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THE AFTERLIFE OF PAINTING

by

Nuala Gregory

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Fine Arts, the University of Auckland, 2015.
This thesis situates my painting practice within the broad context of developments arising from the so-called ‘death of painting’ and its aftermath. My claim is that those developments involved a change in the ontology or the nature of painting, so that it is no longer medium-specific but post-conceptual in its operations. Hence the title: The Afterlife of Painting.

After an Introduction on the formulation of the research topic and its relation to my art practice, chapter one examines the arguments proposed for the death of painting. The principal finding is that the putative death was largely a discursive event centred on the New York art scene in the 1980s rather than an enduring historical reality for Western culture. Nonetheless, painting did undergo significant change from the 1960s, experimenting with new paradigms of production within an art world increasingly dominated by conceptual forms of art.

Chapter two divides into three parts, each dealing with an aspect of my painting practice. Chapter 2.1: Methodology explores the question of contemporary painting when practised in the name of research, or as research, within the University context. Chapter 2.2: Methods focuses on my studio methods and their elaboration through a reflective process informed by the archive of past painting. Chapter 2.3: Theory then provides an account of ideas that have influenced my understanding of the production and reception of art, particularly the philosophies of Alain Badiou and Gilles Deleuze (with Felix Guattari).

Chapter three uses Peter Osborne’s six-point definition of the conditions of post-conceptual art to argue for a form of post-conceptual painting. I contend that Osborne gives insufficient weight to the aesthetic in art today, and I draw upon the work of J.M. Bernstein to discuss painting’s role in reclaiming our capacity for sensuous embodied experience. On the basis of these arguments, I define my own work as participating in the ontological change to post-conceptual painting.

The Conclusion provides further reflection on the idea of an afterlife of painting, including painting’s temporal dimension and the recent rapprochement between aesthetics and ethics.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my supervisors, Dr. Peter Shand and Dr. Jan Bryant, my adviser Peter Robinson, Jayne Carroll (Subject Librarian), and John Pusateri of Auckland Print Studio.
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INTRODUCTION
INTRODUCTION

In a sense, it was my fate from the beginning. I was born in 1965. According to Crimp’s much-cited article, 1 1965 was the year in which painting came to an end, when Daniel Buren spotted some awning canvas in a Paris market and set to work producing vertical stripes, 8.7cm wide, in bands of contrasting colour. That was in September. I was born in December, ‘just in time to be late’, as Joyce joked in Ulysses. And so this whole question of lateness and death and the beginning of new life gradually took hold of me and became my thesis and worked itself out in painting.

If I were to write a novel about the Afterlife of Painting, that’s how it would have to begin. With a small conceit, but a pointed one. I was indeed born in December 1965. And I went on to study painting at the very time when talk of the Death of Painting had just reached Belfast, a few short years after Crimp and Lawson published their now canonical ‘death notices’ of painting in leading art journals in 1981.² Like my fellow students at the time I barely understood the arguments, and attributed them, with good reason, to art world in-fighting. It was only gradually that I began to wonder if my career was foredoomed to be dedicated to a dead practice. This was a troubling and puzzling prospect. If the future of painting was foreclosed, and its present was mortgaged to its past, then the temporal registers were thrown all out of joint. The following text addresses that problem. It examines the arguments for the death of painting, and presents a case for painting’s continuing relevance—in the form of an afterlife. These thematic investigations provide the context for an understanding of my own painting practice as post-conceptual.

Formulation of the topic: the afterlife of painting

That practice was first developed as an undergraduate in Fine Arts at the University of Ulster from 1986 to 1988, a time of mild but concerted hostility to painting as an art

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1 ‘The End of Painting’ (Crimp, 1981).
2 On the ‘death notices’ of painting, see chapter one.
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form. Victor Burgin’s contemptuous remark about ‘the anachronistic daubing of woven fabrics with coloured mud’ captured the prevailing mood but also betrayed an underlying problem. The phrase originally appeared in a 1976 essay in which Burgin argued for a politicised art practice, and bemoaned the ‘arbitrary and fetishistic restrictions which “Art” placed on technology … in the name of timeless aesthetic values’ (p. 148). Henceforth, for Burgin, the task of art was to ‘unmask the mystifications of bourgeois culture by laying bare its codes’. Qualifications for this task included ‘a knowledge of semiotics … politics and economics’ (p. 154). Burgin’s own artworks combined photographic images with text (on social issues such as gender, employment or housing) in an appropriation of the style of commercial advertising. Already then, in 1976, lines of opposition were being drawn: here was a call for an art of semiotics (clear meanings and graphic messages), political concepts and mobilisation of technology, all premised on a denunciation of aesthetics—and the material medium of painting. The underlying problem was that no comprehensive investigation had been undertaken (by Burgin, or others at the time) into painting’s real or potential relations to technology, semiotics and politics. Instead, within a few years—and I am focusing in these introductory remarks on my own experiences as a student—things took a rather different turn. In the 1980s, the art world came under the spell of theory, conceptual forms of art began to predominate, and a new model of Fine Arts education emerged.

De Duve (1994) has analysed, and lamented, the new style of education. It was introduced in ‘advanced’ art schools between 1975 and 1980 (and some years later in unfashionable Belfast) to replace two prior but obsolete models: the academic and the modernist. The academic model set out to provide a professional training (‘métier’) for talented students able to observe nature and imitate the best of previous art. It was destroyed by industrialisation and ‘withered into academicism’ (p. 20). The modernist (or Bauhaus) model aimed to liberate the creativity of all students, who were taught to question a specific medium, experiment with its forms, actualise hidden potentiality,

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3 ‘Socialist Formalism’ (Burgin, 1976).
and invent the new. If the first model drew upon the past and tradition, the second was oriented to the future. Nonetheless, de Duve claims, it has been in crisis since the late 1960s. By contrast, the new model (post-1975) was based on a general practice of art (rather than métier or medium) whose primary mode of operation was to deconstruct present ‘ideology’, wherever encountered, in whatever guise. Among the casualties were received notions of creativity, authenticity, and originality. Leading Fine Arts programmes switched emphasis from technical know-how and medium-specific investigations to a pedagogy of art as a signifying practice. Yet, according to de Duve, this new model soon ‘imploded’, degenerating into little more than an attitude, ‘a pose, a contrivance’ (p. 27). Students educated on these terms were to see no value in craft skills, deep engagement with materials, or sensuous aesthetic experience. Painting and sculpture were regarded as outmoded subjects, clinging on through sheer inertia. In their place, deconstruction was ‘a method by which to produce art and to teach it’ (p. 30). As generalised critique triumphed over form, ‘no exhibition catalogue was complete without a quotation from Derrida’ (Critchley, 2010, p. 4).

In 1980s Belfast, students struggled to adapt to this changing situation. Amid the uncertainty, talk of ‘the death of painting’ was a troubling background noise rather than a bold new principle. If it was more than a technological reflex in the age of new media, it was also less than a well-argued position. In retrospect, it was much as de Duve portrays it: part of a complex and uncompromising new attitude to art. Two questions seemed unavoidable, yet somehow were never voiced. Why the antagonism to painting? And: what was the future for students like me who were intuitively attracted to the affective power and abstract promise of great painting rather than discourses on

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4 De Duve labels the successive models as talent-métier-imitation, creativity-medium-invention, and attitude-practice-deconstruction (p. 26).

5 As Hochdörfer (2009) points out, it is ironic that leading post-war philosophers and theorists tended to engage constructively with painters and paintings, while their acolytes in the art world drew upon those same theorists’ work to criticise painting and declare it ‘dead’ (p. 153). Among the theorists, Hochdörfer names Adorno, Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger, Lacan, Barthes, Deleuze and Derrida (p. 215, fn. 2). Among the art world criticism is the sequence of ‘death notices’ examined in chapter one, and October magazine’s programmatic repudiation of painting.
signification, the rise of the concept, or the merits of ‘critical’ forms of art? No doubt, we had much to learn from these radical new ideas, but my confused feelings at the time are well articulated by O’Sullivan (2006) when he asks: ‘how could it happen? That in thinking about art, in reading the art object, we missed that which art does best, in fact we missed that which defines art: the aesthetic?’ (p. 40). O’Sullivan’s answer is that art had been reduced to its social history, or deconstructed as the broken promise of an aesthetic experience forever deferred. Whatever the cause, it made for an uncomfortable educational experience; it felt as if painting was being shoved aside to make way for important new ideas rather than being seriously engaged by those same ideas.

It was the felt need to clarify all of this, to combat attitude with substance and argument, that led me, first, to the (negative) topic of the death of painting—which gestated for many years as I moved from student to teacher of art—and, later, to its (positive) inversion. As will be shown in chapter one, my researches led me to the conviction that it is necessary to speak not of the ending of painting in the 1960s, nor of its critical negation in the 1980s, but of the positive ontological change that occurred and was consolidated in painting during the course of those and subsequent decades. My research topic thus became ‘the afterlife of painting’: an enquiry into a renewed practice of painting that emerged within a radically altered art world. I argue for the existence, and contemporary importance, of a form of post-conceptual painting, a term which is defined at length in chapter three. In the new millennium, painting seems to have gained critical currency once more and is finding champions among arts writers such as Jan Verwoert and Terry Myers. Post-conceptual painting is a leading form of the new work. My own practice is presented as one example.

**Structure of the thesis**

The remainder of this Introduction outlines the structure of the written component of my thesis. Briefly summarised, that structure consists of a first chapter on the death of
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painting mirrored by a third chapter on its afterlife. The intermediate chapter, chapter two, situates my own painting practice within this overarching thematic context and lays the groundwork for it to be understood as a form of post-conceptual painting (according to conditions set out in chapter three). Finally, a short Conclusion reflects on the temporality of painting and painting’s contemporary function, while suggesting further areas of research.

Chapter one provides a thematic reading of the four leading essays on the death of painting, and analyses their key arguments. To my knowledge, this is the first comprehensive summary of these essays, and, as such, it makes a new contribution to the field. It is also a review of literature in the academic sense: it identifies a set of research issues and problems, and establishes a context for my own artistic practice. The main finding is that the so-called ‘death of painting’ was largely a discursive event, a concerted campaign of critical negation waged in the 1980s, that coincided with an essentialist (mis)reading of Greenberg. The announced ‘death’ was a theoretical judgement—of rejection—rather than an enduring historical reality for our culture. Nonetheless, painting practices did undergo significant change in the period from the 1960s, beginning with the decline of modernist formalism. A series of paradigm shifts followed, evidenced by a multiplicity of new approaches and captured in new critical frameworks such as ‘expanded field’ and ‘strategic art’. But the principal change to painting—such is my claim—took place as part of a wider response to the challenge posed by conceptual art. Contemporary visual art as a whole was critically transformed. It re-emerged as a diverse set of practices whose more historically self-conscious forms may usefully be theorised as post-conceptual. This marked a radical change in the ontology of art, such that art is no longer medium-specific but, as post-conceptual, is categorised as a combination of conceptual and aesthetic elements. It is this new ontology of art that defines the fundamental forms of painting in, or as, its afterlife. My own art practice is historically situated and consciously undertaken as a type of post-conceptual painting.
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In chapter two, I turn to that painting practice and the spaces of its production: the academy, the studio, and—surrounding and traversing them—the diffuse space of contemporary art theory. Accordingly, the chapter divides into three sections. Chapter 2.1 asks how creative practice might be understood as research within the context of the university, and focuses in particular on the vexed question of methodology. Under the umbrella term ‘practice-as-research’, I construct a specific methodology for my painting process by using Crotty’s elements and ‘architecture’ of methodology, as first developed for the social sciences (Crotty, 1998). This approach marks a new contribution to a poorly understood area. It addresses the epistemological underpinning of creative practice, and engages with Foucault’s important, but rarely discussed, claim that painting is a discursive practice that builds upon the archive (Foucault, 1972).

In chapter 2.2, the focus shifts to the productive space of the studio. These sections provide a detailed account of my work methods and decision-making processes (ranging from higher level artistic ideas to precise technical choices to a review of aesthetic effects). The account reveals the importance of reflective processes and the development of a conceptual vocabulary through which to understand and direct the ongoing work. Four main methods are discussed. The first two concern my material practice of colour, which divides into ‘absolute’ colour and ‘relative’ colour. The others are collage and the use of lithographic tusche. In all four cases, I show how material processes lend themselves to the production not just of aesthetic effects but also of emergent meaning. Key themes include ideas of constructedness, contingency and chance, and the movement from formlessness to form.

Chapter 2.3 addresses the theoretical or conceptual space that surrounds and informs my practice. I give two examples of contemporary theories that have become fundamental to my ways of thinking and working as a painter. Alain Badiou provides a radical new perspective on the creative research process and the relation of art to its past. Gilles Deleuze (and Felix Guattari) allow for a reconsideration of the aesthetic in terms of
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affective relations between artwork and audience. These philosophical theories have ontological consequences for painting: they renew our understanding of its production and reception—what it is for paintings to come into being, what they are and what they do. They also advocate a principle of affirmation in art, as opposed to endless critique.

Chapter three resumes the argument about an ontological change in painting, and presents a case for an afterlife of painting as post-conceptual. The term ‘post-conceptual’ is taken from the work of Peter Osborne, whose six-point definition brings much needed rigour to a phrase too often employed in an uncritical, periodising manner. The main body of the chapter consists in an explanation and contestation of Osborne’s definition of the ‘conditions of possibility’ of post-conceptual art as applied specifically to painting. This is a new contribution in two respects. It provides a framework for understanding the important new category of post-conceptual painting (a form of practice that Osborne has consistently failed to address); and it argues for a revision of specific points of Osborne’s definition in order to accommodate painting’s particular capacities and strengths. From my perspective as an artist, I contend that Osborne gives insufficient weight to the role of the aesthetic in art today. My main counter-arguments draw upon the work of J.M. Bernstein who makes a case for modernist painting as the art of sensuous particularity, whose chief function today is to help reclaim our capacity for sensuous embodied experience, and thus experience in general. Contemporary painting emerges from these debates as a transfigured practice. As a post-conceptual practice, it embraces both aesthetics and the concept (the latter at three distinct levels); it has an integral discursive dimension; and its productions have a distributed materiality that may include texts on or about the art object. Moreover, it requires a radical rethinking of the idea of ‘the medium’ in painting, and calls for a new form of judgement of painting as art.

The Conclusion reflects upon the preceding discussion and points to further possibilities for the ‘afterlife’ of painting. In particular, it explores the questions of art and
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temporality, painting as ‘thinking through matter’, and the recent turn to an aesthetico-ethical understanding of painting practice that promises to recover some of the formative force of art in relation to society as a whole.
CHAPTER 1

The Death of Painting
THE DEATH OF PAINTING

I once knew a madman who thought the end of the world had come. He was a painter …

Samuel Beckett (Endgame, 1957)

This chapter provides a thematic sketch of a fundamental change in the condition and self-understanding of contemporary painting. It is not intended to be a historical survey, or to specify historical conditions or causes; that task is best entrusted to art historians. Instead, its purpose is to provide an overview of the arguments presented for the death of painting, and to introduce the term ‘afterlife’ into the critical discourse on the state of painting following that putative death.

Within the art world, it is well known how the debate over the death of painting became entrenched and heated throughout the 1980s. What is not so often acknowledged is that the issues raised at that time remain current and influential. They continue to inform, perhaps even to determine, the production of contemporary painting. Other mediums, principally photography, have also been affected. Recent evidence of the enduring legacy of the debate includes a number of publications. Myers’ book Painting (2011) is a first-ever anthology of writings focusing specifically around this question. Staff’s After Modernist Painting (2013) plots the plurality of approaches adopted by painters in response to the ‘death notices’ issued in the 1980s. And the Tate Channel symposium on Contemporary Painting and History, held in 2009, discusses models of painting practice in the context of the endgame of painting, rejection of medium-specificity, and the new paradigm of art as strategic intervention. The idea of the death of painting has not gone away. It has not prevented attempts at development, but neither has it been repudiated. As a consequence, painting is still somehow suspended in a posthumous condition, for which the term ‘afterlife’ seems oddly appropriate.

The idea of an ‘afterlife’ has its origins in mythical and religious thinking. In such contexts, it functions as part of a tripartite structure, or sequence, in which life
THE DEATH OF PAINTING

succumbs to death yet is somehow restored and lives on in a posthumous form. What survives the moment of death is an essential identity of some kind, an animating principle such as soul or consciousness. By transcending the natural end-state that is death, the animating principle reveals itself as supernatural. If, however, it is the body—the body alone—that survives, then it does so in a reduced and unnatural state. The body continues only as a corpse animated by some external will. Suspended between life and death, it is robbed of autonomous life instinct. Falconer refers to contemporary painting in precisely this way in ‘The Undead’ (2003). Afterlife, in contrast, refers to a higher state, a sublimated life hereafter beyond all earthly existence. It marks the end of mundane life in a double sense: not just its termination but also its necessary completion in order to make way for a more advanced state of being.

Since I am proposing to use the term ‘afterlife’ in relation to painting, it will be necessary to sort these various meanings and set them in context. This seemingly straightforward task is beset by an immediate and intractable difficulty. As has been seen, an afterlife, by definition, requires a prior death. But, in the case of painting, death is by no means absolute, nor even certain. Despite repeated proclamations and the serial publication of death notices, above all in the 1980s (see below), painting continues today as an artistic activity with a global audience and a steady market. An international survey of the quality of that activity, the book Vitamin P: New Perspectives in Painting (2002), proffers evidence of rude good health. And, measured in purely quantitative terms, contemporary painting may be suffering from a crisis of overproduction rather than a cessation.

The real issue of the ‘death of painting’ seems to centre, rather, on the status of the death notices themselves. In what follows, I will claim that the death of painting was in reality a discursive event, a set of statements concentrated in the decade of the 1980s, and issuing largely from positions within the New York art scene. Much of what was written was ‘greatly exaggerated’ (as Mark Twain observed of newspaper reports of his
THE DEATH OF PAINTING

own death). And yet, death of a kind did take place. As the context of artistic production changed, painting was compelled to undergo an ontological shift; it slowly sloughed off an old and discredited identity to emerge in a plurality of new forms. But behind that plurality lies a common condition: the fundamental fact that painting today is irreversibly marked by the event of conceptual art. It has entered an afterlife in which to be painting means to be post-conceptual. This is a claim that I aim to redeem in chapter three. In the current chapter, I will focus mainly on the discursive event of the death of painting, teasing out five themes or ‘arguments’ that are found to underpin it. In the process, I will outline the context of change from which painting re-emerged into what may be called its afterlife.

A discourse of ends

The precise phrase ‘the afterlife of painting’, though seemingly familiar from recent art world discourse, has appeared only rarely in print. A search of the world-wide-web (in December 2012) located only two published examples. They were: in the title of a 1998 catalogue essay by Raphael Rubinstein, ‘The Life and Afterlife of Painting: A Descriptive Chronology of Six Decades, 1920-1980’; and in the course of a round table discussion on contemporary painting, published in Artforum (March 2003) under the title ‘The Mourning After’. It is perhaps a symptom of millenarian reflection that, in both cases, the term ‘afterlife’ should have been deployed so close to the turn of the century, and used as a diagnostic tool. In the Artforum case, however, the word appears only once in a discussion that focuses much more on the death of painting than its afterlife (the word ‘death’ occurs approximately forty times).

For the discussants in ‘The Mourning After’, the very notion of the death of painting belonged to a much wider discourse about ends of various kinds. It takes its place—

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6 They were Arthur Danto, Yve-Alain Bois, Thierry de Duve, Isabelle Graw, David Joselit, David Reed and Elisabeth Sussman.
THE DEATH OF PAINTING

admittedly a minor and belated one—among such important contemporary ideas as the death of God, the end of metaphysics, the end of man, of grand narratives, of modernism, and of history. All of these ideas came to the fore in the second half of the twentieth century. Today, we calmly discuss evidence for the devastation of the planet, due to climate change, and speak of *Living in the End Times* (the title of a 2010 book by Slavoj Zizek).

Within the art world, nonetheless, talk of endings is reflective of more than just the mood of the times. It is rooted in a much earlier argument about the end of art itself, not only of painting. This argument was launched by Hegel’s lectures on aesthetics in the 1820s. For Hegel, art was part of an unfolding world history in which spirit (universal mind) develops and progresses to self-understanding. The role of art was to capture that spirit in sensuous form, that is, to use material means like sculpture and painting to express deep truths about communal values and shared ways of life (ideas of freedom, reality, the human and the divine). This was the case for ancient Greek art. It provided the basis of a unified Greek culture and was formative for its society as a whole. According to Hegel, however, art had long since become ‘a thing of the past’ because it could no longer serve that historical purpose. Its *sensuous, material* and heavily *mediated* means of understanding proved to be insufficient. They were overtaken by progression to the *immaterial, more immediate* and *intellectual* form of the concept. In Hegel’s version of history, the task of cultural formation passed from ancient art (material and sensuous) to medieval religion (a mix of sensuous imagery and intellectual ideas), and thence to modern philosophy and scientific theory (ideally expressed in pure concepts with no material opacity to impede understanding). In this process, aesthetic-sensuous forms of expression inevitably made way for pure

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7 My understanding of Hegel is indebted to the work of Robert Wicks (1993, 2013). Pippin (2002) argues that Hegel played a major role in shifting aesthetic appreciation from individual judgements of taste to a concern with historical meaning, criticism, and collective self-education. He writes that, for Hegel, the history of Fine Art ‘should be understood as a liberation from nature’: the achievement of a mode of human self-determination and a ‘transformation of the natural into a human world’ (p. 10).
conceptualisation. Hegel’s narrative thus proposed the end of art as its necessary completion and supersession rather than its simple termination. Remarkably, this argument was to return in renewed form in the 1960s with the advent of conceptual art—and was to have important repercussions for the fate of painting.

Hegel saw no prospect of an afterlife of art. Although he anticipated that the production of artworks would continue and perhaps even ‘rise higher and come to perfection’, he argued that art would never again be formative of its culture as a whole. From this perspective, art today is neither dead nor ‘undead’; rather, it has withdrawn from the stage of history. In our own time, Arthur Danto has proposed a version of this argument. In influential works such as *After The End of Art* (1996), he argues for the end of the history of western art and its replacement by philosophy. For Danto, as for Hegel, art is post-historical. It is no longer an agent or proponent of historical change.

The Hegelian thesis was meant to signal the end of art and its history. Nonetheless, post-Hegel, the term ‘afterlife’ came to enjoy something of a pedigree *as a concept* within the discipline of art history. In the early twentieth century, German art historian Aby Warburg invented the concept of *Nachleben* (which literally translates as ‘after life’) to indicate the anachronistic survival of ancient images in the culture of the Renaissance and later. Of note is Warburg’s distinction between *Nachleben* as continuity *versus* the idea of renascence after extinction. Warburg’s younger colleague, Walter Benjamin, developed a related concept of cultural memory that involved much more recently outmoded objects. In his 1929 essay on surrealism, Benjamin dreamed of ‘detonating’ the ‘revolutionary energies’ trapped in everyday objects consigned to obsolescence by the changing needs and tastes of capitalism. But, as will become clear,

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8 But see Wicks (1993) who quotes Hegel to suggest that art might again become a formative force, yet only for some future civilization or world—not ours (p. 370).

9 On Warburg, see Didi-Huberman et al. (2003). Benjamin also used the term *Nachleben* (see Osborne 2013, p. 228, fn. 38). For his essay ‘Surrealism: The last snapshot of the European intelligentsia’, see Benjamin (1979, pp. 225-239).
neither of those art historical concepts approximates to my own usage of the term ‘afterlife’. Nor do the recent instances of the term used in relation to painting. The latter provide only a loose and ambiguous indication, an expression of hope or disbelief about the survival of painting in some credible form.

**Serial death warrants (1981 – 1986)**

The next few sections will focus on what I have called the discursive event of the death of painting. That event consisted, primarily, of a series of statements issued by protagonists within the New York art world of the 1980s. I have selected four such statements: they remain among the most familiar essays on the topic, often cited, if not well analysed in detail. I will discuss each, in context, in order to tease out what I think are the four key themes they contain, sometimes explicitly formulated, sometimes embedded but latent. Together, those themes make up the body of the argument against painting and enumerate the putative forms of its death. There is also a fifth theme, both anti-aesthetic and anti-painting, that originated in the 1960s and is almost entirely overlooked in these essays. Ironically, it came to have a much greater impact on the future of painting—or so I shall argue.

**Douglas Crimp: The End of Painting (1981)**

In 1981, the critic and art historian Douglas Crimp was Managing Editor of the leading art periodical, *October*. Published by MIT Press, *October* was known for its militant intellectuality and a strongly anti-aesthetic stance that was reflected in its spartan form: it carried no gallery advertisements, permitted few images per issue—black and white only, no colour—and placed a heavy emphasis on texts informed by French theory. *October*’s strategic approach was to ‘lionize’ a select set of Minimal and Conceptual artists, whilst issuing ‘swingeing jeremiads’ against all art deemed to be ‘incorrect’ (Lawson, 1981, p. 40). Contemporary painting had little significant presence in its
In spring of that year, the magazine published a special issue dedicated to *Art World Follies*. It included two articles attacking authoritarianism in art (one devoted to painting), and an editors’ Introduction that lambasted various unnamed ‘knives and fools’ operating within the New York art world at the time (they included fellow critics, historians, consultants and collectors). The editorial concluded with a proclamation:

> Foolishness has entered the new decade as a mode of concerted opposition to thought, argument, coherence. It is time to name it, to describe it, and actively to become its adversary.

It was in this context that Crimp delivered what is still regarded as the canonical death warrant of painting (the phrase ‘death warrant’ occurs on page 75 of the article). Crimp’s title, ‘The End of Painting’, was pithiness itself. His main thesis was that painting is moribund because it is technologically outmoded and ideologically bankrupt. It had been replaced by photography, which, ‘after waiting out the entire era of modernism’, had finally reappeared to ‘claim its inheritance’. Invented in 1839, photography was only ‘discovered’ and validated as an art form in the 1970s (Crimp, 1981, p. 76).

Today, Crimp’s essay reads as an uneasy mix of scholarly analysis and journalistic provocation. Fellow art historian Robert Storr (2002) has described Crimp’s style as ‘polemical in tone and dogmatic in substance’ (p. 90). Yet, the essay has been much cited and remains influential because it undoubtedly produced plausible evidence for, and symptoms of, painting’s alleged ‘terminal condition’ (Crimp, 1981, p. 75). The evidence came largely from 1970s promotional (supposedly critical) writing about the medium. Crimp had no difficulty in exposing such writing as tainted by overblown ‘idealism’, ‘reactionary rhetoric’, and ‘received ideas’ (p. 74). Among much empty talk of originality and imagination, it presented painting as ‘universal’, ‘transcendent’ (p. 75) and ahistorical because possessed of an ‘eternal essence’ that stretched from the
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cave paintings of Altamira to Jackson Pollock (p. 79). In socio-political terms, painting’s supporters were found guilty of complicity with a discredited ideology, both humanist and bourgeois (p. 75). Then, turning to address the practice of painting itself, Crimp discovered only symptoms of defeat, decay and desertion. He located them in the work of practitioners such as Ad Reinhardt and Robert Ryman who subscribed to a heroic, if self-defeating, paradigm of the endgame of painting. Recognising that the medium had had its day, they were intent on making the ‘last’ paintings that would conclusively seal its fate. Reinhardt painted flat black monochromes devoid of content or expression. Ryman applied white brushstrokes, mechanically and repetitively, to the canvas—until it was filled up. Alongside them, Frank Stella’s work veered from early acceptance of painting’s death to late ‘hysterical’ denial (p. 82) involving the construction of hybrid objects (part painting, part sculpture).

