panels contain?



FIG. 8. David Reed, *No. 251*, 1987, oil and alkyd on linen, 28 × 54 inches. [Collection: Robin Grace and Frederick Warren, Los Angeles, California; photo by Dennis Cowley; courtesy of Max Protech Gallery, New York.]

I ask this question because I'm actually interested in what joins these spaces together. The physical division offers the idea of a sort of demilitarized zone, a bit of the real world between two pictorial spaces, a gap into which the literal might seep and thus structure the imaginary and inaccessibly present.

Does it hold apart spaces which are in some way equal? If they are equal, then I seem to have said that this equality must be based on their having problematized the concept of space which is necessary to reading them. If they're equal, then, since they're spaces and therefore encountered in terms of the movement they make available – how else would we know them as spaces? – their equality must be of some sort which doesn't amount to an equality of amounts of light. It must therefore be expressed as some concept of density, in which one kind of dissolution compensates for the other.

It must then be a question of some relationship, or more properly nonrelationship, of intensities of some kind. I say of nonrelationship rather than relationship because I am, after all, talking about discontinuity rather than continuity.

Discontinuity would imply a condition of beginning again. From what starting point? If one considers the passage, not a matter of a physical break, from one part of Reed's painting to another, one is obliged to savor the implications of there actually not being any such passage. It is a sudden break. A meeting between two spaces which literally have no relationship to one another, in the sense that one cannot derive the terms of the interiority of one of them from the one next to it.

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Reed's painting is a collection of movements which are themselves all fluid movements: the stainlike serpentine coil in the left-hand section; the soft and relatively speaking atmospheric blue arcs in the upper right; the, again relatively speaking, neon blue, lines, again snakelike, in the lower right. Some sort of principle of fluidity within density, then. May one say that between these moments which are durations, which occur in, and define, spaces which are filled with the tenebrous rather than the luminous, there is *nothing*?

Is this what nothing looks like? Is it where intensities filled with movement meet? In Reed intensity must give way to an idea of space, because one sees spaces with things in them. What joins them is then a principle of no space, of contiguity where the link does not affect what's linked, the idea of invisibility as the only thing, which is to say not thing, which could join flows without containing and directing them.



FIG. 9. Ron Janowich, *Untitled*, 1987, black oil on linen, 33 × 20 inches. [Collection: Barbara and David Hancock, Los Angeles; courtesy of Pamela Auchincloss Gallery, New York.]

It is a block of space-time, since the time of movement which is at work within it is part of it every time. There is even an infinite series of such blocs or mobile sections . . . as it were . . . corresponding to the motions of the universe . . . this is not mechanism, it is machinism. The material universe, the plane of immanence, is the *machine assemblage of movement-images*.¹⁵

That is what it means to say that nonrepresentation is inherently historicized and of history and to that extent not interestingly *about* history. As an apparatus of some kind, a materiality, any of the works I'm discussing could be described as a finite articulation of the infinite possibilities presented by the thickness of paint. Thickness is always complete, it's a concept which can't be subdivided. This thickness always contains space, therefore movement. Thickness is therefore the context of duration. No thickness at all is unimaginable, it would contain no time. And therefore not be. The action is in the action, not, ultimately, in the historicity of the visible, the means by which the action is presented. Action is invisible, and thickness not a historical category.

Just as one may have two versions of the surface, so too would my account of things as they are seem also to leave us with two versions of the interior. This means that if the world the body thinks is one projected into itself, then it is nonetheless the case that this projection takes place in terms either of pure exteriority or of an idea of interiority as something which, in a rather Lacanian manner when one comes to think of it, comes to one as something projected, that is to say exteriorized, as if on to a screen. And that when it thinks itself in terms of an idea of pure exteriority, as with Haynes and the fact that her painting is on slate, a brittle and resistant material which is but one surface layered upon another, unlike wood which has a grain or canvas which has a weave, this exteriority will use a language of equivalence based on the recognition of density. In both Haynes and Tsu the idea of an interior is, in quite different ways, attached to the notion of erasure or partial covering, in other words of inclusion by nonexclusion, a language of completeness.

All of which would also mean that we would by now have a rather different notion of the limits and nature of the object considered as an object than we did once. It exists in terms of either its dissolution or the assertion of its identity, an uncertain one, as a thing. The less it is a thing, the more it functions in terms of an exteriority. The more emphatic its objectness, the more it seems to exclude space in the interests of an idea of movement within

itself. The exclusion of space requires the exclusion of nature, so it's not the exclusion of space it's the exclusion of visible space, which is to say of a space visible to the eye as opposed to the imagination. Haub's painting glows with the whiteness of oil paint, the magic and poisonous medium we invented in order to catch the luminosity of nature and the lived, Halley's *Blue Cell with Triple Conduit* with the electric vibrancy of Day-Glo, postnature, counternature, in any event certainly not natural. As it turns out, we can handle both. Once again it is worth pointing out that what Halley has done is to introduce movement, of a sort which was of course always there as far as a painter like Haub is concerned, into an aesthetic of the static and the simultaneous – the static movement of the circuit in place of the openness of a visible space. Is this, by the way, like the static movement which Holderlin saw in the image of the waterfall? The idea would, of course, link Haub with Halley quite straightforwardly.