Meanwhile, other erstwhile believers were also looking beyond or outside of painting. They betrayed its essence and violated its codes by producing impure pictures ‘contaminated with such alien forces as photographic images’ (p. 75), or they abandoned painting altogether to take up other visual means (photography and time-based mediums). The smarter ones, like Daniel Buren, were working on more ‘radical developments’: exposing painting’s outmoded conventions and providing conceptual demonstrations of its institutional dependencies. Buren’s chief lesson was that modernist painting aspired to end in the isolation of the museum, shut off from real life and genuine historical change. Its sole remaining function was to confirm its place in the pantheon of great art as style. Drawing on this argument, Crimp makes the historical claim that painting died in 1965, the date being marked by Buren’s first work with stripes (pp. 80, 85). Since that time, the symptoms of decay had been ‘impossible to ignore’: painting was not just in disarray but in terminal decline. It had failed in terms of its own essentialist self-understanding and in terms of what other, more advanced practices were able to disclose about it. One senses a note of triumph in Crimp’s
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conclusion in which, for the third time, he quotes an isolated remark by Gerhard Richter: ‘basically, painting is pure idiocy’.10

In retrospect, there is no doubt that Crimp’s essay set the tone of the debate about the death of painting, even if he didn’t quite succeed in establishing the terms of that debate. Nonetheless, by sifting the evidence from the rhetoric, and disentangling historical claims from mere assertion, it is possible to extract three ‘reasons’ adduced by Crimp for the death of painting. They are:

• the technological argument that painting’s capacity for ‘illusionism’ has been surpassed by photography;

• the argument from exhaustion, which appeals to historical evidence of declining achievement by painters and the steady contamination or abandonment of their craft; and

• the argument about autonomy, which claims that modernist painting has cut itself off from life and from history, so that its only end (purpose) is to enter the museum of styles.

The three further ‘death notices’ which followed Crimp’s article went on to develop these arguments and add to their number.

Thomas Lawson: Last Exit Painting (1981)

Within a few months of the appearance of Crimp’s polemic, the painter Thomas Lawson countered with his essay ‘Last Exit Painting’. Published as an artist’s text in *Artforum* magazine in the month of October 1981, it is remembered for its searing

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10 See Storr (2002) for the context of Richter’s remark, in which it reads quite differently (p. 90). Richter may have been alluding to the autonomous production of meaning from out of the ‘nonsensical’ play of painting’s dumb materiality. Deleuze (2004) argues that nonsense ‘enacts the donation of sense’ (p. 83).
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indictment of the dominant forms of painting at the time. Sturgis (2009), for example, describes it as a ‘frontline manifesto’ dispensing categorical rejections of fashionable neo-expressionism and the endgame strategies of Buren and the last painters. But others have identified a more positive agenda. Rothkopf (2003) finds it to be ‘a bold defence of painting’s critical potential in the face of a ravenous market and a disapproving intellectual elite’. It was this more affirmative dimension, perhaps, that secured the essay’s appearance in a publication with strong links to painting.

Artforum was founded in 1962. More recently, it has been described as a monthly ‘trade magazine’ with offices in New York and a market position in the visual arts comparable to Vogue in fashion and Rolling Stone in music (Thornton, 2008, p. 145). In 1981, it stood in stark contrast to the severe format of October. Its glossy, colourful editions featured pages of gallery advertisements interspersed with reviews and reproductions of fashionable artworks, many of which had always been paintings. Texts played an important informative role, pitched somewhere between scholarly exegesis and promotional copy. In this company, Lawson’s contribution was unusual for its argumentative tone.

That was because Lawson had a clear and combative agenda. His intention was to establish a credible basis for painting within a changing, apparently ‘regressive’, art scene (Lawson, 1981, p. 40). Part of his strategy was to expose the failings of other, supposedly more advanced mediums. He pointed to the ‘loss of conviction’ of minimal sculpture and conceptual art (p. 43), evidenced in a tendency to ‘academicism’, ‘predictability’ and a ‘hopelessly compromised’ position (p. 40). He diagnosed the shortcomings of photographic approaches that were too ‘safe’, and ‘too straightforwardly declarative’ to inculcate ‘doubt’ about perceptual experience (p. 44). And then, as his title promised, he offered a way out of the impasse. Against all conventional logic, he made a claim for the subversive potential of the historically outmoded and marginalised medium of painting. Other than despair, he insisted,
painting was the last exit available to the ‘radical artist’. The structure of Lawson’s essay, then, was to proceed from general critique to a specific moment of possibility and affirmation. This was entirely in keeping with his opening gambit: ‘It all boils down to a question of faith’.

‘Faith’ and ‘belief’ were words that Crimp had seized upon to repudiate an unquestioning and ahistorical idealism of painting. In response, Lawson presented his faith as a badge of honour and of strategic commitment. At one level, his essay can be read as an indictment of the failings of all artistic programmes other than his own. I will confine my remarks, here, to his criticisms of types of painting in which he clearly had no faith. He denounced the full range of modernist formalism for its dogma of ‘eternal values’, its ‘denial of history’, its cult of ‘immediacy’ and the presence of the artist. In particular, he detected the ‘last decadent flowering’ of the modernist spirit in the fashionable pseudo-expressionism of the 1970s (p. 41). Among his chief targets were Julian Schnabel in the USA, Rainer Fetting and Salomé in Germany, and the Italian Transavanguardia trio of Francesco Clemente, Enzo Cucchi and Sandro Chia. Their particular crimes were committed against the social responsibilities and historical relevance of art. In a bid for market positioning, Lawson writes, they indulged in an ‘uncontrolled annexation of material’ (borrowing from and recombining previous styles); they decontextualised their sources and refused to provide a ‘critical frame’ for them; they dismissed ‘the particularities of history in favour of a generalizing mythology’ and ‘sentimentality’; and they engaged in a cynical form of ‘cultural cannibalism’ in which ‘whatever is accepted [as painting, or as suitable material for painting] becomes equivalent to everything else’ (pp. 41-42).

Lawson does not rest there. Echoing Crimp, he displays his impatience with the self-defeating endgame(s) of the last painters. But unlike Crimp, he is not persuaded by Buren’s own version of the endgame. Buren’s critique functioned by exposing painting’s dependency on institutional support for its meaning and status; outside of the
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gallery/museum system painting risks disappearance into invisibility and irrelevance. Yet, for Lawson, Buren’s work is itself reliant upon external support in the form of ‘an explanatory text, a handbook of the issues raised’. This is a reference to Buren’s critical discourses on art and on his own practice. Moreover, Buren’s sterile repetition of an unvarying visual strategy (his trademark stripes) quickly degenerates into ‘little more than an elegant device’ (p. 43).

Lawson is equally damning of a second major paradigm that was popular in the 1970s. He describes the pluralism of painting practices as a ‘shroud’ and ‘the last holdout of an exhausted modernism’. Pluralism was a free-for-all of styles in which no one style was considered more pertinent than any other. As such, for Lawson it elided all too easily into that post-historical relativism, pastiche and indifference otherwise known as postmodernism, with its tendency to commodification and appropriation of formerly critical types of artwork. Lawson is unforgiving of flagrant market positioning but is also critical of an overly ‘autonomous’ distancing from the market. Here, at least, he accepted a lesson from Buren: art needs to place itself at the centre of the art world; it needs to operate where it can do most radical damage. Finally, Lawson dismisses attempts at the ‘resuscitation’ of abstract painting (p. 40) and all forms of art that refuse the discursive ‘distance’ opened up by figurative forms of representation (forms that present themselves as ‘pictures of something else’). Unless art positions itself at a distance from some original that is being re-presented, he claims, art cannot be discursive: it cannot engage in analysis and evaluation. There can be no subversion of received ideas and methods, and no critique of art or society is possible.

These few extracts from Lawson’s text demonstrate the incisive style of criticism for which it is remembered. But that criticism is perhaps best regarded as preparatory work, a preliminary survey of the situation into which he is about to launch his own positive

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11 Pluralism in painting is discussed below as ‘the paradigm of no paradigm’. 
programme. When Lawson introduces his exit strategy, he describes it not as painting but as the ‘appropriation of painting’.

The appropriation of painting as a subversive method allows one to place critical esthetic activity at the center of the marketplace, where it can cause the most trouble. (Lawson, 1981, p. 44)

This ‘appropriative’ difference is not explained in the essay. It seems to suggest, however, something of the ‘recursive structure’ of the artistic medium as defined by Krauss (1999): a medium that returns upon and regenerates itself by inventing new rules or adopting new critical perspectives (p. 6). It also invokes the discursive distance that Lawson so values in representation, the gap between subject matter and form that makes room for the interpolation of analysis and meta-commentary. In short, Lawson’s strategy is to appropriate, or adopt the look of, fashionable modes of representational painting. By using this ‘camouflage’, artists will be able to infiltrate the market and place critical artworks at its heart. Lawson’s own style of painting has been described as ‘hip’, indebted to the modern world, full of social reference, and acutely aware of the mediating powers of photographic images and signs (Sturgis, 2009). In an earlier text, from 1979, Lawson proclaimed: ‘our images do not refer directly to the world at large, but instead to the world of other images’ (quoted in Rothkopf, 2003). Together with the appropriation of painting, this highly mediated approach was central to Lawson’s strategy of a critical return to representation.

It is Lawson’s positive agenda, allied to his sense of historical development and the strategic need for self-positioning, that provides a first indication of a possible afterlife for painting following the eclipse of modernist formalism. Behind his reasoning lurks something of Benjamin’s obsolescence or Warburg’s Nachleben. He senses that the invariant demand for novelty in art is structurally self-defeating: each figure of the new is rendered immediately old by interpretation; it is consumed and set aside; as the
‘already-familiar’, it is ripe for displacement. This process unfolds in accordance with an underlying logic, which is that of the market. Under these conditions, Lawson believes, only an obsolete idea or medium can withstand such a fate. Hence, painting may be reactivated with renewed subversive potential.

Despite its insightful diagnoses, the essay is by no means convincing in its conclusions. In my view, Lawson’s argument for the subversive potential of a marginalised painting was particularly weakened by his choice of exemplar, David Salle. Feminists see Salle’s depictions of women not as ‘deconstructions’ of their ‘cultural repression’, as Lawson claimed, but as flagrant instances of misogyny (Bee & Schor, 2000, p. 25). Salle’s montaged images are set within a framework that appears subjective and uncritical. Unsurprisingly, the reception of Lawson’s text was generally negative. Yet its impact is still being felt, due to the incisiveness of his critique of various compromised styles of painting and his repudiation of post-modernist and pluralist evasions.

In summary, Lawson’s contribution was fourfold. He introduced a new argument for the death of painting:

• the commodification of painting and its annexation by the logic of the market.

In addition:

• he provided further diagnoses of the exhaustion of painting as evidenced by an increasing relativism of approaches and a directionless pluralism of styles;
• he argued that painting must attempt to be adequate to its time, in which everyday perceptual experience is increasingly mediated by new technologies of reproduction;
• and, finally, he stressed the need for painting to renounce its formalist autonomy, to re-engage with everyday life, and to reclaim a social function as critique.

In terms of the present thesis, he also gave a first indication of the possibility of an afterlife for painting.
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Hal Foster: Signs Taken for Wonders (1986)

Foster’s essay ‘Signs Taken for Wonders’ appeared five years after those by Crimp and Lawson. Its main contribution to the debate about painting was to deepen the arguments about technology and commodification, and to assess the condition of painting specifically in the context of late capitalist society. Foster does this by analysing a novel strain of abstract painting that had emerged in the 1970s and 1980s.

Today, Foster is an internationally respected art historian and critic. He is one of the quartet of writers who preside over the intellectual and political spirit of October magazine, and who co-authored the magazine’s major historical survey, Art Since 1900 (2004). In the 1980s, he was a proponent of ‘progressive’ postmodernism and anti-aestheticism in the arts, and the editor of an influential 1983 anthology on that subject (the anthology included a chapter by Crimp). His 1986 essay originally appeared as the lead story in the June edition of Art in America. In art world circles, Art in America is regarded as a trade magazine designed for collectors, dealers and art professionals. Charles Bernstein (in Bee & Schor, 2000, p. 107) describes it as one of a small number of American publications ‘almost wholly absorbed in the process of promotion and inflation of the art market’, and in which the role of critical writing is ‘to decorate the graphics’ (the numerous reproductions of artworks and the ubiquitous art gallery advertisements). When Bernstein remarks upon Foster’s ‘fundamental suspicion of painting’, one wonders why Foster should have chosen such a vehicle for publication. Yet, Foster was an editor of the magazine at that time (until 1987). In the event, Bernstein acknowledges that Foster’s article manages to ‘contradict’ the magazine’s usual promotional approach, but finds his conclusions ‘evasive’ (p. 111). The possibly conflicted context of its publication may have contributed to the essay’s complex and shifting lines of argument.
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Foster begins the essay by describing a range of paintings that prompt the question: are we seeing the emergence of a new form of abstraction? But he makes it clear at once that this work is ‘not new’ except in the sense of novel; nor is it derived genealogically from the previous history of ‘proper’ or ‘serious’ abstraction. Indeed, its meaning largely depends upon its positioning at an ironic remove from such work—from the tradition that begins with the breakthrough of early abstraction (Kandinsky, Mondrian, Malevich), includes the achievement of Abstract Expressionism, and continues in the ‘critical’ forms of abstraction practised by painters such as Stella, Ryman, and Brice Marden. All of these movements focused on perceptual enquiry into painting’s conventions, reflection on its material processes and historical context, and participation in its ‘discursive entanglements’ (Foster, 1986, p. 86).

The new abstraction shared none of those aims. It no longer sought the ‘authentic legitimation’ of the medium of painting, but was content to manipulate an array of readymade styles, devices and signs. Moreover, it seemed to derive largely from a different source in appropriation art. Yet, Foster sounds a note of doubt. He is not convinced by this alternative genealogy; he sees the new work as neither abstraction nor appropriation, but as a new category of simulation. While the issue remains undecided, Foster points to contradictions inherent to each position. He argues that the new painting cannot succeed as appropriation, but neither does it function as a critical form of simulation.

Foster pursues this argument in relation to the new abstract painters, for whom appropriation may have seemed like ‘the next logical move’ (p. 83). Their strategy was to demonstrate that critical abstraction had become reified in its conventions, easy to reproduce, and therefore no longer a source of modernist originality or sublimity. But, in Foster’s view, abstract painting cannot function as appropriation without entering into a performative contradiction. As an artistic strategy, appropriation is the mediation of an image or an artwork that already exists. It involves a repetition (often a direct
copy) that displaces and subverts an ‘original’ meaning by reframing or recontextualising it. In contrast, painting is the ‘province of the immediate mark’ (p. 83)—it involves no mediation—it sets its meanings directly in place through physical touch, mark-making and expressive gesture. Painting’s immediacy necessarily ‘contradicts’ the deconstructive critique intended by appropriation. (Foster uses this argument to cast doubt on Lawson’s proposal to appropriate painting as a ‘form of camouflage for subversion’.) While the implication is not spelt out, Foster seems to be suggesting that appropriation is a strategy that can be accomplished only by using means, like photography, that are inherently reproductive and mediating.

On the other hand, if the new work functions as simulation, then its strategy would be quite different (p. 83). It would ‘parody’ previous modes of abstraction while emptying them of historical content. This operation would demonstrate that the old modes are ‘no longer critically reflexive or historically necessary’, as they were for modernism. Rather than providing ‘direct access to unconscious truths or a transcendental realm beyond the world’, they could now be seen as mere styles of painting among others (p. 83). Unlike appropriation, simulation does not involve the reframing of a supposed original. Instead, it ‘recalls’ the idea, or parodies the style, of past artworks in a way that can ‘disrupt [the] institutional canon and confuse its historical logic’. Foster’s point is that a work of simulation cannot easily be pinned down, logically or historically, because it is neither original nor a copy. He therefore concedes that abstraction-as-simulation may be the more effective strategy: it has the potential to supersede previous categories of painting (p. 84). But he immediately introduces further doubt. Referring to the dynamics of the art market, which reduces artworks to their monetary value or ‘exchange-form’, Foster states categorically: ‘all of this abstract work complies with it’ (p. 84). No matter what strategy it adopts, the new abstract painting seems doomed to commodity status. In complying with the market’s demand for novelty, it ‘provides a modicum of the new without threat of real change or loss of order’ (p. 84).
Foster’s essay now begins to pose deeper questions about the new painting’s relation to its time and social context. The very logic of its strategies, he claims, determines that painting must die: ‘Painting must die as a practice so that it might be reborn as a sign’ (p. 86). As a sign, painting is hollowed out and content-free; it is reduced to ‘a post-historical attitude’, an indifferent pastiche of previous styles. As such, it can join the dazzling parade of images that make up the depthless surface of the world. No longer engaged in reflection or critique of any kind, it is produced exclusively for circulation as a ‘commodity-sign’ (p. 86). Foster stresses that there is more at stake here than just the latest manoeuvres of abstract painters:

In one way or another, most of these artists seek to picture abstractive tendencies in late-capitalist life: in science, technology, telecommunications, image and commodity production. (Foster, 1986, p. 88)

According to Foster, the abstractive processes of capital may ultimately be ‘the real subject, and latent referent, of this new abstract painting’ (p. 139). The idea of an abstractive process is well explained by Bernstein (2006). In Bernstein’s definition: ‘Abstraction is the negation of a concrete item in its givenness, and its (re-)identification in terms of some more abstract feature or quality, some mark, it shares with other items’ (p. 150). Science abstracts from the sensuous qualities of objects (their colour, shape, smell, texture) and reduces them to what can be measured objectively (mass, dimensions, velocity). Capital abstracts from the use value of objects (their practical purposes) and the labour that produced them; it focuses exclusively on exchange value or price. Rationalisation and bureaucracy abstract from the ways in which people work to build relationships and ‘intersubjective practices of meaning’, in order to focus narrowly on function and system. In all these ways, abstraction is ‘the sacrifice of the sensuous particular to the universal’ and the consequent loss of perceptual and affective experience (p. 151).
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How can painting deal with this situation? How can it portray the deep tendencies of late capitalist society? As Foster points out, it is no longer a matter of representing state-of-the-art modes of transportation or machinery. The ‘new emblematic commodities’ like the computer (and now the ipad, laptop and smartphone) are reproductive technologies that deal in abstract flows of information, images and capital. They represent immaterial transactions rather than discrete objects (Foster, 1986, p. 88). How can painting attempt to capture such immaterial, seemingly ‘invisible’ processes? If it tries to picture them (abstractly represent them), it may simplify them and render them innocuous. If it tries to simulate them, it may only mystify them and render them spectacular. This apparent impasse raises the ‘most vexed question of all’ about the new abstract work: ‘can it seriously engage issues of a technoscientific, postindustrial society in a medium, like painting, based in preindustrial craft’ (p. 88). Foster is, again, doubtful. It is ‘not at all clear’ that the new social space of information flows and signs can be ‘simulated to any critical effect in painting’. The problem is, again, one of contradiction. A craft practice like painting must be considered to be incommensurate with, to stand in historical and technological contradiction to, the new informational networks. Although the new abstract painters are ‘not oblivious to the contradiction’ involved, they fail to ‘reflect on it in the paintings’ (p. 88). Mitchell (2005) points out that, for Foster: ‘Paintings are thus capable of little more than a complicitous irony, but fall far short of the magical operation known as “critique”’ (p. 224). Painting-as-simulation may be able to subvert representation but it cannot provide a critique of a world that, in its most powerful contemporary processes, is barely representable at all. Moreover, such simulation fails to reflect upon its own operations; as a result, it is not at all ‘disruptive or critical’ of simulation as a mode of social control and deterrence of political involvements (Foster, 1986, p. 90).

The overall tendency of Foster’s argument is to point to a double (or triple) failure of this new way of painting. It cannot adequately address technological change because it remains tied to an outmoded craft medium. And it is complicit with, rather than opposed
to, the economy of the commodity-sign. Moreover, an essential failing is that it is unable to ‘ascend’ to the status of social critique. And yet, Foster’s essay succeeds in raising a crucial issue for painting. The new abstraction marks a genuine departure from painting’s two most recent paradigms. It refuses to continue with modernist formalism, but neither is it a self-conscious, intentional endgame. It steps away from previous attempts to either legitimate or to end the medium. Instead, it adopts the kind of *strategic* approach associated with conceptual art, and seeks the next logical move in the game.

If I have dealt with Foster in some detail, it is because he deepens the arguments about the death of painting in terms of:

- **Technology:** painting (as a ‘preindustrial’ craft practice) faces a new test of its capacity to adequately represent the world in the age of information flows and reproductive technologies.
- **Commodification:** painting has allowed itself to be emptied of social and historical reference and reduced to a commodity-sign. These depthless ‘signs’ are then taken for the latest aesthetic ‘wonders’ by a rapacious art market. (Hence Foster’s essay title.)
- **Autonomy:** rather than seeking to determine its own internal development, as in the case of modernist formalism, painting has lost all autonomy and become absorbed into the market and the culture industry.

In addition, as will be seen in later chapters, the issue of ‘abstractive tendencies’ raised by Foster has had an important bearing on my own approach to painting. More generally, his new lines of enquiry have helped to re-orient thinking about painting in such a way as to open up new prospects of an afterlife under changed historical conditions.
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We now come to the last of the four canonical death notices, as I have been calling them. If the first two were chiefly concerned with position-taking (Crimp against painting and for photography; Lawson against forms of painting other than critical ‘appropriations’ of its tradition), Foster raised complex new doubts about painting and did so from the twin perspectives of art theory and social history. All three essays were published in leading art journals and helped to define the mood of the art world at the time. Bois’ essay is no different in the latter respect. He draws upon the psychology (and pathology) of mourning to analyse what he sees as the terminal condition of painting. But his text, which was first published in September 1986, did not appear in a journal; rather, it was the catalogue essay for the exhibition ‘Endgame: Reference and Simulation in Recent Painting and Sculpture’. The essay has often been cited but seldom discussed in detail. J.M. Bernstein’s commentary is an important exception, and will provide a key point of reference in this thesis (Bernstein, 2006).

Bois is a French (Algerian-born) art historian and critic best known for his 1990 book Painting as Model and his association with October magazine: he is currently co-editor, and one of its quartet of leading writers. In his 1986 essay, he refers to the two earlier texts by his October colleagues Crimp and Foster, and his own contribution has the feel of a historical overview and summary word on the death of painting. The essay is complex and nuanced in its arguments, which can be only partly reproduced here. In brief, Bois returns to the historical beginnings of modernist painting to identify three things: what it is that might be said to have died (retrospectively we may identify this with Greenberg’s modernist formalism); exemplary modes of its death; and the tenuous form of painting’s survival. In the process, Bois further develops the arguments based on technology, commodification, autonomy and exhaustion.
The essay focuses specifically on abstract painting, which Bois describes as the ‘emblem’ of modernism, and it begins with a bold historical thesis: ‘the whole history of abstract painting can be read as a longing for its death’; modernism ‘could not have functioned’ without this ‘apocalyptic myth’ (Bois, 1986, p. 30). The ‘myth’ in question required painting to free itself of all extrinsic conventions in order to attain its pure essence, and ‘thereby terminate its course’. There is something Hegelian about this ending— it is end as fulfilment rather than end as demise. And, second, the path to that end is strictly predetermined. It unfolds in terms of essentialism (the quest for an essence) and historicism (a linear history of convergence upon that essence as its natural telos or end-point). Bois does not refer to the fact, but charges of essentialism and historicism have been the main criticisms levelled against Greenberg’s theory of modernist formalism. By tracing the argument back to the earliest forms of abstraction, Bois is effectively critiquing Greenberg’s theory at or near its source.

At this point, Bois introduces his version of the technological argument. He shows that the essentialism of abstract painting (its ‘modernist teleology’) was not just a formal theory or tendentious myth developed by Greenberg (p. 35). It was a real, material effect of the larger history of industrialisation. The rise of industrial mass production and the invention of photography forced painting to redefine its status, and to ‘reclaim a specific domain … of manual mastery’ (p. 31). In other words, it was only at this point in its history that painting first raised the question of its essence and historical destiny— only after, and as a form of resistance to, the twin threats of supersession by photography and reduction to the status of a commodity. Painting was obliged to ask itself what kind of thing or practice it essentially was, what unique forms it could take, and what it could achieve now that it was no longer the pre-eminent ‘technical’ means of visual representation.

According to Bois, the overwhelming impact of mass industrial mechanisation was that it ‘banished the hand’ from the processes of production. As a result, artists felt
‘compelled, by reaction’ to demonstrate the exceptional, and still meaningful, nature of their handcraft activity (p. 31). Hence the renewed claims of authenticity and originality; the emphasis on touch, gesture and expression; and the elaborate attention given to technique and (crafted) form in painting: everything, in short, that was later condemned by Crimp and others as empty idealist rhetoric. The quest for an essence, tied to mastery of a craft mode of production, was to provide the organising narrative of painting’s resistance to industrial technology, right through to the 1960s and beyond. Nonetheless, argues Bois, it was a myth that had been both invoked and called to account much earlier. Bois identifies three exemplary attempts to settle with that myth, all of which date back to the first phase of abstract painting.

The first of these was Duchamp’s invention of the readymade. The function of the readymade was to unmask the mechanisms by which certain objects were valorised as exceptional—as works of art. All that was required was to exhibit an ordinary object (not one made by the artist, but found ‘already made’) in an art context. In such a context, it will appear novel, devoid of practical use, and amenable to transformation into a being of higher value (an artwork), its status as such being conferred by the authority of the exhibiting gallery or museum. The act of exhibiting a readymade thus serves to expose the fetishised nature of the artwork as an ‘absolute commodity’—‘absolute’ here meaning absolved of all relations to material production or use value, and free to take on whatever exchange value the market may care to bestow. By means of this demonstration, it can be seen that the value of a painting does not derive from its eternal essence, its originality, or its universal aesthetic appeal. All such notions are negated as merely ‘imaginary’. At this point, Bois borrows the first of three Lacanian terms he uses to classify the forms of death of painting (the others are ‘the real’ and ‘the symbolic’). The readymade exposes, and thus kills off, the imaginary or ideological dimension of painting in which it is identified with eternal or transcendent values.

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Moreover, the readymade performs a second negation of the essence of painting. After the readymade, there could no longer be any claim to difference or unique identity based on the handcraft mode of production. Duchamp pointed to the commercial tube of paint as a sign of painting’s inextricable entanglement with industrialisation.\textsuperscript{13} As industrially produced, (the tube of) paint could no longer be valued as a pristine craft material, a direct link to the earth and the authority of nature (Bernstein, 2006, p. 236). All such claims were debunked, and painting’s ‘imaginary’ self-identifications were consequently at an end.

The second form of the death of painting relates to Lacan’s idea of ‘the real’. For Bois, the impulse to reconnect with the real is associated with revolutionary situations or politics. The idea is to break through all ‘imaginary’ (hierarchical, yet supposedly ‘natural’) forms of social and productive relations. In the wake of the Russian Revolution (1917), artists wished to put an end to painting’s dependence on bourgeois art institutions and the market. They sought to re-establish the ‘use value’ of painting and thus to reconnect it with the real world of production on behalf of the people—even if this meant putting an end to painting as an autonomous form of art (Bois, 1986, p. 38). Rodchenko’s idea was to break with the cumulative history of painting by returning to its most basic material elements: ‘I reduced painting to its logical conclusion and exhibited three canvases: red, blue and yellow. I affirmed: it’s all over. Basic colours. Every plane is a plane, and there is to be no more representation’ (p. 38). For Bois, Rodchenko’s three monochromes embodied the idea that painting ‘could have a real existence’—it could make a productive contribution to society—‘only if it claimed its end’ (p. 41). That is, only if painting first repudiated its traditional role of representing society in terms of ‘natural’ class relations, in order to become an active partner in the development of new relations. To do this, artists would have to start all over again from the ‘zero degree’ of painting, from its most basic elements of line, plane and colour (p.

30). Yet the programme of productivist painting in Russia ended in failure. Bois does not explain that failure, but suggests that painting could not be dissolved into industrial production without ceasing to exist as art. Rodchenko went too far: he negated painting in toto instead of deconstructing its ‘imaginary’ status and renewing it as part of an extended endgame with ‘real’ social effects.

The idea of such an endgame is of central importance to Bois’ third form of the death of painting. Here, Bois turns to Mondrian. He cites Mondrian’s ‘principle of plastic equivalence’ as an attempt to deconstruct—to challenge and suspend—painting’s entire symbolic order. That symbolic order consists of ‘the laws embodied in the tradition of Western painting’ (Bernstein, 2006, p. 238). It provides the conditions of painting’s internal development by regulating the uses of line and colour, subject matter and form, figure and ground etc. (Bois, 1986, p. 42). At the most fundamental level, it enables painting to organise its dumb material elements into a symbolic language of sense. In Bois’ reading, Mondrian sets out to disrupt the normative functioning of this symbolic language. Far from being a designer of decorative geometrical or spiritual harmonies, Mondrian started from a principle of opposition to all exceptionality and hierarchy. His negative goal was:

the destruction of coloured planes by lines; of lines by repetition; and of the optical illusion of depth by the sculptural weave of the painterly surface … [as well as] the abolition of the figure/ground opposition which is the perceptual limitation at the base of our imprisoned vision, and of the whole enterprise of painting. (Bois, 1986, p. 42)

Conversely, his positive goal was to establish relations of ‘plastic equivalence’ among these elements of painting. No element would dominate or occupy a foreground; each
would contribute equally to the overall construction of meaning.\textsuperscript{14} Abstract painting of this type would serve as a model for mutual recognition among all members of the community, that is, for the advent of a classless society. For Bois, Mondrian’s practice offered ‘a theoretical model’ and ‘provided concepts’ that dealt with reality; it was ‘the plastic manifestation’ of the general logic that ‘real freedom requires mutual equivalence’ (p. 42). In this way, modernist painting could be reabsorbed into life. It need no longer be strictly autonomous, focused exclusively on its own essence and internal development, but would again have a useful social function.

Bois’ argument makes a number of crucial points. First, unlike Duchamp and Rodchenko, Mondrian did not \textit{negate} painting as a whole and thus bring it to a final end. Instead, he \textit{deconstructed} one dimension of painting: its symbolic order. Second, he did this by abstractly analysing and neutralising the ways in which the elements of painting had been ordered into hierarchies within that symbolic order. Such analysis was ‘the only way painting could reach its own end’ (p. 42, italics added). That is, it was the only way painting could determine \textit{for itself} how it should cease (end) all complicity with hierarchical forms of social and political life, and what its goal (end) should now be. Mondrian’s form of abstract painting was such a self-determination, developed under the conditions of industrial modernity. Third, through its abstract principle of ‘plastic equivalence’, Mondrian’s painting offered a form of resistance to the more powerful forms of abstraction—such as commodification—engendered by capitalism. Fourth, this marked a major paradigm shift within painting. With Mondrian, modernist painting postpones its dissolution into the ‘real’ world, and enters instead into a prolonged endgame played out at the edge of its own possibility/impossibility. According to Bois, this is the fate assigned to painting in the contemporary era: the

\begin{footnote}
Batchelor (1992) analyses Mondrian’s paintings from 1916 to 1921. Each of these works contains ‘the same construction, the same organisation of lines and colours and forms. The same vocabulary and syntax are in play. The canvas has now become a field for the interplay of pure abstract relationships. All the elements [of painting]: horizontal and vertical lines; planes of colours and tones; lines and planes; depth and flatness; containment and continuity; all the elements would be equivalent and in equilibrium’.
\end{footnote}
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‘interminable task’ of ‘working through’ its own end via successive attempts at deconstruction. To claim that any final end has come, says Bois, is to give in to a linear view of history. Alternatively, to deny that painting has entered its endgame (a life-and-death struggle for adequate meaning and contemporary relevance) is to abandon the only task left to it (p. 43).

Bois concludes with the claim that ‘mourning has been the activity of painting’ throughout the twentieth century (p. 47). But, by the 1980s, mourning had begun to take pathological forms: manic celebration of painting’s death (leading to the ‘postmodern’ attitude that anything goes in painting because nothing is at stake anymore); or melancholic clinging to an outmoded ideal of painting (denial of painting’s moribund state). Bois insists that the only way to complete the task of mourning is to confront its historical necessity and work it through. If we do this, the potential for painting may re-emerge, but only by means of the ‘conjunctive’ (or parallel) ‘deconstruction’ of all three dimensions of the imaginary, the real and the symbolic. En route to this conclusion, Bois defends one practice of painting which in his view has proved adequate to this historical moment: that of Robert Ryman.

In Bois’ essay, Ryman serves as the exemplar of the endgame of painting, the new paradigm that replaces the search for an essence. Accepting that painting can no longer compete with industry or the market, Ryman responds by ‘internalizing’ some of the features of the technology that threatens his practice (p. 32). His technique consists in ‘dissection’ of the pictorial raw material, and ‘dissolution’ of the ‘organic’ relationship between the brushstroke and the body of the painter (p. 31). Ryman achieves this through the action of a mechanical, repetitive placement of single strokes of monochrome paint, side by side, until the canvas is filled up. There is no trace of expression or display of handcraft mastery; there is no image or pictorial representation; there is only the process, endlessly repeated. Ryman is ‘mechanizing [his] own body at work’ (p. 32), reducing it to the condition of a machine. The deconstructive logic of this
practice, says Bois, is to demonstrate the historical condition of painting: to defer any
final ending; to forever approach the mechanical condition of photography, but never to
collapse, without remainder, into it.

Bois’ chief contribution to the debate about painting is to insist upon this new paradigm
of the endgame, as a response to the conditions of industrialisation. In the process, he
identifies a number of ways in which painting has adapted to survive. Painters embraced
the industrial production of artistic materials (from the tube of paint to synthetic paint
types and colours); they placed greater emphasis on process rather than image; and their
practices began to internalise the operations of mechanical repetition and serial
production. Crimp had already mentioned the ‘contamination’ of paintings that included
effects produced by photography. All of this deepens and modifies the argument about
technology and the ways in which it has threatened, and continues to threaten, painting.

A heavily overdetermined thesis

As can be seen from the preceding summary of the four canonical essays, the claim that
painting is dead was by no means straightforward or based on a single compelling
argument. Instead, in Danto’s phrase, it was ‘a heavily overdetermined thesis’ (‘The
Mourning After’, 2003). It combined appeals to history, theory and cultural trends in an
attempt to deny painting any contemporary relevance. I have identified four concurrent
themes—arguments to do with technology, commodification, autonomy (as social
disconnection), and exhaustion—and will revisit them shortly. As arguments, they no
longer appear so self-evident, nor applicable to painting alone. Storr and Sturgis
separately point out that critics who decried painting in the 1980s have since revised
their positions. In a 2002 interview, Crimp insisted that his title ‘The End of Painting’
also alluded to the purpose (end) of painting not just its death. The following year, Bois
expressed surprise that ‘very few people read [his 1986] essay as a plea for painting’
(italics added). Both now allude to a future for the medium. Meanwhile, Foster (2002)
tells openly about ‘the afterlives of the modern’ (p. 125) in terms not dissimilar to my own idea of an afterlife of painting. And Lawson continues to paint.15

According to Danto, the 1980s death narrative also had less to do with the state of painting at the time than with ‘a heavy atmosphere of postmodern theory’ that served the ‘unrestrained will to power of the critic’. In other words, it was largely a discursive event in which critics sought to position themselves as the new power brokers of the art world. And they did so via the pages of influential journals with deep involvement in the New York art scene. German artists and curators of the time, for example, were less convinced by the narrative, and felt that it relied on an essentialist argument: it diagnosed a problem with the medium per se, and failed to acknowledge painting’s potential as an ‘obsolete’ mode of art-making or as a highly variegated set of practices. In addition, there was an undeniable political dimension to the debate. Both Danto and Isabelle Graw point to the Reaganism of the 1980s, marked by the rise of neoliberalism, consumerism and a bullish art market focused on fashionable painting. Leftist art critics resented this market-led ‘revival’ of painting, and responded with accusations of commodification and the loss of critical and social relevance. (For all these points see ‘The Mourning After’, and ‘Thick and Thin’, both published in Artforum in 2003.)

While there is much to disagree with in the overall thesis—and in all four essays—there is little doubt that it succeeded in establishing a critical agenda for painting that continues to inform its contemporary production. Myers (2011) refers to the ‘pervasiveness (and absolute usefulness) of the death-of–painting discourse during the periods we know as modernism and postmodernism’, continuing through to the second

15 Storr (in ‘Thick and Thin’, 2003) writes: ‘Twenty years ago, of course, obituaries were regularly being written for the medium by neo-avant-garde theorists, some of whom are now furiously back-peddalling with the hope that no one will recall how their “historically mandated” predictions failed to come true’. Sturgis (2009) states that the 1980s critics are ‘now trying to reclarify a connection with painting and medium’. See also Crimp (2002, pp. 172, 177) and Bois (in ‘The Mourning After’).
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decade of the new millennium (p. 12). Its consequences include the wide range of responses by painters to the four critical themes I have identified. I will briefly review those themes before listing the various paradigms of painting that emerged from them.

Themes of death, paradigms of painting

Technology

Of the four named themes, the argument from technology has cast the most powerful shadow over the contemporary relevance of painting. It is an old and entrenched view, preceding the emergence of modernism, and dating as far back as 1839. In that year, the French painter Paul Delaroche, on seeing some early daguerreotypes, reputedly declared: ‘From today, painting is dead’.\(^\text{16}\) The question of art and technology was later thematised and came to prominence in the 1930s with the publication of Benjamin’s ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’. Yet, and despite its apparent historical vindication, the general argument from technology is based on dubious premises. It presents painting as deprived of its essential function as a representational medium, which was overtaken first by photography and later by the new media—the latter being more advanced because more realistic in their effects and thus more ‘objectively’ true. But this assumes that painting is fully invested in ‘illusionism’ and irremediably tied to it. The rise of abstract painting called this idea seriously into question, and has revealed other historical possibilities. Mondrian, for example, showed that painting is able to provide a model for ethical and political ideals, without the need for illustration.

A second strand of the argument dismisses painting as an outmoded artistic technology rooted in pre-industrial handcraft. As such, it belongs to a bygone era of individual (bourgeois) subjectivity and naïve belief in the possibilities of non-mediated perception

\(^{16}\) See Bell (1999, p. 59).
and spontaneous production of meaning. Conversely, so the argument goes, we live in a thoroughly mediated world. Our perceptions are framed and motivated within overarching political and economic structures, and modulated by technologies of communication and exchange. But it does not follow that painting is simply incapable, due to its limited technical means, of engagement in such a world. That argument is, at bottom, tendential and progressivist. It equates technology with an idea of ‘historically mandated’ progress. Worse, it acquiesces in the (literally) endless and uncontrolled nature of such progress, accepting it as inevitable. My own view is that painting can make a telling contribution to new forms of collective understanding, despite its ‘outmoded’ status, and perhaps even because of its quality of being out-of-time, unattuned to technological modes of thinking and calculation. There is a need for alternatives to the hegemony of the technological worldview. We need to disclose the world differently, and there is reason to believe that painting may have something to offer. Or so I aim to demonstrate in the body of this thesis. In chapter three, I will address the ‘abstractive tendencies’ identified by Foster as fundamental processes of our late capitalist, techno-scientific world. I will argue (following Bernstein) that the sensuous particularity of painting can be mobilised to expose and counter them.

**Autonomy**

The remaining themes, or arguments against painting, tend to derive from this technological basis. As Bois has pointed out, it was the rise of industrialisation and photography that first ‘compelled’ painting to seek out a specialist niche as a craft mode of production of images. Crow (1996) has identified a complex of other socio-political forces that also put pressure on painting at the time (the second half of the nineteenth century) and consigned it to an increasingly marginalised position within the wider culture. As a result, painting turned inwards in search of internal resources and strategies for survival: it became reflexive and self-critical, and from these conditions it slowly emerged in the new guise of *autonomous* modernist painting. The precise form
of that autonomy, however, was marked by a deep-seated contradiction (involving the relations between autonomy and heteronomy) that was later exploited by the death narrative of the 1980s.

To understand this, we can turn to the writings of Clement Greenberg, the pre-eminent theorist of modernist formalism in painting. Greenberg (1961) identified modernism with the self-critical tendency in art by which traditional norms and conventions were tested to destruction. Painters eliminated every effect that was ‘borrowed’ from other mediums and progressively reduced painting to what was ‘unique’ and ‘indispensable’ to its identity—its essence—as a medium. This turned out (rather bathetically) to be ‘flatness and the delimitation of flatness’ (Greenberg, 1962, p. 30). In this way, modernism in painting became intrinsically linked to medium specificity, while its history was rewritten as the reductive quest for its essence.\footnote{For a full discussion of the term ‘Modernism’, including an explanation of Greenberg’s position, see Harrison (1996).} Formalism, on the other hand, was defined by Greenberg as the tendency towards an austere, self-referential practice whose meaning or value as art derives solely from the internal play of its elements (of line, colour and form) as judged by the experienced viewer. (See de Duve, 1996, p. 216.) Formalism eschews all reference to ‘external’ content and context. It has nothing to say about society, or the conditions of its own production. A formalist painting exists autonomously, on its own merits, and finds its sole justification in appeals to ‘quality’ or aesthetic value. Greenberg’s original contribution was to combine these tendencies towards modernism (medium-specificity, self-critique and novelty) and formalism (aesthetic value, self-reference and autonomy) to the point of identification (Costello, 2007a, p. 217). Painting had to be medium-specific as a necessary condition of aesthetic value; aesthetic value was the substance of art; without evidence of such value there simply was no art. This forced, and somewhat circular, construction came under attack from the 1960s. ‘Socially aware’ art critics dismissed formalism and appeals to aesthetic value. And a theoretical post-modernism rejected
medium-specificity, turning instead to non-traditional forms of art such as minimalism and conceptualism.\textsuperscript{18} By 1999, \textit{October} editor Rosalind Krauss proclaimed a new era of art distinguished by the ‘post-medium condition’. If anything of painting can be said to have died in the 1980s, then, it was the practice (and discourse) of modernist formalist painting as here described.

Note the proviso ‘as here described’. De Duve (2010) has argued persuasively, against the orthodox reading, that Greenberg did not in fact take an essentialist view of painting.\textsuperscript{19} On the contrary, Greenberg (1940) insisted that the arts were ‘hunted back’ to their mediums (p. 305); they were \textit{compelled} to resort to medium-specificity and formal autonomy as the basis of a distinct but embattled identity. Only then did painting begin to shed traditional conventions and seek its ‘truth’ as a medium. Greenberg acknowledged this historical trend in painting, and argued on its behalf as a means to protect aesthetic value from the ‘philistinism’ of the industrial bourgeoisie. Rather than \textit{prescribing} an essential direction for painting, he was \textit{describing}—and validating—its recent internal development. In the 1939 essay ‘Avant-Garde and Kitsch’, he claimed that an autonomous art was necessary to ‘keep culture moving’ (p. 38), to preserve it from ideological appropriation (by fascism and Stalinism), the bathos of kitsch, and the depredations of the market. Nonetheless, the modernist painting that emerged from this period was riven by a social contradiction. It was caught between autonomy and heteronomy, between its formal \textit{self}-definition and the powerful \textit{external} and marginalising social conditions under which that definition was produced.

\textsuperscript{18} The anti-aesthetic and postmodern trends are reflected in the twin titles under which Hal Foster’s 1983 book was published. The American title was \textit{The Anti-Aesthetic} (Bay Press); in Britain it was \textit{Postmodern Culture} (Pluto Press).

\textsuperscript{19} The orthodox reading is that Greenberg’s theory is essentialist and historicist (painting converges on its essence and ends there), and elitist in its reliance on judgements of taste. De Duve has taken issue with the charge of essentialism, in particular. He cites Greenberg’s exasperated reply to his critics and his emphatic statement that painting has only a ‘working essence’—a critical set of operations deemed sufficient for a credible practice of painting at a particular time (Greenberg, 1962, p. 30). The point of the oxymoronic term ‘working essence’ is that it allows painting to change over time and under different conditions and yet to maintain a distinct regulative identity. This is hardly transhistorical essentialism. See de Duve (2010, p. 71).
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As explained by both Crow (1996, p. 11) and de Duve (1996, p. 274, fn. 98), autonomous painting arose from the contradiction between the *avant-garde* ideal of a new, oppositional art and the mundane economic necessity for painters to placate their patrons—that ‘enlightened faction of the bourgeoisie’ which had no appetite for opposition nor any desire for change other than a safely artistic one. A formalist mode of art was the necessary compromise solution: it offered no social or political critique but maintained internal standards of aesthetic quality. The resulting *modernist formalism*, although designed for survival, nonetheless left painting vulnerable to market exploitation. As Bois (1986) points out, any form of art that is devoid of social reference or critical function is an eminently suitable candidate for market annexation—its fate is to become an absolute commodity and token of pure exchange value.

In sum, the autonomy of modernist formalism came under attack on at least three counts. First, it was accused of renouncing all social function and withdrawing from history. Second, it was complicit with a rapacious and philistine market. Third, it cut itself off from all discourses on art as cognitive and world-disclosing, thereby reducing art to mere aesthetics. Moreover, the bid for autonomy was a failure and a fraud. Buren’s critique had exposed the fact that painting (in its Greenbergian guise) was dependent upon the museum/gallery system for the authentication and legitimation of its cultural value.

These are serious and compelling charges. Even so, they in no way invalidate the urgent, ongoing need for forms of art that seek an independent access to truth. The problem is so deep as to appear intractable—it seems there is something contradictory about *the very idea* of artistic autonomy. T.W. Adorno, like Greenberg, insisted upon its indispensable role in providing a unique social space (a pocket of resistance) untouched by ideology, in which the highest cultural values can be protected from contamination.

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20 Greenberg (1939) drew attention to this material contradiction with his sardonic remark about artists being tied to their patrons by ‘an umbilical cord of gold’ (p. 38).
and exploitation. On the other hand, that same autonomy, because of its \textit{necessary difficulty}—its need to offer an intrinsic epistemological and interpretive resistance to appropriation by external forces—only distances art from the very people whose interests it is intended to serve. Autonomous modern art was thought to be too difficult, elitist and self-absorbed to be understood by the masses, too hermetic to be genuinely culturally enlightening. Appraising this dilemma, Foster (2010) offered the historical observation: ‘My sense is that one cannot decide \textit{once and for all} between artistic autonomy and social embeddedness. It is a tension that should persist’ (italics added). This suggests that autonomy is not an absolute value for the arts; instead, it is an approach that should be deployed, in a strategic and timely fashion, in the service of greater social or political ends. The ideal of autonomy is structurally dependent upon—it is \textit{an effect of}—heteronomy: the social and political forces that determine the place of art in its time and context.\footnote{See Osborne (2007) where he argues that the autonomy of art is \textit{not} a space of \textit{freedom from social determination}. Paradoxically, in fact, autonomy is \textit{socially produced}: it is the contradictory freedom achieved under, and \textit{by means of}, certain social determinations. See also Osborne (2013, pp. 43-47, 161). In recognition of the inextricable entanglement of autonomy-heteronomy, critics and artists today have coined such new terms as illusory autonomy, liminal autonomy, semi-autonomy and post-autonomy.}

\textit{Commodification}

It was a staple of 1980s art criticism that, of all the arts, painting was complicit in its own commodification. That accusation now appears one-sided, if not hypocritical. All art today is forced to contend with market forces, so that artistic practices are both defined and judged by their stance in this regard. On the one hand, Clark (1999) observes that modernism has ‘internalised’ the ‘fact or fear’ of ‘appropriation by commodity culture’ by building it into its operations (p. 308). On the other hand, conceptual artists have not been slow to monetise their ostensibly critical strategies (Zepke, 2006, p. 161); Damien Hirst routinely tests market conditions in search of the
highest auction bid; and, as I write, the Jeff Koons’ sculpture *Balloon Dog*(Orange) has just been acquired for US$58.4 million.

Nonetheless, despite the misplaced moralising, the 1980s critics correctly identified an important phenomenon of modernism: the underlying structural homology between art and the market. Modernist art has been driven by an invariant demand for the new: from the ‘shock of the new’ to new refinements of sensibility and intelligibility, to new forms of expression and means of disclosing the world. Structurally, this is analogous to the market’s core need for an uninterrupted supply of novelty. Novelty is the market’s absolute, its unchanging value: the ‘endless return of the same’ in ‘a moment which can never stop’ (Bois, 1986, pp. 35-36). Moreover, this structural homology is reflected at the level of experience. For the viewer of art and the consumer of commodities alike, novelty is a key element of what they feel: it beguiles momentarily without necessarily rewarding prolonged engagement. Clark’s ultimate fear is that the new in art may be unable to differentiate itself—and thus protect itself—from the auratic appeal of the commodity. As Bull (2001) points out: ‘visual artworks—with their minimal demands on our attention … their materiality and marketability—approximate most closely to the commodity form’ (p. 113). Each may be experienced, in an equivalent manner, as the lure of the new and stylish.

The danger for art is that consumerism operates as a new—and rival—formation of subjectivity. It disconnects sensation from judgement, and isolates individual pleasure from collective meaning (Crow, 1996, p. 23). While commodity choice is advertised as the very image of liberation, ‘creative’ consumption becomes the principal means of self-formation and identification. Under these conditions, aesthetic experience is threatened by collapse without remainder into the general experience of consumption. The negations offered by art—its explorations of uncharted, formless or previously marginalised ‘aspects of self-representation’—are recuperated and repackaged as matters of style and lifestyle. In this way, art serves as a ‘cultural softening-up process’;
its fate is to prepare the ground for the market’s ruthless exploitation of all forms of opposition and otherness (Clark, 1999, p. 308).

On this view, art has surrendered to the cultural logic of late capitalism. As a logic that penetrates all areas of life, this is another of those ‘abstractive tendencies’ identified by Foster. It works by detaching—by abstracting—cultural forms (art, sport, leisure, cuisine) from their roots within a grounded life world, and subjecting them to control by market forces. Art is reduced to a fully commodified practice ‘without foundation or meta-narrative’ (Bull, 2001, p. 112). The institutional theory of art, in which the sole arbiter of the value of new artworks is the authority of the museum/gallery system, ‘is essentially a theory of fashion’. Meanwhile, a triumphant capitalism exhibits its ‘limitless fecundity in the manufacture of pleasures, its mysterious ability to work without foundations, to turn anything, for no reason, into an exchangeable object of value’ (p. 112).

We have seen how autonomous forms of art tried to shut out ideology, but they have proven powerless in the face of market co-optation. Clark presents Pollock as a prime example. He describes how, in Cecil Beaton’s 1951 photo-shoot for Vogue magazine, models in party frocks posed in front of Pollock’s vast canvases, effectively reducing ‘the most revolutionary art of its time’ (Bull, 2001, p. 109) to a marketing tool and adjunct of style (Clark, 1999, pp. 302-306). This raises an extraordinarily difficult question for painting, and for art as a whole. How, if at all, is commodification to be resisted? Can it be ‘internalised’ and strategically negated? Is it a structural given, or a fatal contamination?22 What kind of public life would art have without it? In chapter two, I point to ways in which my own paintings offer an experience that is sensuous, aesthetic, novel, but presented as an integral part of a broader artistic and discursive

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22 The commodity function or commodity status of art appears to be ineliminable (under capitalism). As such, perhaps it ought not to be regarded as illegitimate but, instead, questioned in terms of its relation to art’s other functions—aesthetic, cognitive, historical, ideological, world disclosive etc. On art’s other functions, see chapter three.
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enquiry—inventing the participation of those with the desire to pursue it in directions other than commodification.

Exhaustion

Abstract Expressionism was the last universally recognisable achievement of Western painting. A decline set in sometime in the 1960s, and has continued unabated. Or so the death narrative would have us believe. But what could explain the supposed fall from greatness? It cannot be that five decades and more of painting has been uniformly lacking in quality. After all, a judgement of quality is an aesthetic judgement, and the canonical death notices were resolutely anti-aesthetic: they rejected aesthetics as a basis for the critical evaluation of art. Clearly, for them, the failure must lie elsewhere. A key claim is that painting has declined through loss of vitality, currency, the capacity to challenge perception and compel assent—in other words, it has expired from sheer exhaustion. To paraphrase Melville (1995), the new trends in painting turned out to be ‘merely chronologically new’; they failed to muster any ‘new possibilities of meaning or social being’ (p. 244).

Contrary to this tale of rise and fall, we have seen that the so-called death of painting unfolded as a combination of a discursive event (a concerted act of critical negation) and a failure of self-understanding. The dominant view of painting in the post-World War II era devolved from a misprision or misapplication of Greenberg. It led painting down ‘the road to flatness’ and thus to a double ending. As de Duve (1996) explains: with every discarded convention, modernist (medium-specific) painting came closer to actualising its essence. By 1962, when it finally arrived at the idea of the blank canvas, it was clear that there was nowhere left to go and no further possibilities to explore (p. 253). As for formalism, with its exclusive focus on aesthetic value and the internal play of elements, it degenerated into ‘mere formalism’ in the pejorative sense: ‘an academic and stupid art’ which repeated ‘empty, contentless forms’ in a game of diminishing
returns devoid of social significance (p. 343). These types of painting had truly arrived at a cul-de-sac. Not through natural exhaustion over time, but by encountering their structural limitations.

Art historians and academics have recorded the various responses to this situation. Vitality was not lacking in painting. On the contrary, huge energy went into finding a new way forward, a new set of possibilities. Staff (2013), for example, has dedicated a series of chapters to important developments in painting since the 1960s. And Elkins (2004) lists a number of recent styles and minor movements (p. 38). Here, I will briefly outline what I think is a sequence of key paradigms that emerged in the wake of modernist formalism, a general thematics of attempts at its overcoming and replacement.23

First, painting entered into a complex set of endgames or deconstructive attempts to delay or prolong a final ending. Clark (1999), borrowing Samuel Beckett’s iconic phrase, dubbed this the ‘I can’t go on, I’ll go on’ syndrome (p. 371). Acknowledging that painting was trapped in a state of inertia—unable to make progress or to accept its final demise—the endgame strategy was to turn this into a sufficient condition of existence, and act it out. Each of the canonical essays describes a different version: Crimp championed Buren; Lawson turned to Salle; Bois defended Ryman; and all three cited the ‘last paintings’ of Reinhardt. Foster’s essay tracked the latest developments in abstract painting. He described simulation as a last positive, i.e. non-deconstructive, attempt to develop a mode of painting adequate to the new era of techno-science and information. But this move had unintended outcomes. Repackaged in terms of novelty, as the latest style of painting, simulation was co-opted into the market’s very own version of the endgame—the endless cycle of fashion in which artistic and social relevance is subjugated to monetary value. Simulation did manage to signal a

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23 In the wake of modernist formalist painting, the key paradigms are: endgame, paradigm-of-no-paradigm, expanded field, strategic art—and, finally, post-conceptual painting.
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difference, however. In its attempt to reflect or to reconnect with the world, it showed that painting was changing again. Throughout the 1970s, the melancholy of the endgame began to give way to not one but two concurrent and competing paradigms.

In the first of these, the postmodernists among painters (Bois’ ‘manic mourners’)\(^{24}\) celebrated the medium’s demise by advocating a proliferation of styles, a paradigm-of-no-paradigm in which every kind of painterly or pictorial practice is acceptable because nothing is at stake. Elkins (2004) has called this a ‘trackless pluralism’ (p. 38). For Lawson (1981), such painting is the ‘shroud’ of an exhausted modernism. For Falconer (2003), it is ‘undead’: a lifeless body of work without intrinsic spirit or direction, subject to the whims of the market. But Staff (2013, chapter 3) and Myers see a more positive development. Independently drawing on a 1979 essay by Krauss (‘Sculpture in the Expanded Field’), each refers to the new pluralism as ‘painting in the expanded field’. The two authors use this phrase to indicate a movement in which painting escapes its previous confinement, reworks its relations to the canvas and/or the gallery space, and expands outwards across a range of heterogeneous practices and hybrid forms. Myers (2011) praises painting’s ‘coalitional’ ability to ‘work with rather than against other media’, to absorb ideas and techniques from the outside. Painting thus diversifies its production, and expands its ‘material and philosophical conditions’ (pp. 18-19).\(^{25}\)


\(^{25}\) Fogle (2001) does not use the phrase ‘painting in the expanded field’, but he provides examples that illustrate its meaning: the three-dimensional paintings of Hélio Oiticica; Paul Thek’s playful paintings which challenge the heroic seriousness of high modernism; and Marcel Broodthaers’ conceptual and photo-mechanical analysis of amateur painting. Fogle claims that these artists open up a field of possibilities ‘outside of the endgame exemplified by Buren and his colleagues’ (p. 19). ‘The artists in Painting at the Edge of the World demonstrate that a philosophy of painting is found today not only in these genres but also in a photograph (Andreas Gursky), a walk through a city (Francis Alÿs), in a club culture-inspired application of vinyl tape on the floor (Jim Lambie), in cast rubber “paintings” (Martin Kippenberger), or in paint applied directly to a wall (Arturo Herrera, Richard Wright, Franz Ackermann, Haluk Akakçe)’ (p. 22). See chapter three of this thesis on the expansion of the material means of painting.
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But this runs somewhat counter to Krauss’s own view of things. Her 1979 essay was a critique of the conventional idea of medium-specific practices. For art criticism, she declared, painting and sculpture must no longer be regarded as material and technical operations, but treated as cultural ‘terms’ (categories or signifiers) within a field of similar terms. The field as a whole represents a logical space, an ordered structure of possibilities. Sculptural art, for example, occupies a shifting set of positions somewhere between ‘architecture’ and ‘landscape’ and their inversions ‘not-landscape’ and ‘not-architecture’ (Krauss, 1979, p. 36). In the case of painting, Krauss suggests that its expanded field ‘would probably turn on the opposition uniqueness/reproducibility’ (p. 43). In her 1993 book The Optical Unconscious, however, she offered the alternative pairing of figure and ground as anchoring terms for the logic of painting. A comparison of the two texts is revealing. In the sculpture essay (p. 42), artists are free to ‘occupy and explore’ an expanded but finite set of related positions. By contrast, in the later text, the field of painting is presented as ‘in stasis’; its system ‘admits of no evolution’; ‘inside there is only repetition’; ‘you can only come to its outer limit, and then stop’ (Krauss, 1993, p. 20). This is hardly the expansive realm of freedom discussed by Staff and Myers.