The reader will have noticed that I've made no reference to the figural as opposed to abstract components in various of the works I discussed, except to describe them. The point is this. Such figuration takes place within the context of an object which imposes its terms on all that it possesses and which is, oxymoronicly, an object obsessed with movement – with, that is to say, its own liquidity and the invisibility of that principle. Such figural reference as occurs can only function, a little like the title, as an otherness, an alterity, which is there to play with the movement through which the work structures itself and its connection to what it is not. Therein, incidentally, lies the double transgressiveness of Peter Halley: it's figural and, on top of that, it moves.

I've invoked the television and cinema. It seems to me that our body thinks its space in terms derived or learned from the cinema just as, in the nineteenth century, it thought itself in terms of the novel and more especially of symbolist poetry, and its dream of a complete externalization, redistribution onto the exterior of the page, of the images and energies out of which the self builds itself. Reed's painting, to summarize, fills darkness with movement and links two movements with what might be a microcosmic version of the overall rectangle made out of what one might describe as the color of distance and therefore, and to that extent, of nonpresence. One of the things that bringing the cinema to mind might bring with it is the citizens of East Africa who, on first seeing films, wanted to know what happened to the characters when they weren't on the screen. An analogous question for a painter, for example myself, would be: Where do the inside and the outside

end and, therefore, start? I should think that a question such as this must appeal to the idea of the dream, as an edited, which is to say, discontinuous, continuity, flexible by virtue of its lack of direction, and to the idea of the body, a continuity which is never sure of where its outside starts, rather than to any idea of the real or of history.

The mouth is always complete, the face is always complete, the body is always complete. Which is to say, complete as movement. Let us suppose then that it can relate to objects, to those objects to which it subjects itself and of which it therefore becomes *the* Subject, with a capital S, in one of two possible ways.

One way is that it may engage in a moral discourse. This will involve it in finding in the object the grounds for considering itself as an *incompleteness*, an inadequacy, a flawed component of the great text. Such a body is no longer a body, but has rather subsumed itself into a historical ambition – a sensibility which knows no sense but reason, and that reactive reason, and as such is eager to learn from failure, in which it may see itself. Indeed it may redeem itself through such study, and redemption is its goal. It finds itself in exemplary practice which is exemplary for its failure. Walter Benjamin, who studied German baroque tragedy precisely for that reason, puts it as follows: “Guilt is not confined to the allegorical observer, who betrays the world for the sake of knowledge, but it also attaches to the object of his contemplation.”¹⁶

I should propose that the objects I’ve discussed here have nothing to do with such meaning-production. Those who made them are not interested in betraying the world for the sake of an interpretation of it that may give hope to the pious, whether as counterexample or not.

I should propose instead that the discourse involved here is an erotic as opposed to a moral one. The erotic involves a relationship of nonrelationship between two completenesses.

Consider the following example.

During the Renaissance the question comes up, If the building is intrinsically complete before ornament is added to it, what is ornament for? It obviously must not clutter up the original design, nor simply exhaust it through redundancy. It must then be a completeness in itself, which in some way complements, through difference, as a supplement of some kind, that which it is not but to which it may refer in some other way. Between the two there would be an instability, an arousal of the one by the other, an oscillation which would produce a meaning not present in either when left to itself.

Whether as a complete body which takes the form of an altar-piece filled with movement and therefore decision, or as one which presents itself as a surface characterized by nonproduction and connected to the world by what it is not, the nonrepresentational object cannot but be complete. It cannot be seen as cropped or adumbrated, as may representation, because it's all there.¹⁷ One can only relate to it as another entirety, a relationship of nonrelationship, a further nonmeeting of durations.

But I should relate this notion of completeness to this anecdote. I was watching a program on television some time ago about the Cotton Club, in Harlem, and an old soft-shoe dancer was being interviewed, and he said one of the best dancers he ever saw was a man with a wooden leg. He said it sounded crazy, but when the man danced everything *made sense*. It would seem to me that the nonrepresentational object, just because it's constructed, would always have to be a completeness which conceived itself in terms of such a deformation. Just as Freud, as, again, it is Kristeva who reminds us, draws our attention to the fact that we are all completenesses defined as distortions of some model which has never been. Shall we say, then, a poetics of deformation without guilt?

And I should like to conclude, therefore, by relating this possibility of an erotics through which the body thinks itself, to the call, by the art historian Norman Bryson, for an ethics as opposed to a moralism of critical method. An ethics would indeed be the study of difference, where completenesses did not have to be subsumed into a single thought, or master narrative as we like to say, in order to be thought in themselves and in juxtaposition one to the other. The nonrepresentational object would seem to have something to offer as an articulation of the gap between language and the senses, which, like language, are both voluntary and involuntary. Language doesn't see, hear, smell, or feel pain or joy. There is a gap, then, somewhere, whenever the object appeals to the senses, in our case visually. Language is not all history, but history is all words, and this too would place the work's address outside of it. But to pursue the gap between the senses and language in which the body thinks doesn't sound like a historically irrelevant project. It simply lies beyond the scope of theories which find meaning only in the failures of the past.

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