Melville points to this difference in Krauss’s treatment of the two mediums. He reads her 1993 text as an argument for the ‘closure’ and ‘internal exhaustion’ of modernist painting (Melville, 2003, pp. 163-165). More importantly, he identifies a logical difficulty for Krauss. Her supposedly ‘anchoring’ terms such as landscape and architecture cannot provide the logical foundations she desires: they depend for their meaning on prior terms (such as nature and culture). This opens the field to an infinite regression and multiplication of terms, and risks an endless deferral or loss of stable meaning. Ultimately, what Krauss achieved by her switch to a semiological reading of art—that is, a language-based, non-material and non-aesthetic approach—emerges quite clearly. She used it to attack modernist medium-specificity, bracketing out its history and denying the centrality of the visual and the aesthetic. Her 1979 essay marked the
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transfer of cultural authority from artists and artworks to the ‘will to power’ of the critic, preparing the way for the triumph of discourse over art. This approach contributed to the discursive event of the death of painting in the 1980s. It led to the conclusion that modernist painting was exhausted not because of the loss of creative energy, vitality, or quality but exhausted in its very core: exhausted in its logical possibilities, in its internal structures of meaning. In 2005, Krauss told a London audience ‘painting as a technical support is over’.

From the practice of painting to the operations of strategic art

The competing paradigms of ‘no paradigm’ and ‘expanded field’ both function by allowing painting to exceed or escape its traditional conventions. The first, however, is an entirely open-ended and unregulated set of material practices, whereas the second is based on a formally structured and logically delimited set of cultural terms. Verwoert (2010) develops this contrast. He argues that the idea of the expanded field contained structural possibilities that gave rise to yet another paradigm: ‘the theoretical model that has been most prominent in the discussion of artistic practice since the 1970s’. This is the paradigm of strategic art. To explain this historical shift, Verwoert invokes the figure of Duchamp and the metaphor of art as a chessboard.

Having turned away from painting in the 1910s, Duchamp increasingly conceptualised his artistic practice as an intellectual activity. Photographs of him posing beside a chessboard served to illustrate the idea that art was no longer a set of discrete craft practices or mediums but existed instead as a field of structured relations—the art world as chessboard—within which the artist must occupy a position and make a telling move.

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26 Krauss (1979): ‘For, within the situation of postmodernism, practice is not defined in relation to a given medium … but rather in relation to the logical operations on a set of cultural terms, for which any medium … might be used’ (p. 42). For Krauss (1999) postmodern is also post-medium.

27 This was at the Tate Channel symposium on Art Since 1900 – The Debate, part 2, at 1hr 16 mins. See http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/video/art-1900-debate-part-2
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For art criticism of the 1960s, Duchamp provided the model for a new type of artist: an intellectually rigorous creator who analyses the layout of the field, its internal rules, the position of other players (artists, critics, galleries, journals), and who consciously ‘executes works as he would make a move in a chess game’. Each move is strategically planned and transparent in execution. It derives its meaning from its positioning within the structure and its effect on the general state of play. If successful, it alters the pattern of the game. Verwoert goes further. He claims that, from the perspective of art as strategy, some moves are so unique that they re-invent the rules and rewrite the order of the game; they become ‘direct entries in the book of art history’. Duchamp’s first unassisted readymade undoubtedly qualifies as such a move. It opened the way to the conceptual art of the 1960s and the paradigm of art as strategic practice.

The historical issues here are very complex (and go beyond the scope of this thesis), but the net effect on painting is by now quite clear. The steady shift towards an understanding of art as a strategic and ‘situative’ practice (Verwoert, 2005) belongs to the same movement through which art has become conceptual rather than medium-specific. As a result, painting has been unable to maintain its own independent base, act on its own self-critical terms, or take its legitimacy as art for granted. As Verwoert explains: the principal consideration for artists today is the primacy of the idea or the conceptual project. Medium-specific practice has been displaced ‘in favour of a general and fundamental inquiry into the nature of art—in whatever medium’. This marks a radical historical break, and an irreversible one, ‘a threshold that no one can step back over’. All traditional criteria for the judgement of art have been suspended, and conceptuality has been installed as the new norm. In sum, ‘painting is realised today

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28 The reception of Duchamp’s ideas in the 1960s is a complex historical issue, as is the relation of his art to his activity as a chess player. Verwoert (2010) is careful not to claim that Duchamp fully intended chess to be a model for strategic art, but that is how it was effectively received. Krauss, for example, developed the idea of the ‘expanded field’ partly in response to Duchamp. Thereafter, the expanded fields evolving around specific practices (painting, sculpture, photography) gave way to a general practice of art as strategic and self-positioning.
within the horizon of conceptual practice’, it is ‘grounded in a context that is no longer its own’.

This sounds like the death knell of painting, at long last. And yet, this is not quite the end of the story. There are further twists that will be outlined in chapter three. To anticipate the arguments to be made there: painting will be found to have internal resources that make it (always already) conceptual; it will prove capable of strategic interventions in the general field of art; and a version of medium-oriented painting will become credible once again—if only on new critical terms and in the guise of ‘post-conceptual’ art. Verwoert closes his 2005 essay by indicating the possibility of this outcome without naming it as such.

The conceptual argument

For the present thesis, Verwoert provides a useful review of developments that the canonical essayists were unable to foresee. He explicitly addresses the challenge posed to painting by the rise of conceptual art in the 1960s, and he traces its consequences. The canonical essayists were fully aware of this movement, of course, but none gave sufficient attention to its effect on painting. In retrospect, it has to be doubted that they were in a position (in 1981 or 1986) to anticipate the future influence of conceptualism. Particularly so, since its linguistic version—ostensibly logical and aggressively anti-aesthetic—was already in retreat by the early 1970s, and its inclusive, non-linguistic version also proved to be short-lived.29 As Osborne (2000) explains, the ‘moment’ of conceptual art passed quickly but it was to have an enduring effect on the whole sphere of the visual arts (p. 87). Its approach has come to dominate art discourse and the

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international exhibitions circuit, forcing artists of the new millennium to rethink their practices within the context and horizon of conceptualism.

The conceptual argument, as it might be called, is the fifth (overlooked) theme in the death narrative of painting. Its claim can be simply stated: in the twentieth century, art was initially dominated by avant-garde movements with cultural-political ends, and later by the category of medium, but in the 1960s those organising principles of art were superseded by the new category of the concept. Osborne notes three points about this development (pp. 86-88). First, conceptual art was not just a new type or style of art, the latest in an unbroken sequence. Instead, it brought about a fundamental rupture in the history of art by redefining art as such. It transformed the very nature or ontology of the artwork. Second, its method of achieving this change was to elevate conceptual thinking to a position of paramount importance within art practice, where it presided over art’s material and sensuous dimensions. Artworks were no longer to be objects of a ‘specifically aesthetic’ (i.e. non-conceptual) and ‘quintessentially visual’ experience—they were no longer ‘the site of a look’ (p. 87). Henceforth, the artwork was to be conceptual in essence (both in production and reception). Third, conceptual artists began to place increasing emphasis on ‘definitional questions’ about the nature or legitimate form of artworks, and to engage in discourses on art. They aligned their practice quite closely with that of art criticism, and appropriated the cultural authority of philosophy to advance their position. (This was especially the case with linguistic, analytic conceptualism.) Osborne describes this as ‘a classic example of strategic position-taking’ within the field of art (p. 88); its aim was to reconstruct the field on conceptual, newly intellectual grounds. A major—and fully intended—consequence of this manoeuvre was to dismiss medium-specificity, and painting in particular, as outmoded and irrelevant, tied to an anachronistic idea of what constituted the artwork and the practice of art.
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From the death of painting to ontological change

As will be argued in chapter three, conceptual art was to have an ironic, entirely unintended, effect on the future of painting. Instead of destroying painting by replacing the idea of medium-specificity with a concept of art-in-general, conceptual art changed the context of painting—the nature of the field in which it is made and seen. Conceptual art utterly transformed the conditions of artistic production and reception, just as industrialism had done in the late nineteenth century. Beginning in the 1960s, painting was compelled to acknowledge the power of the conceptual in art and to increasingly recognise it within its own practice. The survival of painting came to depend upon its response to changes in the ontology of art; it could no longer remain content to explore its own physical base (materials, processes or agreed conventions) and its aesthetic effects. Borrowing Greenberg’s metaphor, we might say that painting was ‘hunted back’ to its conceptual dimension. As a result, it is now possible—indeed, strategically necessary for the future of painting—to replace a narrative of critical negation and death with one of positive, historically situated, ontological change. Today, we are able to present a narrative that opens onto an afterlife of painting: painting as post-conceptual, as analogical, as a model for ways of thinking and acting that reconnect with the ethical, the social and the political. Such a narrative takes painting beyond questions of medium, form and the aesthetic, while retaining and rethinking them. This is what I aim to demonstrate in what follows.
CHAPTER 2

Methodology of practice-as-research
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The previous chapter provided a thematic account of the death of painting and the opening to an afterlife. It was, in effect, a review of literature in the academic sense: it identified a set of research issues and problems, and established a context for my own artistic practice. Chapter three of this thesis will return to, and develop, the theme of the afterlife of painting. It will argue for a change in the ontology of painting, beginning in the 1960s, and the emergence of a form of post-conceptual painting, of which my own artwork is one example. The aim of the present (intermediate) chapter is to engage with the methods and methodology of my artwork, to show how it is constructed within, and responds to, that wider context of death and afterlife. The chapter divides into three related parts, each of which addresses a distinct ‘space’ of production. Chapter 2.1 (Methodology) will address the question of contemporary painting when practised in the name of research, or as research, within the academic space of the university. Chapter 2.2 (Studio Methods) will focus on the creative space of the studio, describing my studio methods and their elaboration through processes of reflection informed by previous practices of painting. Chapter 2.3 (Theory) will address the theoretical space that envelops and informs contemporary painting. It will briefly outline two current theories on the production and reception of art, showing their relation to my artwork and its modes of self-understanding.

2.1 Methodology

There are two problems in painting. One is to find out what painting is and the other is to find out how to make a painting. The first is learning something and the second is making something. (Frank Stella, 1960)30

A review of the literature reveals that a great deal has been written on research in the creative arts, but there is frustratingly little that is of practical use to the PhD candidate

with regard to methodology. Scholarly articles and academic websites tend to offer pedagogical discussion and general ‘supervisory’ advice. Or, noting the dearth of practical help on the subject, they resort to case studies that, however interesting, lack wider relevance. Book length studies barely engage with the question (e.g. Smith & Dean, 2009) or offer students a proliferation of methodological alternatives based on ‘postmodern’ narrative approaches (Grierson & Brearley, 2009). To compound the difficulty, there is a marked absence of consensus on PhDs in the creative arts and a lingering doubt over their academic legitimacy as research. As Elkins (2009) has shown, tertiary institutions fail to agree on Fine Arts methodology, research regulations, examination criteria, or titles of qualifications (e.g. PhD in, by or with Creative Practice). But these wider questions cannot be explored here; they are topics for a very different type of thesis.

In this situation, I have been obliged to construct a methodology, using as a basis the architecture and elements of methodology defined by Crotty (1998, pp. 2-9). Crotty’s approach was designed for the social sciences, but has sufficient rigour and clarity to allow for application to the visual arts. He describes methodology as a strategy or plan of action governing the choice of methods ‘related to some research question or hypothesis’ and directed towards desired outcomes (p. 3). His most useful innovation (for present purposes) is to provide a table illustrating what I call the ‘architecture’ of methodology, which he divides—in a logical manner—into four ‘basic elements’: epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology, and methods (p. 5). In what follows, I will populate Crotty’s table (Table 1) with the components of my own methodology. First, however, it is necessary to provide a basic definition of my overall approach to creative practice as research. It draws upon the following much-cited definition of ‘practice-led’ enquiry:

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31 See McKenzie (2014), a bibliography of works on methodologies of creative practice.
By ‘practice-led’ I mean, firstly, research which is initiated in practice, where questions, problems, challenges are identified and formed by the needs of practice and practitioners; and secondly, that the research strategy is carried out through practice, using predominantly methodologies and specific methods familiar to us as practitioners in the visual arts. (Gray, 1996, p. 3)

This is a useful description of research that is rooted in, and conducted by means of, studio methods. It denotes primarily what Frayling (1994) classified as research through art. And it may also accommodate aspects of what Frayling called research for art: the ‘gathering of reference materials’ and thinking that is ‘embodied in the artefact’ (p. 5). Nonetheless, Gray’s terminology of ‘practice-led research’ implies a distinction between practice, on one hand, and research as theory, on the other. It therefore tends to uphold the scientific model of theory-driven research as ‘the gold standard’, with practice-led research as a departure from that standard rather than a methodology in its own right and of its own kind. Sullivan (2010) and Macleod and Holdridge (2005) propose the alternative ‘practice as research’, which positions practice in the very place of research, affirming an internal relation or dialectic between them. That is how I see creative practice in the context of PhD study, as will become clear in what follows. I am therefore driven to the compromise solution of applying the term ‘practice as research’ to Gray’s definition given above. At the same time, in order to avoid possible grammatical confusions, I shall hyphenate the phrase: ‘practice-as-research’.  

Starting from this definition, and drawing upon Crotty, it was possible to construct a methodology of practice-as-research specific to my own approach to painting, thereby

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32 The present thesis is not the place to offer a critique of ‘the methodological image’ of science. But see Popper (1959), Feyerabend (1975) and the summary of issues by Guba and Lincoln (1994, pp. 106-107). From the perspective of the arts, Bolt (2011, chapter 8: Art-as-Research) offers a Heideggerian critique of science as research.

avoiding recent tendencies in creative arts PhDs: the attempt to legitimise art as research by borrowing a methodology from the sciences (Newbury, 2002), or by reducing art to the illustration of theory. The issue for practice-as-research is not the production of objective scientific knowledge (replicable and verifiable as such), and it concerns more than a demonstration of intellectual rigour (although this is an essential requirement). It is, rather, a question of relevance: how to make a work of art that contributes to new understanding in its field. Practice-as-research inevitably involves ‘subjective’ factors such as artistic self-reflection, the strategic intentions of the artist, questions of commitment, and perceptions of the context of production (the art world). For Schön (1983), the objectivism of scientific method automatically excludes such factors. To overcome this limitation, Schön argues for an alternative model of ‘reflective practice’, more suited to the context of enquiry in the professions and the arts. It includes critical reflection both within and upon practical action, thus constituting an epistemology of practice ‘in which the knowledge inherent in practice is to be understood as artful doing’ (Smith, 2001). As Raelin (2007) explains, such knowledge is an implicit or tacit know-how that is rooted in action and is ‘not typically reportable’ (p. 499). Recursive processes of trial and error lead to ‘emergent learning’, which encourages reflection and the development of cognitive skills specific to the practice. Reflective practice also has a strong social dimension. Artists, for example, work within a common field involving the transmission of shared techniques, strategies, a specialist vocabulary, conceptual frameworks, and judgements. Finally, at its highest level, reflective practice develops into the ‘meta-competence’ to combine tacit-practical and reflective-conceptual knowledge (pp. 501-503). This is the level at which the artist-researcher is able to thematise and challenge the immanent rules and conventions that determine her creative actions. She is able to revise cognitive patterns, develop new tools, pose problems that require new strategic thinking, and—in this way—generate new knowledge and disclose new principles of practice that constructively transform the field.
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The model of reflective practice is clearly compatible with a methodology of practice-as-research, and applicable to the PhD candidature in the creative arts. In the latter case, the task of the written component of the PhD is to provide transparency, rather than scientific verifiability, about the candidate’s practice: to describe and explain her ‘artful doing’, while demonstrating the relevance of her practice to the field of art or to society at large. Further, the model also furnishes practice-as-research with a basic epistemology—the first element in Crotty’s architecture of methodology.

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<tr>
<th>Epistemology</th>
<th>Theoretical perspective</th>
<th>Methodology</th>
<th>Methods</th>
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<tr>
<td>Objectivism</td>
<td>Positivism (and post-positivism) Interpretivism • Symbolic interactionism • Phenomenology • Hermeneutics Critical inquiry Feminism Postmodernism etc.</td>
<td>Experimental research Survey research Ethnography Phenomenological research Grounded theory Heuristic inquiry Action research Discourse analysis Feminist standpoint research etc.</td>
<td>Sampling Measurement and scaling Questionnaire Observation • participant • non-participant Interview Focus group Case study Life history Narrative Visual ethnographic methods Statistical methods Data reduction Theme identification Comparative analysis Cognitive mapping Interpretative methods Document analysis Content analysis Conversation analysis etc.</td>
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Table 1: The architecture of methodology. Reproduced from Crotty (1998, p. 5).
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Epistemology

Epistemology is one of the core branches of philosophy, and deals with the theory of knowledge, its methods and validation (Grix, 2002, p. 177). Its fundamental question concerns how we know what we know. Crotty’s first column shows three main types of epistemology. Objectivism takes the view that there exists a mind-independent reality whose intrinsic meanings can be accurately known through scientific discovery. For subjectivism, meaning is not intrinsic to reality; instead, it is produced and projected by the human mind. Constructionism lies between these two extremes. It is the epistemological theory that underpins and informs my epistemology of practice and my reflective practice. Crotty defines it as subjectivism tempered by materialism, or the mutual mediation of subject and object:

What, then, is constructionism? It is the view that all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context. (Crotty, 1998, p. 42)

This definition stresses two points: the contribution of the object to knowledge, and a focus on the collective subject rather than the individual. Contra subjectivism, meaning is not simply a projection of the mind, but depends upon the interaction between enquirer and phenomenon. Contra objectivism, meaning is not intrinsic to an object but is (a) constituted by the system of knowledge that includes the object, while (b) the material opacity of the object offers an immanent resistance to the demand for fully objectified knowledge. Nor is material simply passive and inert. In the arts, materials enable construction, and their sensuous particularity in-forms the quality and meaning of the resulting artwork. By respectfully working with objects and materials, constructionism is ‘open to the world’ (p. 48). These considerations are highly pertinent
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to the practice of contemporary painting and will be addressed again in chapter 2.2 (Studio Methods) and in chapter three.

Crotty’s second point is his emphasis on social context and the collective subject. This is essential to the distinction between construct-ionism and its near neighbour construct-ivism, to which Crotty assigns an exclusive focus on individual ‘meaning-making’ (p. 58). Constructionism holds that all claims to knowledge are socially constructed and transmitted. In contrast to an uncritical interpretivism, constructionism takes a critical stance towards ‘the constructed meanings that culture bequeaths to us’, many of which ‘exist to serve hegemonic interests’ (pp. 59-60). To put it in other terms: constructionism includes a moment of negation, or destruction, of entrenched structures of meaning as well as a moment of (re)construction that develops new knowledge and practice. The underlying principle is that we can have reliable knowledge (epistemology) of what we ourselves have built or helped to bring into being (ontology). Methodologically, this means that for constructionism ‘the conventional distinction between ontology and epistemology disappears’ (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p. 111)—which may account for the absence of ontology from Crotty’s table. Again, these points are highly pertinent to creative practice. An artist-researcher, whether painting alone in the studio or studying in the academy, belongs to a wider community of shared practices and enquiry, and participates in socially constructed frameworks of meaning that may be contested through art.

These preliminary remarks on methodology may be summarised as follows. My methodology of practice-as-research is founded upon a constructionist epistemology (the view that knowledge is socially constructed in interaction with the world). In its operations, it is an epistemology of practice (in which knowledge is acquired, embodied and transmitted through practical action). It is also a reflective practice (involving critical reflection upon that action in order to explicate, extend and transform its implicit know-how). On this basis, it is possible to make a further methodological refinement
that specifically addresses the question of painting. The refinement concerns my choice of theoretical perspective (column two of Crotty’s table), which draws upon Michel Foucault’s claim that painting is a ‘discursive practice’.

Theoretical perspective: painting as a discursive practice

In the closing pages of The Archaeology of Knowledge (1972) Foucault prepares an important shift in his archaeological method, that is, his attempt to uncover the basis of knowledge by comparing the rules and regularities of discourses in different eras (pp. 191-195). His analysis now focuses upon the ‘discursive practices’ that give rise to and transform knowledge, and he extends his analysis to include sex, politics and—explicitly—painting. In general, a discursive practice comprises objects that can be talked about, a field of possible statements, groups of concepts, and a set of strategic choices (behavioural or theoretical).

Foucault proposes that painting and the (conceptual and theoretical) discourse around painting constitutes such a discursive practice. As elements of this practice, paintings are both objects shaped by concepts and codes of art, and statements made in the medium of paint. More fully, paintings are statement-events produced at a particular moment in history, and statement-things with a materiality and a function within the domain of art (pp. 128-129). They do not exist in isolation but are formed, and take their place, within a regulated field of associated statements governed by ‘anonymous’ rules of which no-one has full knowledge and which no-one can master. Each new painted-statement activates the field, performs operations, establishes relations, contributes to patterns, and generates effects—some of which may come to be transformative of the field itself. In this way, a new technique or manner of painting may embody a novel artistic strategy. But any such strategy depends upon—while

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34 Foucault (1972, p. 194). See also Smart (1985, pp. 37-41). Hall (1997) argues that, for Foucault, ‘Meaning and meaningful practice is therefore constructed within discourse … Foucault was a “constructionist”’ (p. 44).
responding to—the underlying conditions of possibility and the present conditions of operation: that is, the system of regularities, conventions, permissions and exclusions that constitutes the discursive practice of painting at that particular time.

Having described painting in these terms, Foucault argues that it must be analysed in a manner quite different from the dominant strain of art history, which tries to recapture the painter’s ‘subjective’ intentions or to uncover the ‘objective’ background that shapes both artist and artwork. An archaeology of painting would have a different method and a different aim. It would seek to discover whether colour, line, depth, space, light etc. in the painting of any given period were not:

considered, named, enunciated, and conceptualised in a discursive practice; and whether the knowledge that this discursive practice gives rise to was not embodied perhaps in theories and speculations, in forms of teaching and codes of practice, but also in processes, techniques, and even in the very gesture of the painter … It would try to show that, at least in one of its dimensions, it [painting] is discursive practice that is embodied in techniques and effects. (Foucault, 1972, pp. 193-194)

This marks a shift in Foucault’s work away from underlying structures of knowledge to a focus on actual practices, behaviours and techniques. It also issues in a new, expanded view of painting—the discursive practice of painting—as generative of both practical and conceptual knowledge of the art form.35 Two years after the (French) publication of the Archaeology of Knowledge, Foucault utilised this new approach to make a historical

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35 See Rajchman (1988) on the discursive practice of painting. He emphasises the ‘construction of the conceptual space of painting’ and the spaces in which it is produced, including the studio and, importantly, the academy (p. 93, fn. 9).
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comparison between Manet’s techniques and those of quattrocento painters. The resulting text was published in English in 2009 as Manet and the Object of Painting. It shows, in great detail, how Manet reworked three specific points of painting practice: the space of the canvas, effects of lighting, and the place of the viewer. In each case, Manet’s techniques violated the ideal transparency of quattrocento painting: the convention of masking the materiality of the painting as object in order to focus exclusively upon the image or depicted scene. Instead, Manet drew attention to the materiality of the canvas and the artifice behind the image, making them ‘an inescapable part of the viewing experience’ (Tanke, 2009 p. 67). By breaking with tradition, the ‘event named Manet’ made possible a new set of regularities for the organisation of painting practice (Foucault, 2009, p. 13). This new form of practice emerged with an accompanying discourse that was to nominate it as ‘modern’ or ‘modernist’ painting.

For Foucault, Manet’s canvases were the first to refer reflexively to painting’s ability to represent. They were the first to conceptualise and visibly expose the manner of their own representational functioning. Developing Foucault’s text, I would add that this operation reveals the dynamics of—and marks the fact of—each painting’s construction as a representation, and its constructedness as a painting. Manet’s art both invents new techniques and demonstrates the underlying principles behind them. This was to become a major tendency within painting in the twentieth century: the drive to know itself immanently, to question (like Stella) its ontological make-up and changing conditions of production. Importantly, Foucault’s reading of Manet provides evidence of the capacity of technique, or technical thinking, to ascend to a radical new concept of painting. Bois (1990) calls it ‘the epistemological moment of technique, where thought and invention take place’, the moment in which a technical operation ‘is raised to the

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36 Quattrocento is an art historical term referring to Italian painting of the fifteenth century, but Foucault used it to refer to all subsequent painting that adheres to the quattrocento ideal of transparency (see below).
dignity of an original principle’ for the knowledge and organisation of painting practice (p. 250). This is painting as discursive practice.

**Painting and the archive**

The idea of discursive practice provides a new theoretical perspective on painting as an integral combination of studio techniques and conceptual reflection. In so doing, it reveals that the methods of painting are not ‘merely’ technical and productive, but also repositories of knowledge and vehicles for strategic thinking. They form part of a practice that reflects upon and transforms its own past, or, in Foucault’s terms, that builds upon the *archive*.

In the *Archaeology of Knowledge* (pp. 128-130), Foucault defines the archive of a culture as the totality of all the discursive practices that enable statements to emerge, survive and ‘undergo regular modification’. ‘It is *the general system of the formation and transformation of statements*’ (p. 130). Elsewhere, however, he uses the term in a narrower sense to refer to a delimited area of practice such as literature or painting. In the latter case, the archive of painting is the general system of painted-statements, and written statements on painting, that has been established and preserved over time. As such, it approximates to what methodologists would call the ‘data’ of painting: the collection of historical and contemporary material available to be worked upon. But, for Foucault, the archive is not just a body of inert empirical data. It is more than the totality of paintings and the texts devoted to them, the institutions that preserve them, or the theories that validate or encode them. It is the internal system of rules that has made all of that possible as a series of *events* within the discursive practice of painting, just as it is also the effective series of works, concepts and strategies that *remain in force* and open to question and thus continue to shape painting practice today. Foucault was careful to include the proviso that the archive is ‘inexhaustible’ and ‘unavoidable’. We
can never describe it in its totality, and neither can we elaborate upon its present functioning since ‘it is from within these rules that we speak’ (p. 130).

For Foucault, Manet is the first artist to have produced his work *explicitly* as an exchange with the archive (Tanke, 2009, p. 63). His art positioned itself with respect to the existing system of practices, carried out operations upon them, and set out—strategically—to transform them. Manet addressed the fact of ‘what has been painted’ as a prior condition of possibility for his work, but also as a basis for acts of displacement and departure. In his essay ‘Fantasia of the Library’, Foucault writes of Manet and the novelist Flaubert:

> They both produced works in a self-conscious relationship to earlier paintings or texts—or rather to the aspect in painting or writing that remains indefinitely open. They erect their art within the archive. (Foucault, 1977, p. 92. Italics added.)

The quotation makes it clear that the archive is neither fixed nor closed (see also Foucault, 1972, p. 127). Instead, it shifts and changes as new statements, which it both enables and regulates, take their place within it thereby altering its overall configuration. Manet’s dialogue with the archive would not have been possible without a studio training steeped in the classical traditions and ‘the alphabet of art’. His technical know-how and deep conceptual engagement enabled him to overturn long-standing conventions and inaugurate a compelling new form of practice that both supplemented and transformed the archive. In consequence, a new discursive regularity, a new way of seeing and thinking via the medium of paint, gradually emerged. An important aspect of all such creative practice, for Foucault, is a ‘combative’ relationship with its own history as a medium (Tanke, 2009, p. 35). Finally, in his Introduction to *Manet and the Object of Painting*, Nicolas Bourriaud summarises the painter’s achievement: ‘Manet proved himself a founder of discursivity … he instituted a
“discursive field” in the same way as the works of Darwin, Buffon, Marx or Freud’ (p. 12).

Revisiting Crotty’s Table

It is now possible to revisit Crotty’s table and populate it with the various terms developed in the above discussion. In the process, the table itself has been extended along lines proposed by Grix (2002, p. 180), who adds two new structural ‘elements’ of ontology and data (see Table 2 below). Data is, for Grix, the material to be investigated. I have named this ‘the archive’ of painting, which includes the history and theory of painting as well as its materials and processes. Ontology is discussed in chapter 2.3, and in further remarks throughout chapter three. A number of further terms in Table 2 also await explanation, but are included in order to provide a complete overview of my methodology of practice-as-research. Each is introduced in its proper context within the overall argument of this thesis.37

To summarise, practice-as-research is the methodology of my creative practice. It applies to both components of this PhD thesis: the production of original artworks and the writing of the present text—the written component of the thesis. The latter is, in its own right, a form of critical discourse that is initiated by, and integrated within, my creative practice rather than being an external supplement to that practice. This is discussed further in chapter three, where I argue that post-conceptual painting has an integral discursive dimension. The ‘practice’ in ‘practice-as-research’ is therefore as much a production of discourse and critical thinking as it is a matter of paint and canvas

37 Of the outstanding terms, those pertaining to Methods are explained in chapter 2.2; ‘open’ constructionism and ‘research as fidelity’ in chapter 2.3; distributed unity and post-conceptual painting in chapter three; and the temporality of art in the Conclusion.
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or related artistic materials. The formation of research questions and problems (Gray, 1996, p. 3) takes place in the continual inter-play between painterly action and conceptual reflection.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ontology / Epistemology</th>
<th>Theoretical perspective</th>
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<tr>
<td>Ontology</td>
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<td>• Practice-as-research</td>
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<td>• Ontology of new creation</td>
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<td>Epistemology</td>
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<td>• ‘Open’ Constructionism</td>
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<td>• Epistemology of practice</td>
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Table 2: architecture of my research methodology, following Crotty (1998) and Grix (2002).

2.2: Methods

Having outlined my methodology, chapter 2.2 will be devoted to the studio methods used to produce the exhibited artworks. Given the complexity of the production process, the text will selectively focus on four methods: (1) what I call ‘absolute’ colour and (2) ‘relative’ colour, (3) collage, and (4) lithographic tusche. Each is discussed in terms of the production of aesthetic effects, but also the production of meaning. More general issues will also be addressed, including the relation of my artwork to the archive, the integration of practice and theory within the work, and questions of medium and materiality.

38 ‘Practice’ here refers to the artist’s development of ideas, strategies, practical experiments, and production of artworks. Today, the notion of practice has expanded to accommodate anything an artist does in relation to art—including discourses within or about the work. See chapter three.
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Middles, beginnings, endings

In determining their studio methods, painters generally begin in medias res. That is, in the midst of things: right there among the paints and paintings, the problems and proposed projects. Practice-as-research is no different. The chronological order of such research does not normally conform to the logical order of the methodological architecture; it does not begin from a founding ontology or epistemology, before selecting methods and data. Instead, painter-researchers tend to ‘resume’ work that is already under way. Consciously or not, they are also resuming ‘the problem of painting’, in one or another of its aspects. It is the totality of those still open—that is, still potentially productive—aspects that I have been calling the archive or ‘data’ of painting. This relation to the archive determines that painters must decide where and how to resume some previous enquiry, or at which point to break from it. Theirs is a situated practice that begins in medias res and is never entirely sure where it is going or, indeed, how it can proceed at all. As noted in the preceding chapter, Clark (1999) paraphrases Beckett in describing this as the ‘can’t go on, will go on’ syndrome of late modernist painting (p. 371). No methodology, adopted a priori, can overcome this condition. Painting consists rather of a series of decisions about where to break into the labour of painting and how if possible to continue.

If painters do manage to ‘go on’, after beginning in the middle, there remains the problem of how to end. It is well known how painters face the conundrum of never knowing whether or when a work is finally completed. They generally begin without a predetermined endpoint, and are unsupported by a methodological guarantee of the scientific kind. Moreover, there is the burden—and stigma—of having to work with methods that ‘cannot be legitimised beforehand’, which must be selected or improvised.

39 Crotty (1998) acknowledges that a research project only rarely proceeds chronologically in the manner indicated in his Table—moving left to right from epistemology to methods—and endorses the legitimacy of beginning from a choice of methods or data. In practice, research is most often initiated by a question, a practical problem, or ‘a real life issue’ (p. 13).
from within the creative process and be adapted to, or moulded by, that process as it unfolds.\footnote{Henry Slager argues that the ‘essential characteristic’ of artistic research is ‘a methodologically articulable result founded by operational strategies that cannot be legitimised beforehand’ (see Elkins, 2009, p. 55). Applied to painting, this means beginning \textit{in medias res}, then explaining the methodology retrospectively with reference to the resulting works.}

For example, in my current research I have chosen to employ lithographic operations \textit{in the service of painting}. To some traditionalists that may seem \textit{ad hoc} or artistically incoherent: a violation of medium-specificity. In practice, I am obliged to reply, it all comes down to artistic judgement, or, more precisely, to a series of informed but ‘axiomatic’ artistic decisions and the methods that both realise those decisions and bear their effects. By axiomatic, I do not mean clear or self-evident. On the contrary, I mean that such decisions are self-grounding; they are self-selected starting points. They cannot be externally validated by a methodology, theory or concept; they are always risky and remain to be proven, even when they appeal to prior experience. In the end, they can be assessed only retrospectively, according to their consequences for the painting process. That is the \textit{risk} of painting—as opposed, once again, to the in-built guarantees of scientific method.

In what follows, I describe the process of constructing an artwork using methods forged and strategically deployed in the face of an ongoing problem. My description will not, however, be an exercise in auto-ethnography. That is, it will not attempt to provide an \textit{objective} account of my studio methods and work processes (as if that were possible). Nor will its primary focus be \textit{subjective} experiences or expressive intentions (the supposed ‘view from the inside’). It will instead proceed from a position of engagement and, indeed, of conviction. This militant or ethical vocabulary is not chosen lightly. It is intended to signal that, while there is something inherently subjective and intentional about the painting process, it is also \textit{always already informed by a situational logic} through which it responds to a wider context. A creative painter always wishes to
achieve something of relevance to that context, to produce novel results that will make a difference, whether to the form or function of art or to a way of seeing and understanding the world. A creative researcher has the additional burden of having to explain the means and ways of arriving at, and the prospective value of, novel results.

To begin, then, I will start with a recent exhibition of work (from 2010) that forms part of my programme of research for PhD. The focus of this particular work is what I call ‘absolute’ colour.

**Absolute colour (colour as colour)**

But colour can also seem bottomlessly resistant to nomination, attaching itself absolutely to its own specificity and the surfaces on which it has or finds its visibility, even as it also appears subject to endless alteration arising through its juxtaposition with other colours. Subjective and objective, physically fixed and culturally constructed, absolutely proper and endlessly displaced, colour can appear as an unthinkable scandal. The story of colour and its theory within the history of art is a history of oscillations between its reduction to charm or ornament and its valorisation as the radical truth of painting. (Melville, 1996, p. 141)

In the above quotation, the opening sentence nicely captures a central theme of two of my recent exhibitions. This occurs when Melville refers to colour in terms of its resistance to nomination (conceptual definition), a resistance he attributes to a contradiction between logic and experience. Logically, we seek to define the absolute specificity of a colour, the distinctive qualities that constitute its unique essence or identity. But observational experience reveals the ‘endless alteration’ of that identity whenever the colour is juxtaposed with—or seen in close relation to—other colours. This issue of absolute versus relative colour was explored in the exhibitions Exploded
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View (Gus Fisher Gallery, Auckland, June 2010) and Now Colour, Now Shape, Now Paper (Higher Bridges Gallery, Enniskillen, July 2011).

Melville then points to a second, related contradiction. This is between the physical fixity of a colour (our sense that it is a materially invariable, trans-historical ‘substance’) and the recognition that colour is often ‘culturally constructed’, being assigned different meanings within different symbolic systems. For example, the colours orange and green have specific historical, religious and political meanings within Irish culture that they do not have for other societies.

It was perhaps due to an over-familiarity with this situation that I set out, in my studio work, to counteract or go beyond the symbolic, expressive and psychological dimensions of colour. At first, I wanted to negate them in their entirety, to strip away all associations in order to arrive at ‘pure’, unadulterated, materially specific and sensuous colour. But despite all efforts, colour seemed to carry the day. The expressive and symbolic associations could not be so easily suppressed; nor could I prevent viewers (and reviewers) from actively seeking them out. Nevertheless, I felt that it was still possible to come at colour from another angle: to approach it in terms of its material rather than cultural construction, that is, through its constructedness. Long experimentation with the materiality of paint had taught me that purity, or the effect of purity, can arise in different ways. It can be achieved through the isolation of a single intense colour. Isolation, of course, is already an operation, a process of framing or constructing or staging an appearance of non-relation (to other colours). Alternatively, the feeling of intensified purity can be achieved through the careful contrast or configuration of different colours, especially complementary colours, and the contribution of other factors such as surface texture. That is, one can effectively arrive at a seeming crystallisation or confirmation of colour identity through strategic combinations, just as one can appear to diminish that identity through ‘careless’ juxtaposition. In Matisse’s formula: ‘even colour can only be a creation’ (Alliez &
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Bonne, 2007, p. 208). Translated into my own idiom, this means that colour can only ever be a construction of some kind.

While following Matisse on this point, I have explored it through operations that differ significantly from his practice. Matisse’s work turned on the relations of colours (or relative colour) attained by operations of juxtaposition. He never, to my knowledge, experimented with a single isolated (or absolute) colour. Even when arguing that ‘the quantity of colour was its quality’, each quantity was measured for Matisse strictly in relation to other quantities within the same painting. The nearest he came to the deployment of absolute colour was in the two huge canvases of 1909-1910, *La Danse* and *La Musique*.41 There, he used only a few colours, applied uniformly across large areas of canvas: ‘I was determined to put the colours into surfaces, without nuances’ (Matisse, quoted on p. 225). My exhibitions of 2010 and 2011 set out, instead, to create a plane of colour that would be ‘absolute’ in the literal sense of being ‘absolved’ of all relations to other colours, isolated in its ‘purity’.42 What remains in common with Matisse is the use of unmixed pigments, absence of nuances (uniformity of tone), and large expanses of colour.

A key aim of those exhibitions was to make visible and intelligible the idea that colour can be fabricated or constructed, even as it appears to be entirely and naturally itself. The problem was how to achieve this ‘contradictory’ effect. It seemed necessary to first liberate colour from its traditional role in figuration and representation. The colour would have to be ‘abstract’: that is, able to impart real physical or sensuous presence apart from, or beyond, its subordination to form. I would therefore need to find a way to

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41 Referring to these works, Alliez and Bonne describe how Matisse simplified and augmented the dimensions of the colour surfaces, making ‘explicit the importance of extensive quantity’ (pp. 225-227). Hence Matisse’s formula linking the quantity and quality of colour: ‘1 cm$^2$ of blue is not as blue as a square metre of the same blue’ (p. 212).

42 ‘Purity’ connotes an ‘in-itself’ of some kind, an essence or proper identity. But, with colour, this in-itself is merely apparent or illusory; it is a constructed effect that can only be staged or performed. As Alliez and Bonne put it: ‘colours are not identitarian qualities’ cut off from the material basis of their production or the context of their display (p. 221).
overcome (or minimise) the appearance of figure/ground relations and their tendency to re-introduce depth, form, image—and representation. Ultimately, the goal was to set colour to work on its own account: to deploy colour as colour. In the end, I arrived at a form of ‘resolution’, or at least a means of deployment, of these difficult and contradictory aspects of colour. I decided to arrange the exhibitions so as to expose and play upon the tensions between absolute versus relative colour, isolated versus composed/juxtaposed colour—not as putative opposites but as twin forms of constructedness. In both exhibitions, the main gallery wall featured a large-scale installation of isolated colour (Big Yellow #1 and Big Yellow #2), while the remaining walls displayed a sequence of small compositions of relative colour.

These, then, were the problems of painting that I wished to take up, or to resume. As an artist, they were my point of contact with the archive of painting. As a researcher, they were my guiding ‘research questions’. But I did not initially encounter these problems in Melville or through my reading in art theory or art history. I arrived at them only through long experience of working with the materiality of paint and an equally long process of looking at and thinking about paintings, such as Matisse’s The Red Studio (1911). What struck me about that particular painting is its domination by a large bloc (field or area) of red paint whose sensuous impact overwhelms any representational intent. Melville’s essay helped to clarify my responses to such works, responses that were aesthetic (matters of sensation or feeling) before they were conceptual (articulated via distinct ideas). But the process of active clarification was, by then, an already established part of my artistic method: a productive movement that begins in medias res with an aesthetic response of some kind, passes through (discursive) reflection, calls for artistic decision, is tested and put to work through experimentation, and continues (indefinitely) with the presentation and critical-conceptual evaluation of artworks. These ideas will be further discussed below and in chapter three.
By 2010, then, my proposed programme of research was: to deploy colour as colour; to negate so far as possible all symbolic and expressive associations of colour; to minimise figure/ground relations; to explore absolute versus relative colour (relations of colour and scale, and quantity and quality of colour); and to make visible the constructedness of colour. I understood that I could not possibly do all of this simultaneously at all points of an exhibition. In particular, I did not expect to ‘capture’ absolute colour, but only to stage or invoke its presence. Nonetheless, it should prove possible to do enough of this, enough of the time, to make the tensions and contradictions of colour visible. And this effect of visibility would constitute the labour, or work, or active difference, of the artwork.

The exhibition Exploded View (2010)

Exploded View began with the idea of a large bloc of uniform colour: a monochrome field voided—or absolved—of all content but the colour itself. My idea was to isolate and stage this effect of ‘big colour’ without nuance. That is, the paint was to be uniform in tone, applied evenly, with no visible variations in spacing or direction of brushwork. I wished to eliminate all such effects, all indices of the bodily presence of the artist. In their place would be an unvariegated field of colour deployed as colour alone—an ‘exploded view’ of colour enlarged and isolated, as far as possible, from all the other elements of painting practice (from line, figure, depth, perspective, gesture, tonal or textural contrast, etc.). Importantly, colour was to be foregrounded as the substance of the painting, rather than a technical means in the service of representation.

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43 ‘Bloc’ denotes a large expanse of monochrome colour on a single plane. But here, as in Deleuze, bloc also takes on the additional meaning of a combined force of colour, scale, and sensation. The terms ‘bloc of colour’ and ‘bloc of sensation’ play a key role in Deleuze (2005).
44 See Alliez and Bonne on Matisse’s ideas about other ‘points of view’ (or constituent paint operations) that affect the intensity of a colour (pp. 223-224). These include: brushstrokes and their forms, their placement in the field (spacing), their density, texture, orientation, frequency and modes of distribution, and all the chromatic interactions (relations of relative colour).
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To produce this result, I decided, I would have to go beyond the limits of the large canvas format, to make the shift from easel to mural scale.

In designing the work, I laid down some additional guidelines. My plan was to empty the mural tradition of its figuration and socio-political content whilst retaining its scale and frontality, or directness of address. Second, I wished to preclude any similarity to previous displays of large-scale colour (such as Colour Field painting). A third consideration was to avoid the appearance of a huge, bulky, three-dimensional canvas. The ‘picture-as-object’ was too imposing a form; it was too obtrusive and monumental for my project. I would need to find a ‘flatter’, more ‘planar’ format. Thinking back to The Red Studio, but also to the work of German painter Katharina Grosse, I began to focus on one particular aspect of the ‘absoluteness’ of colour: the sense of colour being totally unconstrained. In certain of Grosse’s paintings, large areas of colour appear to seep out from the high corners of gallery spaces to spread unchecked across the walls and ceiling. The colour seems to seek out its own natural limits, unconstrained by any external model, end, framework, or underlying support. It occurred to me that this type of work presents a body of colour—a body of colour ‘on the march’ (to quote Matisse); a body of colour in the act of delimiting and colouring its own world. But Grosse’s are highly ‘nuanced’ works, using mixed colours, as opposed to a single bloc of absolute colour.

Another solution was required. Despite all temptation to paint directly onto the wall (like Grosse), I elected instead to use paper as a medium. I decided upon a series of discrete rectangular white sheets. Each would be coloured in the same high key, and pinned to the wall to form a large-scale installation. In this way, I could create a type of ‘mediated’ mural, separated from the supporting wall by a minimal but visible gap. A second technical issue was to ensure that all sheets were coloured in the most uniform (non-nuanced) manner possible. The solution was to use a printmaking process rather than to hand-paint each sheet individually. By using stone lithography, I was able to
I quickly produce a large number of sheets, each coloured with unmixed printer’s ink of the same intense yellow. I opted for a Hanco Benzidine yellow ink—the printmaking industry regards this as the ‘purest’ yellow, being neither too warm (towards red) nor too cool (towards blue). The process required each paper sheet to be cut to fit the dimensions of the lithographic stone (38cm x 57cm). It was then a straightforward matter to choose Rives BFK printing paper. In terms of colour, this process ensured a very consistent monochrome across the whole of the installation—the desired bloc of absolute, all-over colour.

I calculated that I would need 66 sheets to complete the work (418cm x 342cm). The sheets were to be carefully aligned in a rectangular grid pattern, abutting against one other, and held in place using dressmaking pins. Experimenting with this format, I encountered technical and aesthetic issues. I was obliged to recognise—through practical, bodily engagement with the contingencies of wall, paper, pin, scale and coloured ink—that any artistic project has to yield at crucial moments to the force of the material and the aesthetic. In the process of hanging the work, I noticed that the occasional minimal gap began to appear between contiguous sheets. This had been anticipated. Indeed, it was accepted as an immanent ‘effect’ of obdurate materiality, and left to stand ‘uncorrected’. It was deployed as a visible sign of the tension between the material work of construction and the desire for an absolute, ‘immaterial’ sensation of colour. However, a second and greater issue was to emerge from this process. It became obvious that an ‘absolute’ plane of colour, although undoubtedly impressive, would require at least some minimal variation if it was to hold and reward the viewer’s attention. Again, this was not unexpected, but its resolution required me to look further into lithographic processes and resort to supplementary methods of construction.
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Additional methods of construction: gap, tusche, cut-out and collage

These additional methods were needed to complete the overall look—the governing aesthetic—of the installation. After working with various prototypes, I decided that the bloc of yellow colour should no longer cover the entire grid (of 11 x 6 sheets), nor would it form a plane that was wholly flush with the surface of the paper. Instead, I introduced distinctions of various kinds.

First, the bloc would include a gap or hole—a significant internal variation, the size of approximately half of one sheet—at one crucial point. This would alleviate the ‘fact’ of absoluteness, without reducing aesthetic impact. The gap would seem, rather, to be a ‘natural feature’ of the work, a breach in the surface development, a sign of internal difference. To create this gap, I varied the lithographic process for one sheet of paper, applying tusche to the edges of the lithographic stone only. Reviewing this effect, I elected to create a number of additional very small gaps, distributed arbitrarily towards the right of the coloured plane. This was a purely aesthetic decision, dictated by the requirements of appearance alone. The second variation was to create an unevenly shaped or non-rectilinear bloc of (yellow) colour within the outer rectangle of (white) paper. The principal ‘irregularities’ would lie along the bottom and right edges. The intention was that the colour should appear to seek out its own formless form. It must appear as a mobile body of unconstrained colour spreading down from the ceiling in expression of its own immanent power. (Only at the extreme left would the flow of colour be impeded where it meets the adjoining wall of the gallery.) To produce this effect, two different methods were employed. One was liquid tusche. The other was a combination of cut-out and collage.
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Liquid tusche

Liquid tusche is a greasy, viscous lithographic wash that is used to lay down a basic image. It is brushed onto the lithographic stone and allowed to dry out before coloured ink is applied. The distinctive quality of tusche is that, as it dries upon the stone, it creates an effect of ‘reticulation’. That is, it leaves a visible trace of the chemical process of solidification, which takes the form of a wave-like or web-like pattern. This pattern emerges strongly after the processes of etching, inking and pressing. As well as being tenacious, liquid tusche is also notoriously sensitive to any variation in handling, so that results can be uncertain. During my studio experiments with the tusche technique, I decided to embrace—and even accentuate—this uncertainty rather than attempt to control it. For instance, I took the unorthodox step of preparing the stone by washing it with water. The wet surface allowed the tusche to spread more easily, free from the usual constraints of imposed form. When dry, it produced an image that was doubly unpredictable: both in particulars of shape, and in details of surface pattern. This stochastic element, or element of chance, was to become an important dimension of the completed artwork. It provides a visible index of the work’s aesthetic, in which the controlling artistic parameters allow for random effects deriving from the immanent qualities of the materials used. Such an approach visibly acknowledges its ‘indebtedness’ to materiality. (This important aesthetic and ‘ethical’ question is discussed in my concluding chapter.) In the Exploded View installation, the effect of reticulation can be clearly seen at the extreme right, in the centre of the final column of sheets. I worked two of those sheets together to create a plausible outward spread or wave-like flow of colour, distinguished from the central body of the bloc by their subtly differentiated surface.

45 See the glossary of lithographic terms at http://litografia.pl/en/slownik_tusche.html
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Cut-out and collage

The final ‘supplementary’ technique was a combination of cut-out and collage. For Matisse, cut-out or papier découpé was a secondary means of eliminating the need for line drawing to produce contour. (The first, as later for Grosse, was the use of large masses of colour that delimit their own boundaries.) Matisse employed this method in his later years, when illness made it difficult for him to paint. He would cut shapes from prepared paper, painted in gouache by assistants, and attach them to a background support. Extremely flat in appearance, and generally devoid of internal detail, the shapes succeeded in suggesting the embodiment (or silhouette) rather than the graphic depiction of objects such an apple, a flower, or the famous Blue Nude (1952). Their severe frontality also defied traditional perspective.46

In Exploded View, cut-out was employed to give a definite, hard edge to the bloc of colour, in contrast to the painterly effects of tusche. I felt that a highly reticulated, wave-like edge would be too illusionistic for extensive use within a painting designed to foreground absolute (unworked) colour, materiality and constructedness. The tusche was therefore retained in two of the outer sheets only. Elsewhere, the edge of the bloc was created using cut-out. Retaining the overall rectangular format, I replaced the outermost yellow sheets (at the right and bottom) with blank white sheets, which were then partly overlaid with arrangements of cut-out yellow shapes. In this way, an informe body of yellow colour appeared to flow across the supporting grid (of white paper) without completely filling it. For the cut-out sections, I used a thin architect’s paper hand-painted with cadmium yellow acrylic. When attached to the heavier printmaking paper, it was indiscernible in tone from the original, lithographically produced yellow. It also appeared flat but not completely so, causing a minimal raising of the surface. Not only was this layer visible when examined closely, but it also produced effects that

46 On Matisse and cut-out, see Buchberg et al (2014). The Snail (1953), 286.4cm x 287cm, is unusual in combining Matisse’s two methods of avoiding line drawing: large areas of colour, and the method of cut-out.
reverberated across the whole of the installation. It constituted a ‘built-up’ edge that contrasted significantly with the central bloc, thereby re-introducing the possibility of differences in depth between foreground and background areas. Further, the paper support and the bloc of colour were no longer so apparently congruent: seen from distance, the yellow colour appeared detachable from the (layers of) paper, set free to establish a ‘floating’ immaterial presence of its own.

The completed installation thus reveals the presence of different techniques and processes. The resulting effects are not simply optical or aesthetic, they are redoubled as signs of constructedness: they indicate how the work was constructed, and they foreground the fact that it is such a construction. Among the techniques employed in this way are the contrasts between paint, tusche, and printmaker’s ink; different types and weights of paper; flatness versus depth (surface plane versus collage); a formless bloc of colour versus the eternal geometry of the grid; visible gaps between sheets, and between paper and wall; and so on. This patent display of facture or constructedness\(^47\) stands in opposition to the sense of an organic, wholly natural colour extending itself in space (just as it violates the conventional idea of painting as ideal composition). Both can be seen, but not simultaneously, as in a Gestalt switch.\(^48\) At one moment we experience the sensation of a large mass of apparently ‘absolute’ colour. At another, we see a formal construction in paper, pins and pigment. It is the play or tension between

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\(^47\) I use the term ‘facture’ to denote the material production of an artwork, stressing the fact of its constructedness, and the etymological relation to ‘manu-facture’. Buchloh (1984) provides a more complex reading of facture, which turns on the distinction between composition and construction (pp. 86-90). ‘Composition is the contemplative approach of the artist in his work. Technique and industry have confronted art with the problem of construction as an active process, and not a contemplative reflection’ (pp. 90-91). In this thesis, composition connotes the ideal unity of a work: its completeness, wholeness, and—closure. By contrast, construction connotes a contingent ‘putting together’ or assemblage of selected materials, and the possibility of incompleteness—openness to further work of de- and re-construction.

\(^48\) On the Gestalt switch, see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Optical_illusion](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Optical_illusion). One example is the faces/vase illusion in which figure and ground are reversible. This phenomenon is accentuated in certain collages of synthetic Cubism, in which elements appear to change places in depth: alternately lying on, behind, or in front of the surface—a kind of three way Gestalt switch that defies a single ‘correct’ view. This type of artistic effect can be taken as a model for an ethical or political relation in which all perspectives are equally respected.
these two, the visible *presentation* of this internal difference, that animates the artwork and motivates its address to the audience.

**Big Yellow # 2 and the smaller works**

For the exhibition *Now Colour, Now Shape, Now Paper*, the installation of absolute colour was constructed quite differently. Rather than cutting and then colouring sheets of white paper, I opted instead to use ‘readymade’ A3 yellow paper supplied by the manufacturer. This meant that, after forming an overall grid, I could cut directly into the outermost sheets to produce a shaped edge. Tusche, collage, and their effects, were sacrificed. The result was a much purer body of absolute colour—entirely unworked—that occupied a single plane, with no internal variation (no white gaps) and no raising of the surface. What was sacrificed by way of aesthetic interest led to a conceptual gain: the use of readymade paper augmented the sense of *construction* from available materials as opposed to notions of ideal *composition* (that is, the masterful imposition of form upon inert matter). Moreover, in *Big Yellow #2* more emphasis fell upon the play of difference between cut and uncut sheets. The former were unique and occupied a specific place; the latter were indistinguishable from one another so that each could have occupied any position within the central (unworked) area. These oppositions between fixed and variable, unique and generic, worked and unworked, were absorbed into the descriptive-conceptual vocabulary that emerged from, and informed, the artwork’s construction.

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49 The *Big Yellow* works included further indices of materiality, constructedness, temporality and chance. The dressmaking pins introduced minor effects of sculpture (extending into three-dimensional space in front of the plane of colour) and of drawing (the shadows of the pins traced visible lines whose changing position tracked the passage of time as the natural light changed in the gallery). The gap between paper and wall varied locally as air circulated through the gallery space and produced slight movement of the sheets. Finally, in *Big Yellow #1* one sheet was removed from the right upper corner of the grid, undermining the ideal geometry and apparent ‘completeness’ of the rectangular structure.
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The title of this second exhibition refers to the Gestalt effect previously mentioned, in which the audience is invited to switch between perspectives when viewing the large installation, seeing colour or shape or paper, in turn—but no representational image. In both the 2010 and 2011 exhibitions, the installation of absolute colour was accompanied by smaller works of relative colour, which also avoid ‘imagery’ but make use of multiple shapes and variable colour relations. These works were framed behind glass, and displayed either as stand-alone paintings or in diptych or triptych format. When developing them, I began by brushing broad lines—or ‘material flows’—of colour onto permatrace drafting film. Gradually, however, both the method of construction and the ‘research question’ shifted: techniques of cut-out and collage came to displace brushwork; and, while still exploring sensation and affect, the works now focused thematically on the passage from matter to meaning. To explain this new approach, it will help to return briefly to the archive of painting—to Matisse and Mondrian.

Relative or relational colour

In contradiction of any attempt to produce absolute colour, Matisse argued that colour does not exist in isolation: it can only be defined relationally. For Matisse, ‘colour only exists qua constructive expression of the relation of forces between colours … painting requires organisation’ (Alliez & Bonne, 2007, p. 208). Further, ‘the intensity of colour depends upon a regime at once superficial and relative from which every “in-itself” has been banished’ (p. 212). In other words, for Matisse there is no absolute colour (no ‘in-itself’ of colour); the sensuous impact of any coloured surface will depend upon the adjacency of other colours that co-determine its manner of appearing (including the white of the gallery walls). This relationality of colour is explored aesthetically in the small works, but is also taken up conceptually in order to expose a general characteristic of signifying systems.
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In language, for example, the relation between a word and its referent is entirely arbitrary. There is neither a necessary nor a natural link between the word ‘tree’ and an actual tree. Rather, linguistic meaning derives its authority from conventional usage and is founded upon nothing more than the differential play of the words that make up the system (Hawkes, 1977, pp. 24-28). In the case of abstract painting, a colour or a mark is, at the material level, pre-signifying or a-signifying; it acquires meaning (it begins to signify something) only when deployed differentially within the overall system by which painting is regulated and understood. An example would be Bois’ reading of Mondrian (see chapter one). For Bois, Mondrian’s principle of plastic equivalence ensured that elements of line, colour and plane took their significance only from their relation to each other within a non-hierarchical arrangement. This enabled his painting to serve as a model for social relations of mutual recognition. Nonetheless, Bernstein (2006) contends that this is not the end of the matter (pp. 240-242). Criticising the ‘crudeness of the claim for the arbitrariness of the sign’, he argues that the emphasis on the relation between elements—that is, on syntax—tends to detach those elements from their material determination. It overlooks the fact of the elements’ sensuous qualities ‘being there before us and somehow managing a claim’ for meaning in their own right (p. 242).

In a footnote, Bernstein refers to Kristeva’s unorthodox use of the term ‘the semiotic’ which may be deployed (in the present context) as part of a tripartite schema of semiotic-syntax-semantics. In this schema, semiotic refers to the particular sensuous qualities of each element of line, colour or form; syntax indicates the arrangement of these elements, or the relations between them; and semantics is the meaning that we derive from their combination. Bernstein’s main point is that syntax should not (and does not) dominate the schema; meaning depends also, and fundamentally, upon the

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50 For Kristeva’s definition of the semiotic, see Lechte (2013) and Barrett (2011). Barrett: ‘Kristeva’s semiotic indicates a realm of meaning that is in excess of or cannot be contained by the signifier—a sensuous, bodily knowing that goes beyond the naming of objects or describing of scenes’ (p. 19).
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Semiotic elements of line and colour affect us sensibly: they produce immediate bodily sensations of pleasure, harmony, or their opposites. In themselves, they are indeterminate, pre- or a-signifying. But, Bernstein argues, the practice of ‘painterly repetition’ across a series of works is able to ‘confer’ on this semiotic material ‘a symbolic form, a chance for becoming meaning or a chance for meaning to arise through them’. 51

For Bernstein, repetition can take the place of difference—the semiotic can complement or displace syntax—as an alternative method for authorising ‘the meaning-potential’ of an element, for transforming an artistic gesture into a possible carrier of meaning (p. 244). Repetition does this by enacting the construction of form. Bernstein cites the example of Robert Ryman’s mechanical white brushstrokes. Their repetition across consecutive works raises this unpromising semiotic material to the level of form and meaning: they manage to signify something to us. 53 The specific value of repetition is that the resulting meaning can never be entirely unequivocal: it can never be fully determined by convention (agreement between artists and the art public) or by comparison (its differential relation to other practices). What remains undetermined is the opacity of the colour, line, or brushstroke as such: its simple being-there before us, its ‘non-transparency’ to conceptual understanding. Bernstein concludes that ‘how painting means is not up to us’: conventional agreement on meaning is needed because

51 Bernstein (2006): ‘If one thinks of the elements of painting as composing what Julia Kristeva calls “the semiotic,” namely, those presymbolic material pulsions that are indeterminate between sheer material things and psychological events, then painterly repetition confers on its semiotic elements (the semiotic material of visual perception) a symbolic form, a chance for becoming meaning or a chance for meaning to arise through them, that everyday life has withdrawn from them or defaulted on providing for them’ (p. 371, fn. 40).

52 Pippin (2002) makes a similar point about the movement from semiotic material to meaning: ‘[T]he constituents of meaning are shapes, borders, dots, frames, and so forth. They are potentialities understood conceptually, as moments of sensible meaning that painting can be about, thus being about both itself [painting] and the possibility of sensible meaning itself’ (p. 22, italics added).

53 What they signify is open to debate, but it is at least clear that the act of repetition makes Ryman’s brushstroke visible as a form, and thus confers upon it a potential for meaning. For Bois, Ryman’s brushstroke reveals the condition of painting in an era of mass mechanical production. For Bernstein, it stands for materiality and our embodied experience of that materiality. See chapter three.
art is bound to a sensuous and material dimension that remains ultimately unknowable, yet the agreed meaning falls short for precisely that same reason. Each element of painting remains forever ‘indeterminate between a potential for meaning and non-meaning’ (p. 246). In Clark’s phrase, it ‘exists at the edge of insignificance’.\textsuperscript{54} Our normal experience of a ‘good’ painting is to keep going back to it—to confirm that and how it affects us, so as to grant those sensuous affects a valued place in our wider world of understanding.

\textit{Chine collé, cut-out, collage}

The above discussion outlines some of the ideas informing the production of the large-scale installations and the smaller series of paintings. The methods used in both cases are grounded in a material practice of colour informed by conceptual reflection, and each takes its point of departure from an issue in the archive of previous painting. The large works isolate a single colour so as to stage an effect of absoluteness (thereby thematising the semiotic in painting); the smaller works deploy multiple forces of colour to create an all-over construction (variously emphasising syntax or relations of difference, and repetition, in conjunction with the semiotic). Both are concerned with the passage from matter to meaning (semantics), and both employ techniques of cut-out and collage—although this is taken much further in the smaller works.

The key technique used in those smaller works is \textit{chine collé}, which consists of affixing cut-out pieces of (very thin) rice paper to a surface of (much heavier) printmaking paper. As a type of collage, it resembles the \textit{papier collé} practices of Picasso and Braque but is deployed to quite different effect. To be clear: my use of collage is not about attaching ‘tokens of reality’ to the picture plane, as in the crude understanding of Synthetic Cubism; nor does it systematically engage the issues identified by Greenberg...\textsuperscript{54} Clark (1982): ‘Modernist art exists at the edge of insignificance … it stands in constant danger of not being understood even by those who sympathise with it.’
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in his essays on Cubist collage—the tensions between depicted flatness and literal flatness, optical illusion and pictorial illusion. Instead, the emphasis falls once again on the constructedness of the paintings, the visible fact that the surface has been worked all-over and built up from prepared pieces of variously coloured material. In addition, the paintings seek to enact or make visible the emergence of form, and to exemplify what I have come to call ‘open constructionism’. The following section will explain these ideas in turn.

From formless to form

As Bernstein suggests, it can be difficult for a single (non-representational) artwork to demonstrate the terms of its development. Repetition across a number of works, however, can gradually establish the lineaments of a form, while tracing its emergence from a prior formlessness. My series of collaged paintings function in this way. They contain no pre-conceived images or representational intent; instead, each is little more than the visible consequence of its method of construction. That method begins by cutting out, or tearing out, shapes from pre-coloured sheets of rice paper. The edges of the shapes reflect this process: they are marked by abrupt angular turns and ultra-fine scissor snips, or a ragged tearing that rips into the paper to create a ‘feathered’ edge. When fixed in place, the effect is one of raw or undisguised materiality—a kind of evidential collage in which elements show themselves in a state that appears prior to form: their syntactical co-ordination seems tenuous, a product of obvious labour that requires active investment by the viewer.\textsuperscript{55}

\textsuperscript{55} Pippin (2002) remarks on the tenuous nature of such constructedness: ‘[I]n Cézanne, constituent elements of painterly meaning begin to come apart, or perhaps they come to seem more and more a result of having been actively put together (held together in order to belong together), and where all that becomes thematized as such. (Seurat’s points and cubism’s lines and planes could serve the same function.)’ (p. 22).
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The construction of the collage proceeds, piece by piece, with no pre-conceived plan of organisation, just a process of mixing and arranging together. Overlaps occur, sometimes partial, sometimes complete, until the supporting surface (the printmaking paper) is entirely covered over. As the layers accumulate, it becomes difficult to register a discernible ground. There are sculptural effects of *bas relief* and visible outlines of ‘buried’ shapes but, taken in their totality, the cut-outs seem to co-create and co-inhabit an ‘ungrounded’ space. There is no single supporting plane, no place for the eye to finally rest, neither a bottom layer nor an apparent foreground element to determine orientation and focus. Instead, the eye is led ceaselessly from colour to colour, shape to shape, layer to layer, to take in the whole of the variegated construction in all particulars; attention is mobilised and dispersed all over.

This way of working lends itself to different terminologies. For example, Cazeaux (2000) writes of ‘contingent material involvement’ (p. 381). This refers to a realm of aesthetic experience ‘beyond conceptual description’, in which thought is no longer organised by abstract categories but relies on knowledge rooted in the material, the sensory and the spatial. As an artistic method, it creates conditions for a ‘formless’ form to emerge through the material act of construction, rather than by projecting pre-conceived forms onto supposedly inert matter. Alliez and Bonne (2007) invoke Matisse’s term ‘*la marche*’ (pp. 209, 218) to describe the moment in which a painting seems to mutate into a self-organising forward movement, driven by ‘an idea that [the artist] does not truly know’. To work in this way means to collapse the gap between thought and the creative act; ideas retain their importance only insofar as they issue in ‘a continuous becoming’ of the artwork’s internal evolution. Such ‘processual materialism’ (p. 209) cedes authority to the potentialities of the materials and the hazards of construction. What these differing terminologies hold in common, clearly, is the principle that there is no imposition of a higher—external, pre-existing, *transcendent*—form. Instead, form is constructed *immanently*: it emerges through the process of working with the materials, their sensuous particularities and their
differential relations. In my collages, an emerging pattern may be accentuated with decorative touches of liquid tusche or the application of a dragged comb. The initially random arrangement is thus tempered by attempts to strike an aesthetic balance, whether ‘awkward’ or more resolved. Over a series of works, it becomes possible to identify the rudiments of a repeated form, a recognisable style or a ‘look’ with the potential to bear meaning.

In summary, it may be said that the cut-out method takes on the function of a medium, one whose logic is to work the surface all-over using the freely applied forces of colour, shape and placement. There is no over-coding, no projection of a unifying idea onto multiple material units, just an evidential (self-showing) form of additive collage. In this sense, each of the works remains ‘open’: it does not offer itself as a completed thing, a declared reality, a structure sufficient unto itself. Instead, it presents—erects and holds up to view—a possible construction: a performance of meaning or structure that is always tentative, reconfigurable, finite and destined for replacement. Such a practice of ‘open constructionism’ implies a critique of the illusion of full presence, the idea that each existing thing is a closed totality whose identity is known and secure. In contrast, these collages appear home-made, precarious, and ripe for de- and re-construction into other similar forms in an unending series. And the meaning of that series is the ongoing potentiality of open construction itself, the possibility of further and different meaning.

2.3: Theory

This third and final section of chapter two will examine the place of theory within the methodology of practice-as-research. Already, it has been proposed (following Foucault) that painting is a discursive practice, a point of view that provides an overall theoretical perspective on my researches. The next chapter and the Conclusion will add to this perspective, making the additional theoretical claims that contemporary painting
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is a post-conceptual practice and that, in common with other art forms, it has an unusual temporality.

In what follows immediately below, I will give two just examples of the types of theory that artists tend to incorporate into their practical enquiries. In this instance, I will outline particular ideas—from the French philosophers Alain Badiou and Gilles Deleuze (with Felix Guattari)—that have become central to my thinking and practice of art. Such theory, although initially external to studio practice, becomes integrated into its processes. It is never a case, however, of illustrating or embodying theoretical ideas, nor of conforming rigidly to their precepts. Instead, practice-as-research is always initiated in, shaped by, and carried out in accordance with the needs and experimental methods of the visual arts. Those methods routinely include the appropriation of aspects of theory that, in Verwoert’s phrase, constitute ‘a strategic gain’ in the artistic project. The strategic gain can consist of informed reflection on the project, development of a working vocabulary, clarification of ongoing ideas, production of supporting texts, and discursive communication with an audience. All of this is already an integral part of what it means for painting to be a discursive practice: to produce or elaborate ideas and written statements in tandem with painted object-statements.

**Badiou: research as fidelity**

Badiou has become important to my methodology of practice-as-research in two quite distinct ways. First, he provides a very different perspective on the research process, one that is much closer to my actual experience of that process than the ‘methodological image’ of scientific research. Second, he presents a new way of thinking about the archive (of painting) and the work of developing the archive. In addition, he offers insight into the creative process itself. But we will approach Badiou indirectly at first, by way of Cézanne.
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For much of his career, Cézanne was regarded as a ‘barbarian’ painter, a ‘carpenter of colour’ whose work failed to observe even the basic rules of painting (Danchev, 2012, p. 4). He was considered unworthy of a one-person show until 1895, aged fifty-six. And yet, despite the critical rejection, a set of artworks (by other artists) began to emerge in response to something that was glimpsed, uncertainly, in his canvases. The value of Cézanne’s work remained, for a long time, undecidable; nonetheless, certain artists dared to affirm—to decide without any secure basis or possibility of external validation—that Cézanne’s work constituted a new idea or a new proposition in painting. Their encounter with his work marked what Badiou calls ‘an event’.56

In a given situation (such as the art world of Cézanne’s time) an event brings to light a possibility that was hitherto unforeseen, incalculable, and unthinkable. Its occurrence marks a rupture with the sanctioned knowledge of the time; it explodes and thereby reveals the limitations of the existing framework of understanding. Artistic events, in particular, ‘always bear on the question of what counts, or doesn’t count, as form’ (Badiou, 2013, p. 68). Their occurrence is signalled by ‘an accession to form’ of what was previously excluded as formless, illegitimate, or extraneous to art. Badiou often cites the example of Schoenberg’s unthinkable ‘invention’ of atonality in music. In Cézanne’s case, his violations of the conventions of space, perspective, brushwork, line etc. (Tuma, 2002, p. 65), were considered grotesque and invalid. Yet it was these same violations that were taken up and developed—gradually brought to clear formal expression—in the work of succeeding generations.57 Painting practices from Cubism to Abstract Expressionism together constructed what Badiou (2005a) calls an enquiry into

56 Danchev (2012) names key members of the first two generations of artists who were seized by the ‘event’ of Cézanne (pp. 8-12). Even they found it extremely difficult to define what it was that Cézanne had actually achieved. In 1907, a year after Cézanne’s death, Maurice Denis remarked: ‘I have never heard an admirer of Cézanne give me a clear and precise reason for his admiration’ (p. 6). Twenty years later, Roger Fry still lamented: ‘In the last resort we cannot in the least explain why the smallest product of his [Cézanne’s] hand arouses the impression of being a revelation of the highest importance, or what it is that gives it its grave authority’ (p. 6).

57 On Cézanne’s range of influence, see Rishel and Sachs (2009) and Rothkopf and Stavitsky (2009).
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the truth of the Cézanne event (p. 12). That is, they pledged their fidelity to it, oriented their work to it, and enquired systematically into that which the event had the power to make possible. It should be noted that, for Badiou, truth becomes actual only in the wake of an event. It consists in the set of operations by which the consequences of the event are gradually worked out and made discernible: this truth procedure is the protocol of the event’s incorporation into the world.

For present purposes, what is important is that these ideas open up a new understanding of creative research. Practice-as-research (in painting) may be recast as fidelity to an event in the archive or previous history of painting. As a type of truth procedure, it is conducted via an enquiry that has an essential discursive or conceptual dimension but is carried forward primarily through the production of artworks. For Badiou, it is the artworks (not the artists) that together constitute the true subject of the artistic event. A subject is that which is called into existence by an event, opens itself to whatever new idea may emerge, and works out the disruptive consequences of that idea for its situation. For the situation of painting, an event may be associated with the names of Cézanne, Manet etc., according to the specific issues investigated. Its truth procedure would be the long sequence or configuration of modernist painting: those seminal works that uncovered and formalised a whole new set of post-evental possibilities. From today’s perspective, fidelity would consist in the commitment to related but newer lines of enquiry: the effort to extract further (as yet unseen) consequences from the event—this time in the face of denials that modernist painting has anything left to offer.

According to Badiou (2013), artists today find themselves in an ‘interval period’

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58 For Badiou, there is no universal truth, only local truths of situations such as the situation of French politics or the situation of Western painting. Badiou (2003): ‘Truths are affirmations to which in principle we can all actively hold true, in excess of our ability to prove that what we thereby affirm is correct or justified in any demonstrable sense. Truths are not to be confused with matters of knowledge or opinion, they are not subject to established criteria of adequation or verification … truths are militant processes which, beginning from a specific time and place within a situation, pursue the step-by-step transformation of that situation’ (p. 111).

59 For an argument that some of those possibilities were suppressed by the rise of theory in the 1960s, and constitute a ‘hidden reserve’ of further potential for painting, see Hochdörfer (2009) and Siegel (2006).
between two events: the past event to which they must remain faithful, and that future event to which they must remain open but whose arrival is unforeseeable and incalculable (p. 77).

Clearly, this is an unorthodox perspective on research, and one that diverges from the standard scientific image of methodology. In place of dispassionate, ‘objective’ enquiry secured and validated by proven procedure, it invests in an ‘ethical’ language of fidelity, commitment, and openness to the undecidable and unforeseeable. Yet it has its own immanent logical rigour. The ‘epistemological moment of technique’ testifies to the emergence of new tacit knowledge in the studio: it occurs (if and when it does occur) as a successful formalisation of some aspect of the event that had been grasped only intuitively. Matisse spoke of that moment when the artist is ‘driven by an idea that [she] does not truly know’, when she must submit to the unpredictable growth (*la marche*) of the painting. The artist must commit to an idea and act *in advance of* prospective knowledge so that the idea’s potentialities are given the freedom to emerge. Moreover, research in fidelity to an event is conducted according to a strict ‘discipline of consequences’ (Badiou, 2005b) that will, in time, reveal the full extent of its contribution to new understanding. Unlike experimental science, which generally yields immediate evidence to indicate success or failure, truly innovative art must await judgement. It is not possible (*pace* Joseph Kosuth) to propose ‘This is Art’ with immediate effect. The true proposal is always affirmative yet conditional: ‘This will have been a work of art’ *if* and when it has been taken up within the art world community and succeeds in supplementing the existing knowledge of art. There is no immediate surety of success, but only retrospective validation. These ideas are further elaborated in my Conclusion.

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60 Kear (2013): ‘For Badiou, formalisation provides the mechanism enabling the indeterminate idea of the event to be “staged” in material form’ (p. 22). Badiou (2007): ‘Form is therefore an idea as given in its material index’ (p. 159).
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Deleuze and Guattari: sensation, affect, percept

The work of Deleuze (and Guattari) is also important to my methodology at two distinct levels. First, it presents a new understanding of ontology: a new view of what art, or anything, is. And, second, it opens up a radically different perspective on the reception of art, rescuing aesthetic experience from its reduction to questions of linguistic meaning and judgement. I shall address these ideas in turn.

Like Badiou, Deleuze is a leading theorist of the event. For both philosophers, the event answers to a basic ontological question: how does change—not mere novelty, but something genuinely new—come into the world? Yet there are great differences in their respective concepts of the event. Badiou’s events are ‘rare and historical’; they ‘come to be’ only when revealed by a retroactive intervention that thinks them through and works out their consequences. By contrast, Deleuze’s events are ‘common and natural’; they are experienced (felt) as movement and change ‘in both the human and inhuman realms’ whenever two or more forces connect. Such events do not happen to bodies, but in and through them, affecting and transforming the world and ourselves (Mullarkey, 2010, p. 173).

These brief points take us straight to the heart of the matter—to Deleuze’s ontology and to his emphasis on affect. Since Aristotle, the dominant idea of an object has been of a combination of hyle (matter) and morphe (form). In this hylomorphic ontology, an intelligent agent (such as God or Nature) imposes a design and an essential meaning upon inert, passive matter. By contrast, Deleuzian ontology rejects this idea of Being as consisting in discrete essences and fixed, stable identities. Instead, the whole of life is seen as an immanent flow of creative movement, of the interaction of forces and bodies in unending processes of change and becoming. Such an ontology ‘assigns primacy to processes of formation as against their final products, and to flows and transformations of materials as against [fixed] states of matter’ (Ingold, 2010, pp. 2-3).
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An artwork, for example, is no longer regarded as a given object endowed with secure representational meaning. It arises, rather, from the event of encounter between the artist and her materials, each enabling or affecting the other and together leading to the production of a new body (the artwork). The artwork is then engaged by viewers in a second type of productive encounter which issues, when effective, in an event (or uprising) of transformative meaning (O’Sullivan, 2006, p. 21). The various meanings, in turn, are circulated by the viewers along unpredictable chains of connection with potential for further encounters, further events that result in changes of understanding or behaviour.

What is essential here is the idea of *affect*, understood as the reciprocal impact of one body on another, a coming-together in which both are transformed in some manner and to some degree. Each body along the chain of connections—the art material and the artist, the artwork and the viewer—is ‘already the envelopment of a potential’: each has an inherent capacity to affect and to be affected in turn, in specific ways (p. 21). Any encounter between them is a moment or event of ‘affective capture’ involving the passage of material force(s). The bodies are caught up in a process of *becoming* that arises from their relation and passes through them, bringing difference into the *Being* of the world.

Affects, then, have little to do with the art historical idea that artworks function like linguistic signs (or texts) awaiting interpretation. Their place in art is alongside the *percept*, as one of the two components of what Deleuze and Guattari (1994) call ‘sensation’ (p. 164). Percepts ‘make perceptible the imperceptible forces that populate the world, affect us, and make us become’ (p. 182). Certain paintings by Cézanne, for example, are said to grant us a glimpse of the geological forces that fold a mountain, the power of germination in the apple, the thermic force rising through the landscape (Deleuze, 2005, p. 41). These percepts differ from everyday perceptions in that they are composed and ‘preserved’ in an artwork, and affect the attentive viewer. Beyond our
normal vision of things, percepts make visible the unseen affects: the forces of movement and becoming that lie ‘beneath’ the world as we typically experience it.

For Deleuze and Guattari (1994), a work of art is a ‘being of sensation and nothing else’; a painting is a compound of affects and percepts, a ‘bloc of sensations’ (p. 164). At this most basic (ontological) level, artworks operate in a-signifying ways that escape or exceed linguistic and conceptual capture. What they do—how they affect and move us—is more fundamental than any meaning we might extract from or interpretively attribute to them. Deleuze (2005) contends that Francis Bacon’s paintings act directly upon the nervous system: they register as sensations felt by the body rather than signs decoded through the ‘intermediary of the brain’ (p. 25). Sensations precede perception and its subsumption under concepts; they operate immediately at the material level of the body. This, then, is a materialist theory of meaning in distinction from language-based ideas of signification and representation (O’Sullivan, 2006, p. 20). As such, it alters our understanding of the reception of art. In place of judgements of taste, the performative dimension of the artwork—what it does or makes possible—becomes the kernel of aesthetic experience. In an encounter with an artwork, neither the work nor the viewer is thought in terms of pre-given identity. Each is a material body with expressive potential. An ‘affective assemblage’ forms between them, permitting the passage of a transformative force: ‘I become in the sensation and something happens through the sensation’ (Deleuze, 2005, p. 25). Meaning transpires as or through the event of material connection.

In their sole-authored works, Deleuze and Guattari take somewhat different positions on these ideas. Deleuze (1998) refers to affects as the ‘dark precursors’, or pre-condition, of our conceptual system (p. 144). His claim is that a shared system of sense (meaning) is first made possible by the fundamental non-sense of random affective encounters. If this is the case, then as Rajchman (2000) notes, we might ‘look to sensation’—and an art of sensation—‘for the condition of other possibilities of life and thought’ (p. 127).
For his part, Guattari (1998) takes a wider view of meaning in the artwork. He accepts that ‘the same semiotic material’ can function in two distinct but related registers: at the a-signifying, affective level and also at the discursive level of signification (pp. 219-220). Importantly for the present thesis, this raises the possibility that an artist’s writing about her work may also operate in these two ways. Although primarily discursive, such writing may (like the artwork) go beyond mere signification to affect and transform the reader, thereby extending the artwork’s becoming with its audience and its world. The discursive dimension of art will be further explored in chapter three.

If the above discussion has centred primarily on the reception of art, the same ideas also impact upon art’s production. I will refer to only two points here, both of relevance to my own practice of painting. Art, like any rhizomatic (multi-connective) process, always proceeds ‘from the middle’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004, p. 25); it does not emerge from nowhere but begins from some existing stratum or organised structure. The two philosophers advise their readers to ‘lodge yourself on a stratum, experiment with the opportunities it offers … It is through a meticulous relation with the strata that one succeeds in freeing lines of flight’ (p. 178). Applied to art, this is a direction to orient oneself to the archive: to fasten onto some existing or previous point of practice from which to launch new lines of research. The second point concerns Deleuze’s idea of the ‘diagram’, borrowed from Bacon. Very briefly, the diagram is a technique for breaking with figuration, narrative and representation in art. In painting, it involves the use of random marks, ‘line-strokes and colour patches’ to attain the level of a-signifying materiality and sensation, and allow for the free play of contingency (Deleuze, 2005, p. 71). By disrupting clichéd representation and mobilising chance, it makes possible an ‘escape to the outside’—the production of something affirmatively new. According to O’Sullivan (2006), the diagram is a germ of rhythm and order emerging from chaos, a disavowal of control that is ‘ontologically constitutive’ of new forms of art rather than ‘an accident that befalls it’ (p. 62).
METHODOLOGY

By way of conclusion, then, it should be reiterated that the ideas of Badiou and Deleuze (and Guattari) have been cited here as examples of the type of theory that has been productive for my art practice. Those ideas have informed my reflections upon that practice and helped in the formulation of research questions and themes for development. In addition, these particular theorists share an attitude to art that has been described as 

*affirmative*: their work is rooted in an ‘ontology of the new’ or an ‘ontology of change’ so that they emphasise infinite creativity in art rather than the critique of existing ideas or institutions. An art of affirmation acts in the name of an event: today, it proposes an artwork as the awakening of an immanent potentiality whose consequences will become known and valued only as they unfold into the future.

With regard to this last point, I have adopted the term ‘open constructionism’ as a final description of my epistemology (see Table 2). For these philosophers, a construction such as a painting is never ‘closed’—at either end. Its production begins, as Badiou puts it, from a ‘non-constructed’ moment of receptivity when the artist is set to work by a sensation of some kind: ‘a moment when the sensible produces an impact that cannot be reduced to the pure constructive movement of the concept’ (Badiou, 2010, p. 48). And it remains forever open, as Deleuze argues, to further encounters and affective assemblages that will transform it in unforeseeable ways. Far from presenting themselves as fully resolved and finished objects, therefore, my paintings exhibit their contingency and constructedness; they mark not an ending but the attainment of a new mid-point in a process that is always already, and continuously, under way.
CHAPTER 3

The Post-conceptual Afterlife of Painting
THE AFTERLIFE OF PAINTING

This chapter resumes the argument about an ontological change in painting, and presents a case for an afterlife of painting as post-conceptual. My use of the term ‘post-conceptual’ is taken from the work of English philosopher Peter Osborne who has written extensively on conceptual art, art theory, and philosophy. Osborne (2013) has provided a rigorous six-point definition of the ‘conditions of possibility’ of post-conceptual art, thereby bringing much needed substance to a term that has often been employed in an empty, periodising manner.61

The main body of the chapter will consist in an explanation and contestation of each of the six points of Osborne’s definition, applying them specifically to painting. In this way, I affirm the existence of a new category of post-conceptual painting—a possibility nowhere addressed in Osborne’s work. At the same time, I argue for a rethinking of specific points of the definition in order to accommodate painting’s particular capacities and strengths. More generally, I contend that Osborne’s definition gives insufficient weight to the role of the aesthetic in art today. I then present the new category of post-conceptual painting as evidence of an afterlife of painting following the demise of ‘Greenbergian’ modernist formalism.62

Briefly stated, post-conceptual painting differs from modernist formalist painting in two key respects: it has a necessary conceptual dimension, and it is no longer medium-specific (no longer bound to a delimited ‘physical’ base). Further, it embraces new understandings of the term ‘aesthetic’. These are fundamental changes to the ontology of painting. To understand them, it will help to begin with some broad historical background.

61 A search of the world-wide-web reveals that the term ‘post-conceptual’ is widely used without explanation, as a general prefix for artwork that is presented as, or wishes to present itself as, contemporary.

62 As in chapter one, my concern is to provide a thematic account—in this case, of the category of post-conceptual painting—rather than an art historical explanation of its emergence as a practice. My account affirms the existence of such painting, citing my own work as one example, and argues for its contemporary relevance.
A genealogy of contemporary art

For Osborne (2013), post-conceptual art is the third phase in a history of late twentieth century art that runs from medium-specific art (modernist formalism) to conceptual art to post-conceptual art (pp. 47-48). Osborne proposes this tripartite ‘genealogy’ (p. 142) as a replacement for the standard transition between ‘modernism’ and ‘postmodernism’, a linked pair of terms that he considers to be insufficiently determinate as concepts and inadequate as historical periodisations. He argues (p. 73) that the standard periodisation tends to reduce the cultural logic of modernism (as the negation of tradition and the valorisation of the new) to an art historical period delimited by a particular set of practices (modernist art). This is then ‘abstractly negated’, i.e. superseded in its totality, by whatever happens to come afterwards (the post-modern). What this periodisation particularly fails to register, in Osborne’s view, is ‘the critical priority’ of conceptual art and its legacy. Its neglect of the critical role of the concept in art means that there is no theoretical basis upon which to specify the ontological transformation that has taken place in art since the 1960s, or the ontological distinctiveness of post-conceptual art today.

In opposition to the modernism/postmodernism dyad, Osborne’s genealogy downplays the role of medium-specificity and ‘concentrates on those practices that negate aesthetics in art’ (Birnbaum, 2014, p. 35). The details of that genealogy lie outside the scope of the present thesis. Nonetheless, Osborne’s chief revisions are to link medium-specificity to nineteenth century practices of art, and to relegate it to ‘a short-lived reactive moment’ (p. 36) within the ‘main tradition’ of art in the twentieth century (Osborne, 2013, p. 81). For Osborne, that main tradition is dominated by anti-aesthetic, an-aesthetic and conceptually oriented practices. It both precedes and succeeds the medium-specific art of the mid century, stretching from Duchamp, Dada and early avant-garde ‘isms’ (such as Surrealism and Russian Constructivism) to the conceptual art of the 1960s and the post-conceptual art that follows. In this way, Osborne seeks to
refine the concept of modernism as a cultural logic,\(^6^3\) while arguing for the centrality of conceptual forms of art.

**The emergence of conceptual art**

In chapter one, it was claimed that conceptual art brought about a fundamental rupture in the history of art by redefining art as such. It can now be seen that this ontological transformation was achieved, specifically, by displacing the category of medium that had dominated art in the mid twentieth century. For Greenberg, the medium was a category rooted in the material and the sensuous.\(^6^4\) It was gradually displaced by the elevation of conceptual thinking as the essence of art. The effect of this change was to utterly transform ‘the relationship of sensuousness to conceptuality within the ontology of the artwork’ across the whole field of the visual arts, painting included (Osborne, 2000, p. 87).

Alberro and Stimson (1999) define four ‘trajectories’ that led to the increasing conceptualisation of artistic practices in the 1960s (pp. xvi-xvii). Those trajectories acted as strong precursors of the ‘moment’ of conceptual art as an identifiable movement (a moment which lasted barely a decade, from 1966 to 1977). Briefly summarised, the trajectories were: the continuation of the self-critical tendency of modernism, beyond the shedding of conventions to the devaluation of manual skills and material technique; the negation of aesthetics and judgements of taste, to be replaced by a new focus on ideas and information; the reduced status (and even the dematerialisation) of the art object accompanied by a turn away from the material, visual and sensuous dimensions of art; and, finally, a new emphasis on the contexts of display and reception of artworks, including a critique of art institutions and the

\(^{6^3}\) Osborne (2013) rejects the notion of postmodernism, arguing that the logic of modernism is ‘far from over. Indeed, it structures the entire field of contemporary art’ (p. 72).

\(^{6^4}\) Greenberg (1940): ‘It is by virtue of its medium that each art is unique and strictly itself … For the visual arts the medium is discovered to be physical’ (p. 305).
mediatised world of publicity. It was from such beginnings that conceptualism came to consolidate itself as a movement, albeit a brief and empirically diverse one, before mutating into the dominant tendency within the art of our time.

In what follows, I will focus on just one form of conceptual art, represented by the work and writings of Joseph Kosuth. Kosuth’s linguistic conceptualism is particularly relevant to the present thesis because of its explicit critique of aesthetics and the category of medium. It made a significant contribution to what I have been calling the conceptual argument against painting, comparable in its enduring effect to the canonical death notices of the 1980s. It did not attempt merely to negate painting, but also offered a positive alternative basis for the making of art. This new conceptual basis proved attractive to a broad range of artists. Moreover, it went beyond the scope of the death notices by calling into question, and overturning, the very definition of art itself.

Kosuth and the linguistic programme of conceptual art

The linguistic programme of conceptual art was first set out by Kosuth in his serial essay ‘Art After Philosophy’, published by Studio International in 1969. The essay followed earlier statements by other conceptualists, such as Sol LeWitt, but differed from them in its singular focus on language and its analytical approach to definitional questions about the nature of art. Prior to Kosuth’s intervention, it was possible to think of inchoate conceptual art as just another type of art, one for which language, idea, or concept served as its primary material or medium. As Osborne (2013) points out, however, to think of conceptual art in such terms is to remain within a ‘medium-based’ understanding (p. 103). Kosuth’s essay dispelled any such misconception by excluding the medium altogether from his new definition—his new ontology—of art.

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65 Alberro and Stimson list six ‘strands’ of conceptual art between 1966 and 1977 (pp. xvii-xxviii), followed by three ‘models’ of post-conceptual art in the 1970s and 1980s (pp. xxviii-xxx).

66 Krauss (2012) names Kosuth as ‘the progenitor and organiser of conceptual art’.
THE AFTERLIFE OF PAINTING

The assault on medium was the critical edge of Kosuth’s intervention into the ontological situation of art in 1969. When the category of medium (its necessity and presumed essence) began to be questioned by artists in the 1960s, this led to a crisis in the ontology of the artwork. Kosuth’s response to that crisis was to repudiate the ontological role of the medium and to establish the concept as the essential basis of the production of artworks.

In making this move, Kosuth retained some aspects of Greenbergian theory while rejecting others. First, from Greenberg’s modernism, he retained the idea of self-criticism but applied it to art in general rather than to a specific medium. The category of medium was rejected outright (from all art). Artworks would henceforth deal in concepts, presenting those concepts in whatever material form proved suitable, while maintaining an independence from the material support. Kosuth (1969) argues that this ‘changed the nature of art’ from ‘appearance’ to ‘conception’, so that all art is by definition conceptual: ‘art only exists conceptually’ (p. 135). Art was now a self-critical and generic practice of ideas (‘art in general’) embodied in any material whatsoever.67

Second, from Greenberg’s formalism, Kosuth retained the ideas of autonomy and self-referentiality while uncoupling them from, and completely rejecting, the aesthetic dimension of art. Henceforth, an artwork would no longer be ‘the site of a look’ (Osborne, 2000, p. 87), an object to be experienced visually and judged aesthetically in terms of its formal properties. Instead, the function of the artwork would be to question the nature of art and to present itself as an original conceptualisation of art’s nature. The artwork would take the form of a proposition: ‘this is art’. To achieve this extraordinary redefinition of art, Kosuth turned to the philosophy of language.

It was in the philosophy of logical positivism that Kosuth found the resources that enabled him to retain the ideal of self-referentiality in art, while severing it from all ties

to the aesthetic (Osborne, 2000, pp. 94-95). For Greenberg, the aesthetic value of an artwork was embodied in the internal play of its forms, each of which refers only to—and derives its aesthetic effects from the totality of its relations to—all the other forms; aesthetic value is thus inherently linked to the work’s self-referentiality. No external reference is required. By contrast, Kosuth’s innovation was to drive a wedge between art (as concept) and the aesthetic (as form) in an attempt to develop an art that was fully anti-aesthetic, yet still self-referential and autonomous. Kosuth negated the aesthetic altogether, rejecting the significance of visual appearance, material composition, medium, form, and sensuous affect. In their place, he relied exclusively on the concept and a reductive theory of language borrowed from logical positivism. From the latter, he took the model of linguistic tautology and applied it (by analogy) to art. A standard example of tautology is ‘All bachelors are unmarried men’. According to logical positivism, this is a proposition that tells us nothing about facts or events in the world. It relies for its meaning solely on the interplay of its internal elements, that is, the logical relations between the words. It functions as a self-definition: the meaning it generates is both autonomous and self-referential.68 As Osborne points out, Kosuth began by claiming that ‘art is analogous to an analytic proposition’ but the analogy soon collapsed into identification: ‘works of art are analytic propositions’ (Kosuth, 1969, pp. 134, 136).

Kosuth contends that the role of the artwork, as tautology, is to spell out the artist’s conceptual proposition. It does so in the same way that a linguistic definition (‘unmarried man’) spells out the meaning of a term (‘bachelor’). The sensible-aesthetic-material dimensions of the artwork make no contribution to the work’s conceptual meaning (in the same way that the sensible sounds of ‘unmarried’ and ‘man’ play no part in the meaning of ‘bachelor’). They merely transmit it to the viewer. It is the

68 For an account of logical positivism see Magee (1978). Magee interviews A.J. Ayer, a leading proponent of logical positivism in the 1930s, who retrospectively admits that ‘nearly all of it was false’ (p. 107). In ‘Art After Philosophy’, Kosuth quotes repeatedly from Ayer’s work. Osborne (2000) describes logical positivism as ‘long discredited’ (p. 95).
concept alone that guarantees the artwork’s status as art, provided it is presented within a ‘context’—an exhibition or a publication—acknowledged by the art world. Further, the artwork is a definition of art because the artist has the cultural authority to nominate it and validate it as such a definition. And all of this is true a priori, that is, prior to our experience of the artwork; it is true by logical definition. The curator Seth Siegelaub was merely being consistent when he described such conceptual art as ‘experienceless art’ (Zepke, 2006, p. 159); it entirely ignores—or, rather, it suppresses—all aesthetic or sensuous experience of art’s material dimension. Unsurprisingly, Osborne (2000) concludes that Kosuth has never been able to logically uphold his claim about art as tautology, and that from this point his ‘propositional positivism’, i.e. his theory of art, ‘starts to break down’ (p. 96).

In the end, Kosuth’s appropriation of logical positivism miscarried. It was part of a strategic bid to wrest control of art’s definition from critics, such as Greenberg, by invoking the cultural authority of philosophy. It was also a self-conscious attempt to recast the image of the artist as ‘an intellectually rigorous creator’ (Osborne, 2000, p. 89). In the process, Kosuth aligned his own art practice more closely with art criticism and ontological discourses on art. His 1969 text has all the appearance of a rigorous logical statement, but—and the point is worth emphasising—it is deeply flawed in its argumentation. Osborne describes ‘Art After Philosophy’ as ‘one of the more technically confused philosophical statements about art’ (p. 95). De Duve (1996) finds it ‘full of loopholes’ (p. 307). And, in 1975, a philosophical journal reviewed ‘Art After Philosophy’ under the heading ‘What Kind of Nonsense is This?’ The precise nature of Kosuth’s logical confusions need not detain us. The important point is that, despite the fact that his arguments go badly astray, Kosuth’s lasting achievement was his leading

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69 For details, see the three texts mentioned. Sclafani (1975) describes Kosuth’s philosophical ‘excursions’ as ‘amateurish, uninformed and often confused’ (p. 457). De Duve (1996) detects confusion in Kosuth’s essay between art as a concept and art as a proper name. Osborne (2000) criticises Kosuth’s inability to sustain the claim that art is an analytic proposition, and the contradiction between his explicit rejection of art’s materiality and mediums and his implicit reliance upon them in his ‘presumption of art’s difference from other forms of signification’ (p. 96).
role in proposing a new ontology of art founded on the concept. This was to prove very appealing to artists and critics in search of an alternative to what they saw as the dead-end of modernist formalism. Conceptualism went on to open up an exciting and productive new future for art while contriving to make medium-specificity, and painting in particular, appear distinctly moribund.

**Kosuth contra painting and aesthetics**

Since I have presented Kosuth as a leading proponent of the conceptual argument against painting, his explicit remarks on painting warrant some brief comment. His main charge against ‘morphological notions of art’, such as painting and sculpture, is that ‘for all functional purposes’ they are ‘not art at all’ (Kosuth, 1969, p. 135, italics added). Kosuth’s reasoning is as follows. As he defines it, the function of art is to question the nature of art. On that basis, if an artist remains within the traditional confines of a medium like painting, then she may question that medium, but this makes it ‘impossible’ to question art—and thus impossible to make an artwork. Why? Because painting is *specific* (limited it to a specific tradition, morphology and medium) whereas art is *general* and includes all possible mediums and materials (p. 135). Only conceptual art is able to address art in its general nature, art *as such*. Painting inherently fails to do so. For Kosuth, paintings are no more than ‘pure exercises in aesthetics’; formalist painting in particular is ‘the vanguard of decoration’ and has little value as art. This is because Kosuth’s principal criterion of value is what an artwork has ‘added to the conception of art’ by presenting a new proposition ‘as to art’s nature’. Paintings simply fall outside this definition of the work of art as ‘a kind of *proposition* presented within the context of art as a comment on art’ (p. 136).

One point that comes across very clearly in these remarks is the absolute nature of Kosuth’s anti-aestheticism. He argues that aesthetics is ‘conceptually irrelevant to art’ (p. 135), and ‘art’s viability is not connected to the presentation of visual (or other)
kinds of experience’ (p. 137). This antipathy touches on the dual meaning of ‘aesthetics’. The ancient Greeks distinguished between noeta, or things apprehended by the mind, and aistheta, or things graspable by the senses. In this original usage, *all materially existing objects* have aesthetic qualities due to the fact that we register them with our senses. By 1790, with Kant, aesthetics had acquired a highly specialised secondary meaning in which it refers to beauty and to judgements of taste; thereafter, it was applied increasingly to works of art. This was to become the dominant meaning of the term, to the extent that art and aesthetics are often confused today. When Kosuth declares his intention to ‘separate’ art from aesthetics, he is not just referring to this (secondary) association of art and taste (‘the notion that there was a conceptual connection between art and aesthetics, which is not true’, p. 134). His primary target is the original sense of aesthetics: ‘it is necessary to separate aesthetics from art because aesthetics deals with opinions on *perception of the world in general*’ (p. 134, italics added). As he develops this position, Kosuth rejects the full range of material-perceptible aspects of the artwork. Morphology, physical attributes, visual qualities, expression, and aesthetic experience are said to add nothing to ‘our understanding of the function or nature of art’. Kosuth goes beyond the standard critiques of taste (second sense of aesthetics) to altogether suppress the material dimension of the artwork as object (first sense of aesthetics). Osborne (2013) describes this position as ‘an absolute anti-aesthetic’ (p. 49).

This absolutism becomes a problem for Kosuth insofar as he tries to eliminate from the artwork something that cannot be so eliminated without disposing of—without dematerialising—the art object in its entirety.

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70 On *noeta* and *aistheta* see the entry for ‘aesthetics’ in Payne and Barbera (2010, p. 16). Osborne (2004) analyses Kant’s deployment of the term aesthetic in its ‘original’ meaning ‘denoting the sensible element in knowledge’, and in its ‘extended use’ to refer to judgements of taste (pp. 657-660).
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The legacy of conceptual art

In Osborne’s view, the programme of linguistic or pure conceptual art ended in failure. It was beset by logical difficulties and proved to be incoherent in terms of its self-understanding. Nonetheless, Osborne (2013) is adamant that ‘this was not an artistic failure’. On the contrary, it was ‘a perverse artistic success’ (p. 49). This is because it failed in a performative and constructive manner; it failed in such a way as to irrefutably demonstrate a positive truth: there can be no absolutely anti-aesthetic art. Kosuth’s attempt to discount aesthetics from the (conceptual) work of art revealed the truth that all art must necessarily include an aesthetic dimension. This discovery brings pure conceptual art to an end, and in so doing opens the way to the post-conceptual. In retrospect, the success of conceptual art may be seen to lie in its legacy, its enduring effect on subsequent practices across the whole field of contemporary art, painting included.

That legacy may be summarised as follows. Conceptual art’s negative achievement was to destroy the role of the medium as the privileged mediating form, or organising category, that lies between an individual artwork and the universal idea of art. The medium was no longer the primary vehicle for the production, classification and interpretation of art. Osborne (2013) regards this ‘critical destruction’ of the ‘ontological category’ of medium as a ‘historical act’ that led to a fundamental change in art’s nature (p. 99). Its positive legacy was to demonstrate the ‘necessary conceptuality of the artwork’, which had been obscured by the ‘aesthetic ideology’ of modernist formalism (p. 49). In Verwoert’s terms (2005), all art today is conceptual because it is produced within ‘the horizon’—the radical new sphere of possibility—opened up by conceptual art. Painting must self-consciously ground itself within this changed context, and must develop its contemporary meaning as part of it. The establishment of this conceptual condition is the critical legacy of conceptual art.
Moreover, a logical consequence of the shift from medium to concept was the redefinition of art as a generic practice (art in general); its practical effect was the opening up of artworks to modes of production that are no longer medium-specific but ‘trans-media’ (Osborne, 2013) or ‘post-medium’ (Krauss, 1999). Finally, the failure of Kosuth’s quest for an absolute anti-aesthetic demonstrated the necessity of a new, post-conceptual understanding of art that (re-)includes its aesthetic dimension. An unintended aspect of conceptual art’s legacy, then, was to re-open the question of aesthetics. Given that the aesthetic dimension of art could no longer be theorised in relation to medium, and was ‘external’ to the concept, how was it to be understood? As will be seen, discussions of post-conceptual art tend to refer to the ‘materialisation’ or ‘specific materiality’ of the artwork. For example, when defining the historical change in art since the 1960s, Osborne refers to ‘the transformation of the ontology of the artwork … from a craft-based ontology of mediums to a post-conceptual and trans-categorial ontology of materialisations’ (Osborne, 2013, p. 28).

In the present thesis, my chief claim is that the historical changes wrought by conceptual art had unintended, ironic consequences for the future of painting, opening up the possibility of an afterlife for painting as post-conceptual. The remainder of this chapter will spell out that claim. Its main content will be a point-by-point discussion of Osborne’s definition of post-conceptual art as applied to painting. The discussion is made necessary by Osborne’s consistent neglect of painting as a possible form of post-conceptual art practice. As will be explained, that neglect may derive from the apparent contradiction between painting as medium and Osborne’s definition of post-conceptual art as trans-media (or art-in-general).

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71 ‘Trans-categorial’ means to challenge or deconstruct the normative categories through which art has been interpreted—categories such as ‘medium’, ‘painting’, and the various ‘-isms’ of art history. Osborne accepts, nonetheless, that art cannot do without them: ‘there is no escape from the maze of categories’ (pp. 107-109). Also, note his reference to ‘an ontology of materialisations’ that replaces an ontology of mediums.
The ‘condition of possibility’ of post-conceptual art

Osborne’s most precise definition of post-conceptual art is given in his book Anywhere or Not At All (2013, p. 48). Its six criteria or ‘conditions of possibility’ are:

1. Art’s necessary conceptuality.
   - Art is constituted by concepts, their relations and their instantiation in practices of discrimination: art/non-art.

2. Art’s ineliminable—but radically insufficient—aesthetic dimension.
   - All art requires some form of materialisation; that is to say, aesthetic—felt, spatio-temporal—presentation.

3. The critical necessity of an anti-aestheticist use of aesthetic materials.
   - This is a critical consequence of art’s necessary conceptuality.

4. An expansion to infinity of the possible material forms of art.

5. A radically distributive—that is, irreducibly relational—unity of the individual artwork across the totality of its multiple material instantiations, at any particular time.

6. A historical malleability of the borders of this unity.

In order to address these points, it will first be necessary to establish what it is that Osborne aims to capture with this definition, and what he hopes to achieve thereby. The short answer is that Osborne is attempting to define criteria for the critically important art of our time. He claims that ‘contemporary art is post-conceptual art’ (p. 51). That is,
art is contemporary—in critical distinction from other art practices—insofar as it meets the above six ‘conditions of possibility’ of post-conceptual art.

Osborne prefaces his definition with a warning about the ways in which it is not intended to function. It does not function as ‘a traditional art-historical or art-critical concept at the level of either medium, form or style’ (p. 48). Medium, form and style are among the outmoded categories displaced by conceptual art; as such, they make no contribution to the new (post-conceptual) ontology of art. Nor is Osborne’s definition prescriptive: it does not tell us how post-conceptual art should be made or how it should look. Further, it has nothing to do with aesthetic judgements of good or bad art. And neither is it strictly a periodising term: not all artworks made in the wake of conceptual art (1966-1977) are post-conceptual. Only those artworks that demonstrably work within the legacy of conceptual art may be characterised as such. This last point gives a first indication of how the definition functions positively. It reveals that, for Osborne, the term ‘post-conceptual’ functions as a critical category: it includes some artworks while (critically) excluding others. And this criticality is ‘constituted at the level of the historical ontology of the artwork’ (p. 48). This last phrase requires further elaboration.

The historical ontology of the artwork

As discussed in chapter 2.3, ontology refers to the nature of what exists. The ontology of art is the nature of art, or the philosophical enquiry into that nature with regard to what kinds of entities artworks are, how they relate to each other and to their audiences, and the conditions under which they ‘come into existence, survive or cease to exist’ (Thomasson, 2004, p.78). Pure conceptual art and modernist formalism are both attempts to capture the ontological substance (or essential identity) of art. Pure conceptual art does so in terms of the concept; modernist formalism refers to essence in terms of medium. Leading critics of modernist painting, however, moved away from the idea of an unvarying, eternal essence. De Duve (2010) explains that for Greenberg
painting had only a ‘working essence’, whereas for Michael Fried painting is regulated by a set of conventions that changes over time (pp. 70-71). Both accept that the essence of painting is neither ideal nor timeless, but argue that it nevertheless remains distinct: painting continues to maintain an essential difference from other mediums and forms of art. De Duve refers to ‘a pact’ between artists and the public, a tacit agreement that defines artistic conventions for a specific period only (p. 63). All three critics acknowledge that the ontology of painting, and art more generally, is liable to historical change. Painting is historically mutable; it exists on historically changing terms (material, social, and ideological); at different times, it relates to the public in different ways. Osborne takes this idea a step further. In his ontology of post-conceptual art, he includes art’s relation to its own history as an immanent part of its nature. Post-conceptual art is ‘irreducibly historical’ because it reflexively engages its historical conditions of existence (Osborne, 2013, p. 10). Its fundamental principle (inherited from conceptual art) is the ‘historical destruction of the ontological significance of the category of medium’, and the critical rejection of medium-specific practices. It also negates conceptual art, moving beyond it to re-include the aesthetic dimension as an ineliminable part of art’s nature. More generally, post-conceptual art challenges and disrupts the whole range of categories through which art has been regulated up to the present day. All this is captured by the phrase ‘the historical ontology’ of art. In particular, Osborne stresses that ‘historical ontology is a critical ontology’ premised on the legacy of conceptual art (p. 73, italics added).

In summary, post-conceptual art includes only those artworks that (1) come after conceptual art of the 1960s and (2) register ‘the fundamental mutation of the ontology of the artwork’ that was brought about by conceptual art. The six points of Osborne’s definition comprise a set of ‘new interpretative conditions for analyses of individual works’, which together define the ‘condition of possibility’ of post-conceptual art (p. 48). Those six points will now be examined in specific relation to painting, to determine in what ways painting might meet, or challenge, their requirements.
Point 1: Art’s necessary conceptuality

Osborne begins his definition with the premise that contemporary art must necessarily be conceptual. He offers no *logical deduction* of this position, since it is not a matter of logic alone but of the actual history of art, its social relations, and the developing modes of its understanding. As part of his enquiry into this history, Osborne returns to the ‘philosophical ground’ of the claim of art’s autonomy—the claim that artworks can produce meaning independently, through the play of forms alone (p. 44). This claim, he says, originated (around 1800) from the displacement onto art of the intractable metaphysical problem of human subjectivity. Henceforth, the work of art became a privileged vehicle for reflection upon questions of subjective self-determination and the autonomous production of meaning. As a consequence, autonomous art is thoroughly invested in its philosophical background, and ‘*irreducibly conceptual*’ in its philosophical structure (p. 45, italics added).

In beginning with and privileging the concept in this way, Osborne is laying claim to a philosophical tradition that goes back to Jena Romanticism and to Hegel (in the 1820s). Historically, as Pippin (2002) points out, Hegel played a major role in shifting the reception of art away from an aesthetics ‘founded on taste, beauty and pleasure’ to an evaluation ‘concerned with criticism, with meaning’ (p. 10). Osborne presents conceptual art and post-conceptual art as the latest inheritors of this tradition.72

But if art underwent a ‘conceptual turn’ in the 1960s it was not just by rediscovering its immanent ‘philosophical structure’, or by rewriting the history of art so as to valorise the concept. Other factors played a vital role. In *Conceptual Art* (2002), Osborne points to the growing demand throughout the 1960s for forms of art capable of responding to

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72 Both Osborne (2013, p. 46) and Pippin (2002, p. 5, fn. 6) identify distinct lines of development in the history of art. A first line runs from Kant to Greenberg (focusing on individual aesthetic experience). A second line (says Pippin) runs from Hegel to Clark (focusing on collective historical meaning) or (says Osborne) from Hegel to conceptual art (focusing on the ontology of art).
wider cultural-political issues, particularly in the USA: the Civil Rights movement, anti-war protests, the rise of feminism. Modernist formalism appeared hopelessly out of touch. It experienced crisis and rejection as conceptual art ‘negated’ the aesthetic definition of the artwork. Criticism focused on art’s autonomy (seen as remoteness) and its fixation with objects, mediums and visuality. In their place, attention was drawn to ‘the role of ideas in the production of meaning from visual experience’ (Osborne, 2002, p. 18). The new conceptual practices seemed to promise an art that would be relevant again, able to re-engage critically with society and to contribute to the re-formation of culture.

In addition, Osborne argues that conceptual art ‘raises the retrospective search for universal determinations of “art” to the highest theoretical power’ (p. 18). That is, conceptual art takes seriously the issue of art’s ontology and, in particular, the definitional question of distinguishing between art and non-art. In Osborne’s view, the aesthetic understanding singularly fails to do this. As noted earlier, artworks and ordinary objects alike have aesthetic qualities, in the original Greek sense of the term. A Kantian *pure aesthetic judgement* is unable to distinguish between them; it must regard both, *in principle*, as if they were products of nature. Conceptual art, on the other hand, has no such difficulty. It posits the *conceptual* dimension of the artwork as its defining difference, as what makes it *art* (in clear distinction from all other types of object). Osborne refers to this as the ‘historical truth’ of conceptual art. Its historical achievement was to have so ‘transformed the field of practices institutionally recognised as “art” … as to constitute a change in art’s “ontology” or very mode of being’ (Osborne, 2013, p. 37). Since the 1970s, art has gone beyond a self-understanding that relies on aesthetics alone. Artists have steadily abandoned historically received mediums and replaced them with a generic idea of art. In this context, each new work of art must make ‘a conceptual claim on its own status as art’ by differentiating itself from
non-art (Osborne, 2010). According to Osborne, only a conceptual or post-conceptual work of art is capable of meeting this requirement.

For a painter, this raises a crucial question about Osborne’s definition of the post-conceptual. It is a question that Osborne himself posed on at least one occasion. He asked whether conceptual art might be ‘better understood more generally, such that one might talk of conceptual painting, conceptual sculpture … Indeed, is not all contemporary art in some relevant sense “conceptual”? (Osborne, 2002, p. 15). Interestingly, Osborne makes no attempt at an answer. At no point does he explicitly confirm or deny that painting is capable of the ‘necessary conceptuality’ that would validate it as a form of post-conceptual art.

Nonetheless, this is a vital question for the present thesis and its claim on behalf of post-conceptual painting. To address this issue it will be necessary to look elsewhere. The following three sections continue the discussion of Osborne’s point 1 by drawing from Verwoert but also from earlier work upon which Verwoert explicitly relies (Bois and Damisch). Verwoert sets the context of the discussion and makes the strongest statement in support of painting’s capacity for conceptuality. Bois and Damisch provide important details required by, but insufficiently explained in, Verwoert’s argument.

1.1: Painting is (always already) conceptual

In 2009, Verwoert claimed that ‘today, there cannot be painting that is not conceptual because we operate in that sphere of possibility’ opened up by conceptual art. Earlier, in his 2005 essay (‘Why Are Conceptual Artists Painting Again? Because they think it’s a good idea’), he argued that in the art world debates of the late 1970s ‘it again seemed

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73 See Osborne (2010) after approximately 40 minutes.
74 The sections are numbered to indicate their continuation of point 1 (section 1.1, 1.2, 1.3). A similar numbering system applies to the subsequent points.
possible to integrate painting situatively and strategically into conceptual practice’. These remarks suggest that, for Verwoert, painting had the resources to adapt itself to the changed conditions in the wake of conceptual art. Not only did painting switch paradigms to become a form of strategic art (see chapter one), but also, in some pertinent sense, it succeeded in becoming conceptual.

Before turning to Verwoert’s essay, I will insert an additional claim of my own. Numerous historical examples could be cited to make the case that painting, in the highest forms of its development at any given time, is always already conceptual. Foucault’s reading of Las Meninas (Velázquez, 1656) provides an exemplary analysis of that painting’s deep conceptual structure. Damisch has demonstrated how in Renaissance painting ‘the invention of pictorial perspective … anticipated by two centuries the work of mathematics on the notion of infinity’. Clark shows in various ways how modernist painting modelled critical positions on social and political change. Bois re-introduces Mondrian as a distinctly thoughtful, socially engaged, highly conceptual painter. Ferry describes the ‘irreplaceable role’ of theories of non-Euclidean geometry in Cubist painting. Surrealism famously embraced psychoanalytic ideas, just as Seurat deployed Helmholtz’s theory of colour. And finally, but perhaps more controversially, Pippin has argued for a reading of Pollock’s and Rothko’s work as conceptual in both intent and execution (see further remarks below). These are just a few examples of painting that anticipated or integrated important cultural concepts and, in the process, scrutinised and reformulated its own practices in a distinctly conceptual manner.75 They provide a background to Verwoert’s remarks on the relation between painting and conceptualism.

That relation is the principal theme of Verwoert’s 2005 essay. The essay concludes with an unequivocal defence of ‘painting as conceptual practice’, a position Verwoert

75 See Foucault (1970, chapter 1); Bois (1990) on Mondrian (p. 240) and Damisch (p. 253); Clark (1999); Ferry (1993, p. 210); and Pippin (2002, p. 23).
attributes to Bois (*Painting as Model*, 1990) particularly the title chapter on painting’s capacity to provide ‘theoretical models’ that may be taken up by other disciplines. Bois names four such models: the perceptive, the technical, the symbolic, and the strategic. In differing ways, they involve knowledge and speculative thought (Bois, 1990, p. 252), invent original organising principles (p. 250), reveal concepts (p. 255), and engage in ‘the theoretical in painting’ (p. 245). On Verwoert’s terms, these are models of conceptual practice in the medium of paint. One senses that, for both authors, an argument of this kind is needed to counter the normative assumption that painting and conceptualism are mutually exclusive.

Verwoert begins his essay by rehearsing the debate between conceptual (generic) art and medium-specificity, acknowledging that both positions ‘seem well founded in principle’. On the conceptual side, the dismissal of the ‘dogmatic restriction’ of art to conventional mediums is regarded as a genuine historical advance. In consequence, today, ‘the only thing that counts is the artist’s conceptual project’; the choice of medium is secondary. The counter argument is that an artwork must be evaluated in terms of ‘the laws, limits and history’ of its specific medium. This is the only way to appreciate a painting’s ‘true significance’ as painting and its ‘semantic depth’ as art. To reduce painting to transferable concepts is to lose sight of what it can achieve otherwise, by virtue of its nature as a form of ‘non-verbal’ production of meaning.

Developing this debate, Verwoert refers to writings by *October* stalwarts Rosalind Krauss and Benjamin Buchloh. For those critics, the privileging of the concept over the medium established ‘entirely new, historically irreversible conditions for the production of art’. Henceforth, the conceptual gesture was regarded as the only artistic act still capable of generating meaning. It set a new norm for artistic endeavour. At this point, Verwoert hones in on a significant difficulty for the artist: every producer of conceptual

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76 As the essay is unpaginated it is not possible to provide page references. Refer to [http://www.afterall.org/journal/issue.12/why.are.conceptual.artists.painting.again.because](http://www.afterall.org/journal/issue.12/why.are.conceptual.artists.painting.again.because).
art faces the expectation of having to come up with an idea so radical that it will rewrite the history of art. Lacking a traditional, medium-based practice, the artist must produce that idea ‘by starting from absolute zero’. Moreover, the idea must be ‘legible’ and ‘transparent’ so as to have maximum communicative force. In a series of lectures since 2009, Verwoert has repeatedly referred to this expectation as unrealistically ‘heroic’. It stipulates that the artist can ‘win the game of art’ only by negating the validity of all previous production. This theory of the singular winning concept is the ultimate endgame: it replaces the contingency and the iterations of everyday studio practice with the finality of a decisive historical gesture.

Unsurprisingly, conceptualism was forced to retreat from this impossibly demanding position. The quest for the artwork as singular historical event, Verwoert (2005) argues, mutated into the more manageable expectation that an artist should make strategic interventions within the wider field of contemporary production. Given the complexity of the field, interventions could be multiple and occur at various points. They would comprise gestures whose meaning is situational; that is, their significance derives from, and refers back to, the structure of options currently available within the art world. (Verwoert’s preferred metaphor for this is the art world as chessboard, with artists occupying positions and making moves within the game.) The challenge for the artist, in this case, is to produce ‘surprising reflective situations’ or to invent concepts that show art in a new and changing light.

Verwoert’s bold next step is to re-introduce painting into this situation, to show how it could still have a future within a context that it no longer dominates, and in which its legitimacy as art is no longer self-evident. The retreat from a paradigm of the heroic endgame to one of strategies and positions provided the necessary opening:
This is probably why, in the context of the postmodern debate in art in the late 1970s, it again seemed possible to integrate painting situatively and strategically into conceptual practice. (Verwoert, 2005)

Note that painting is required to comply with the new norm of conceptuality. If it is to be re-integrated into the changed context of art, ‘painting can no longer just be painting’. It must abandon its appeal to medium-specificity as a sufficient justification of its status as art. This does not mean abandoning the medium altogether. Rather, it means that, in order to be accepted as art, painting must demonstrate its necessary conceptuality by meeting the conditions of being strategic and situative.

Verwoert briefly mentions two ways in which painting was re-modelled and re-admitted to the game of art on these terms. First, a painting could be physically included as part of a more ‘comprehensive spatial setup’ (such as Ilya Kabakov’s installations). Or, second, the meaning of a painting could be ‘forcibly disseminated’ by inserting it into a network of references ‘to other artworks and social events’ (as in Martin Kippenberger’s paintings, whose meaning ‘can only be accessed through a multiplicity of cryptic references’ that surround and traverse it). In either case, the painting is no longer self-contained but situated—physically and/or conceptually—within wider circuits of meaning. And the painting is selected (Kabakov) or produced (Kippenberger) for its strategic value in terms of extending or disrupting or complicating the surrounding network of images, signs and information.

It is at this point that Verwoert turns to Bois in order to take ‘a decisive step further’ in the argument for ‘painting as conceptual practice’. He begins with a reference to Bois’ strategic model and the idea that a painting, like a chess piece, acquires meaning according to its position and value within a field—as much by ‘what it is not and what it opposes’ as by its own positive attributes—but he quickly moves on to a second and
stronger claim, again attributed to Bois. This is the claim that ‘the medium of painting is by nature conceptual’ (italics added):

For Bois, painting is essentially conceptual when it self-referentially and self-critically addresses its material qualities as well as the symbolic grammar of its own formal language. (Verwoert, 2005)

What is striking about this statement is not just its content but also its Greenbergian language. ‘Self-critical’ is the defining term of Greenberg’s modernism; ‘self-referential’ recalls his definition of formalism; and ‘material qualities’ echoes Greenberg’s ‘physicality’ of the medium. Yet these terms are now construed as the very basis—the essence—of painting’s conceptuality. Verwoert employs this language to capture the collective meaning of the first three ‘theoretical models’ named by Bois: the perceptive, the technical and the symbolic. Together they make up what Verwoert calls the ‘immanent criticality’ or ‘conceptual potential’ of painting. The fourth model, the strategic model, then deploys that criticality in strategic and situative ways. It is only when this two-phase process is fully engaged that painting can, in Verwoert’s phrase, be integrated into conceptual practice. The critical and conceptual potential of painting needs to be put to work under new conditions (within the ‘horizon’ of conceptual art), and in new ways (strategically and situatively), in order for painting to be accepted as a relevant form of contemporary art.

1.2: The conceptual essence of painting and its ‘meta-critical’ deployment as conceptual art: Bois’ four models

This section provides an overview of Bois’ four theoretical models before returning to Verwoert’s essay and his general conclusions about ‘the conceptualisation of painting’. Details of the models are not included in Verwoert’s essay, but are presented here as an essential source, and necessary clarification, of his argument.
It should first be pointed out that Bois is not the original author of the four models. He discovered them in the work of French philosopher and art historian Hubert Damisch. According to Bois, Damisch ‘considers painting a key to the interpretation of the world’, and he assigns to painting a specific cultural task (Bois, 1990, p. 253). That task is to produce ‘theoretical models’ that may be taken up by other disciplines and forms of knowledge. Bois elaborates upon this idea, affirming that the ‘stake’ of the painter’s art is to ‘make his canvas a specific theoretical model, the development of a thought’ (p. 248). This is the basis for Verwoert’s claim that painting is conceptual (Bois, for his part, refers only to ‘the theoretical in painting’). Its conceptuality resides in a set of four models that together constitute the originality and inventiveness of pictorial thought.

The first three of these models, in particular, comprise what Verwoert calls the ‘immanent criticality’ or essential conceptuality of painting. The perceptive model functions by focusing attention on the specificity of the painting as object: the details of materiality, mark and texture (p. 247). Certain canvases (for example, by Mondrian or Picasso) allow for an ‘aesthetic perception’ that sees beyond the represented image, and leads the eye ceaselessly back to painting’s constituent elements of line, colour and design (p. 248). This arrests the passage from the painted mark to its reflex interpretation. Instead, the meaning of a work consists in an ambiguous appeal to the senses; it operates by awakening an ‘uneasiness’ in the spectator, a phenomenological or semantic uncertainty that compels her to return again and again to the act of seeing. For the painter, it is a question of thematising and ‘disturbing the permanent structures of perception’ (p. 248), above all the figure/ground opposition that activates representational thinking instead of inviting the viewer to attend to what is actually given to be seen. Painting of this disruptive kind conceptualises the need to break with reflex habits of thought, and demonstrates our capacity to refresh our ways of seeing and acting in the world.
When describing the second, technical, model, Bois cites the ‘logic of invention’ that led to Pollock’s all-over canvases. In the painter’s early (pre-1944) work, says Bois, Pollock sought to impose visual form upon the ‘alien’ material of paint; in his mature works, by contrast, his bodily gesture connected so closely with the paint that the latter now seemed ‘to be its trace, its necessary product’. Pollock’s inventiveness lay in raising the process of dripping ‘to the dignity of an original principle for the organisation of surfaces’ (p. 250). (The drip technique thus replaced previous ways of organising the canvas, such as linear perspective or the harmonious use of colour.) This was the ‘epistemological moment of technique, where thought and invention take place’—the moment in which Pollock came to know the space of the canvas in an entirely novel way by means of a new form of practical engagement. He destroyed the illusory regime of the image and instead emphasised the gestural application of paint, whose meaning is ‘inaccessible as such to pure vision’. This was a new invention of ‘pictorial thought’ that implied ‘a knowledge and a speculation’ (p. 252). Moving beyond Pollock, Bois quotes Damisch’s general claim about the innate conceptuality of painterly practice:

Without recourse to theory or to mathematics, a painter may very well come to formulate, by means all his own, a problematic that may later be translated into other terms and into another register (as happened in its time with perspective). (Bois, 1990, p. 252. Italics added).

In other words, painting has the inherent capacity to develop concepts and models of thought that may be taken up by other disciplines and forms of knowledge.

A similar statement about Pollock was made by Pippin (2002). Drawing on Hegel, Pippin argues that as humans become more self-conscious and freely inventive, we experience the need to create our own self-determined norms of thought and action. Unreflective representations of nature no longer satisfy. In their place, we invent new
conceptualisations of nature and ourselves in areas as diverse as ethics, politics, civic life and art. This, Pippin claims, provides a context for ‘seeing abstraction as self-conscious, conceptual, not, as with Greenberg, reductionist and materialist’ (p. 23). Paintings by Pollock and Rothko are not just ‘presentations of paint drips and color fields and flat canvas’. Instead, ‘they conceptualize components of sensible meaning that we traditionally would not see and understand as such, would treat as given’ (italics added). With the advent of modernism, the constituent elements of painting began to be ‘thematized as such’. It became historically possible for Impressionist brushstrokes, Cézanne’s flattened perspective, Seurat’s points, Cubism’s lines and planes, and Matisse’s ‘quantity of colour’ to be taken as potentialities for meaning: ‘potentialities understood conceptually, as moments of sensible meaning that painting can be about’ (p. 22, italics added). Returning to Pollock, the claim (as in Damisch and Bois) is that Pollock freely invented a new norm for painting, and this act of invention involved dimensions of both technical and conceptual labour. Encountering Pollock’s work, viewers came to understand the canvas differently. What at first made no sense as painting—all those drips and gestural lines—steadily acquired (newly normative) intelligibility.

Bois’ third model, the symbolic model, operates at the level of the laws and language of painting, its rules of organisation and categories of understanding. Bois remarks upon its affinity with Cassirer’s idea that we construct reality as a universe of symbolic forms that mediate all our experience. His point seems to be that artworks (along with science and language) have played a significant role in constructing that symbolic universe—and can therefore be used to de- and re-construct it. Through works of art, we can declassify given forms, bring about the collapse of taxonomies and categories of understanding, and overturn traditional oppositions (Bois, 1990, p. 254). Bois cites examples of artists who introduce conceptual confusion between the horizontal and vertical planes in painting, and also between ‘representation and action’ (he seems to have had Pollock in mind, in both cases). The strongest claim for the symbolic model is,
again, made by Damisch: painting has ‘a cultural task equal to and different from the discourse that deals with it’ and ‘certain pictorial advances’ act like ‘theorems of anthropological mutation’ (p. 253). Put in simpler terms, this suggests that successful paintings can propose modifications to our collective ways of being human (seeing, thinking, acting) by introducing changes into our shared symbolic systems.

If Bois is correct, these first three models enable painting to engage in different but related modes of internal conceptual labour. On its own terms and by its own means, painting rethinks its historically received conventions, conceptualises components of sensible meaning, and produces new constructions of sense from its own inner forms. This is what Verwoert calls the immanent criticality and essential conceptuality of painting. It represents a new understanding of painting, what it is, and how it works. Verwoert adopts these ideas from Bois and summarises them in the phrase: ‘the medium of painting is by nature conceptual’.

Returning now to Verwoert’s 2005 essay, his next move is to supplement Bois by relocating the fourth, strategic, model of painting within the new ‘horizon’ opened up by conceptual art. He begins with Bois’ derivation of the strategic model from ‘the structural or rather the strategic nature of signification’ (Bois, 1990, p. 255). This refers to the way in which the meaning of a word or an image depends upon its place within a shared structure of language or a shared situation. The strategic model differs from the first three, according to Bois, in that it does not ‘immediately take account of pictorial invention’ or the inner conceptual workings of ‘the theoretical in painting’ (p. 255). It is concerned more with contextual matters, namely ‘the conditions of appearance’ of a work within a wider field. Artists are fully aware that a work’s value derives not just from its internal meaning but equally from its differential meaning in relation to important other works. The look of a particular painting is always a function of comparison and precedent, relative forms of innovation (semantic, technical or stylistic), and the capacity to plug into existing circuits of meaning. An artwork
struggles to show itself as relevant within this context; it makes a bid for novelty and significance. Bois stresses this aspect of strategic struggle, the artist’s acute sense of competing within ‘an antagonistic field’ of opposing positions and programmes. Indeed, he provides Verwoert with the metaphor of the chessboard (p. 254), and the language of game theory—of matches, plays and moves (p. 256). It is here that Verwoert focuses his attention and makes his telling intervention.

If art is a game, the rules were transformed when strategic considerations acquired unprecedented status, when an artist’s positioning of her work became as important as the work’s putative content. At this point, strategic art became the new paradigm of production. For Verwoert, this coincided with, or was at least greatly accentuated by, the rise to prominence of conceptualism. From the late 1970s, within the new horizon for which all art must necessarily be conceptual, the game was no longer played solely or even primarily at the level of the content of artworks. The game moved to a second, higher level of meta-commentary. A painting designed to intervene strategically and situatively at this level is, ultimately, making a statement about the current state of play and perhaps even about the existing rules of the game of art. It is adopting a higher order ‘meta-critical’ position (Bois, 1990, p. 255) with respect to painting and to art, and perhaps also to the art world and its institutions.

1.3: Three ways in which painting can be conceptual

For Verwoert, the great contribution of Bois’ text is that it ‘mediates between a conceptual and a medium-specific perspective’ on painting. Of central importance is the manner in which Bois’ strategic model raises ‘the structural self-inquiry’ and ‘conceptual self-criticism’ of painting practice (the first three, medium-oriented, models) to ‘another level’ (the meta-critical). Painting thus emerges in a form that I would call conceptually double-coded:
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• it is conceptual as painting: the perceptive, technical and symbolic models all involve immanent conceptual labour; they conceptualise the sensible components of meaning and develop new norms and concepts of painting. They remain, however, very much tied to the medium of painting, exploring it immanently and critically.

• it is conceptual as art: the innovations of the first three models are deployed in a strategic and situative way under the new conditions of production in the wake of conceptual art. At this second, higher level of meta-criticism, paintings take the form of interventions within the wider field of art (they fight for possession of a square on the chessboard). Crucially, as Verwoert points out: such paintings offer themselves to judgement as conceptual art, on the same terms as, and in competition with, conceptual practices in all other mediums. A painting ‘must hold its own in this comparison’.

Moreover, there is a clear passage from one level to the other. According to Verwoert, the meta-critical gesture ‘essentially derives its critical force’ from the self-inquiry of a medium-specific practice: ‘it simply takes it to another level’. Painting only arrives at its contemporary justification ‘by way of an immanent dialogue with its own history and conditions as a medium’. In other words, medium-based practices continue to form the foundation (already internally conceptual) upon which painting is able to operate at the level of strategic conceptuality, and thus to claim legitimacy as art within ‘a more widely spread conceptual horizon’. Painting today is defined by this double coding, this combination of its inner workings qua painting and its strategic operations in the wider field of art. As has been seen, Verwoert cites two ways in which this can be done: a painting can be (re-)positioned within a greater spatial setup, or embedded within a wider network of ‘artworks and social events’. At this point—with that reference to the ‘social’—Verwoert opens up a third possibility for painting: it can be conceptual in relation to the wider world outside of art.
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This third possibility accords with Damisch’s view that the ‘cultural task’ of painting is to develop ‘theoretical models’ that may be applied more generally. Bois, for his part, insists upon painting’s capacity to engage directly with reality:

Painting was for [Mondrian] a theoretical model that provided concepts and invented procedures that dealt with reality: it is not merely an interpretation of the world, but the plastic manifestation of a certain logic that he found at the root of all phenomena of life … the culture of plastic art shows that real freedom requires mutual equivalence. (Bois, 1990, p. 240. Italics added.)

According to Bois and Damisch, painting’s theoretical models contribute to the wider culture in a variety of ways. They can be translated into other terms and registers of thought (p. 252); they can overturn standard oppositions and conventional perspectives (pp. 254, 248); they both ‘convey’ philosophical ideas and ‘elaborate them’ (p. 257); they may even advance ‘theorems of anthropological mutations’ (p. 253) thus contributing to the re-formation of culture as a whole. Indeed, Damisch argues that we should not just interpret painting but ‘do something with it’. A proper response to painting’s conceptual labours would be:

...to try to see a little more clearly, thanks to painting, into the problems with which [we are] concerned, and which are not only, or even primarily, problems of painting. (Damisch, quoted in Bois, 1990, p. 257)

This wider role liberates painting from structural enclosure within the field of art, which had been a genuine risk under the strategic paradigm. In his overall assessment of that paradigm, Verwoert (2005) identifies both gains and losses. On the positive side, strategic painting succeeds in overturning the accusation and fate of essentialism. Such painting is still strongly medium-based but no longer subscribes to a closed historicism, a single pathway that converges tendentially upon a final essence (in order to end there).
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Instead, it explores the medium for further immanent potentialities while inventing new moves that test the rules and probe the limits of the game of art. As a result, it is necessary to introduce a distinction in which double-coded painting is understood as medium-oriented or medium-based but no longer medium-specific and essentialist.

On the negative side, Verwoert criticises strategic art for being, by definition, static. Strategic artists declare a position within the field, identify with it, and defend it as if to say (like Martin Luther) ‘Here I stand, I can do no other’. Second, strategic positioning reduces art to a question of legitimacy and nothing more. For Verwoert, all strategic operations are constrained by rules of legitimacy that are self-reinforcing and self-reproducing; there is no appeal to an outside and therefore no possible transformation of the field. There is only an endless cycle of moves within a pre-given structure (the art world). As Bois suggests, a truly historic event—like that of Duchamp’s urinal—may succeed in altering the field, but that would only mark the end of one strategic game (or one particular match) and the beginning of another.

The risk of structural enclosure within the field of art is countered by Verwoert’s claim that Kippenberger’s paintings reference ‘social events’ and when he relocates painting within ‘a more widely spread conceptual horizon’. Both phrases suggest engagement with a world outside of art. Indeed, in a 2009 lecture, Verwoert makes it abundantly clear that he believes in the capacity of art to intervene in the wider world—specifically through the designation of new sites of possibility (of practice), the evocation of ethical ideals, and provocation of the audience into thinking. In these and other ways, art can escape strategic confinement within the chessboard.\(^7\) In consequence, it is necessary to add a third dimension to the conceptual coding of contemporary painting:

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\(^7\) See Verwoert (2009), (2010) and especially (2013), a podcast in which he explicitly thematises the relation between art and the wider world. He speaks about artworks in terms of ‘adjacency’ to social spaces such as the home, the studio and the discotheque, and the ‘passage’ of meaning between art and theses spaces.
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• it is conceptual with reference to the wider world outside of art: the perceptive, technical and symbolic operations of painting have the capacity to develop theoretical models that may be taken up by other registers of thought, or applied in other situations. As in Mondrian, painting may provide models of social, ethical or political thought and action.

Verwoert ends his 2005 essay by offering some ‘general conclusions’ about the current condition of painting. His main conclusion is that ‘the medium-specific approach to painting is still possible’ but only if painting is ‘also necessarily a form of conceptual art’—painting is no longer capable of self-justification in terms of the medium alone. This points directly to the need for post-conceptual painting. Second, painting’s legitimacy as art depends upon a form of ‘conceptual self-criticism’ through which, strategically and situatively, it engages in ‘the creation of contextual relations’. (In later lectures, Verwoert indicates that these ‘contextual relations’ extend beyond the art world.) Finally, in his closing paragraphs, Verwoert poses what I think is the essential question arising from this whole discussion of ‘triple-coded’ painting (painting that is conceptual as painting, as strategic art, and in relation to culture as a whole).

In his critique of the strategic approach, Verwoert contends that ‘an obvious limitation’ is its inability to grasp ‘the immanent qualities of a painting’. Any statement on the experience enabled by painting ‘can scarcely be formulated’ or even ‘comprehended’ using categories like strategy, position and legitimacy. He then asks:

whether the moment when the ‘strategic model’ reaches its limits really is the time when the art of describing aesthetic experiences comes into its own once again. (Verwoert, 2005)

He repeats this question in the closing sentence of the essay, this time focusing on ‘the intractable materiality’ of medium-specific (or medium-oriented) artworks. Might it not
be the case, he suggests, that ‘a renewed examination’ of materiality and aesthetic experience is ‘what is needed at this precise moment’. These questions will inform the discussion of points 2 and 3 of Osborne’s definition of the post-conceptual in relation to painting.

Point 2: The aesthetic is an ineliminable but minimal condition of art

The previous discussion was necessary to establish a case for painting’s capacity or potentiality to be conceptual, in opposition to the orthodox view that it is a fundamentally non-conceptual practice—or, as Kosuth put it, ‘a mindless art’.78 Drawing upon Bois and Verwoert, I identified three distinct levels at which painting can operate conceptually, and on that basis made the retrospective claim that the most advanced painting of the past was already conceptual. If this is broadly correct, then painting meets the first of Osborne’s conditions for acceptance as post-conceptual art. In the case of Osborne’s second condition, it might be thought that no such demonstration is required. No-one doubts that painting is aesthetic; so, the discussion should end there. Yet Osborne has placed clear constraints on the scope of the aesthetic in post-conceptual art. There is an unmistakable sense that, for Osborne, the concept is the true ontological basis of the post-conceptual, while the aesthetic makes only a minimal contribution. It will therefore be instructive to analyse Osborne’s constraints. I will begin by comparing them with what Nae (2011) and Carrasco (2012) have called ‘the two dogmas of conceptualism’.

Briefly stated, the two dogmas seek to eliminate art’s aesthetic dimension. They propose that aesthetics must make way for ‘an art of the mind instead of the senses’, of intellectual content rather than visual form (Carrasco, 2012, p. 150). The first dogma, as defined by Nae, concerns ‘the demise of aesthetic experience’. It declares that

78 Kosuth (1969) refers to ‘formalist art’ as ‘mindless’ (p. 135), but it is clear from the context that his primary target is painting, which he dismisses as formalist and aesthetic.
conceptual art is not about eliciting a subjective *aesthetic experience* from the viewer by presenting an object to be ‘looked at’. The second dogma advocates ‘the “dematerialisation” of the art object or the irrelevance of artistic form’ (Nae, 2011). This negates the understanding of the artwork as an *aesthetic object* with ‘expressive qualities’ of visual and formal interest. Carrasco detects an underlying dualism in these twin exclusions. On one side of the duality there is the body, materiality, and a focus on the sensuous experience of objects whose opacity resists understanding. On the other side is the mind, the cognitive and intelligible, and an inter-subjective communication of ideas founded on transparency and rationality. This duality may be expressed as the opposition between opacity and transparency, or mark *versus* meaning. It will lead me to an important disagreement with Osborne (see point 3 below).

Returning to Osborne’s constraints, a comparison with the two dogmas reveals that Osborne does not exclude the aesthetic from the post-conceptual artwork. Rather, he states categorically that aesthetic ‘in both its ancient and later Kantian senses … is a *part of* … the ontological specificity of art’ (Osborne, 2013, p. 49). He accepts, first, that ‘all art requires *some* form of materialisation’ or ‘spatio-temporal presentation’: this is the ancient sense of aesthetic. Second, he affirms that there is also a role for pure reflective judgement in the ontology of art: this is the Kantian sense of aesthetic *experience*. Nonetheless, Osborne adds that the aesthetic concept of art utterly fails to ‘account for’ the part played by the aesthetic dimension in the ontology of art. Ironically, it was left to conceptual art to clarify the matter. As explained above, conceptual art showed—through its own failed attempt to do so—that it was not possible to eliminate the aesthetic from art. By failing as it did (performatively and constructively), conceptual art provided a conclusive demonstration that the aesthetic dimension is absolutely indispensible to the artwork. It is ineliminable for the simple

79 Osborne’s full statement reads: ‘Conceptual art demonstrated in a whole variety of novel ways, with respect to a whole series of different forms of materiality, the sense in which “aesthetic”, in both its ancient and later Kantian senses (as sensibility and as pure reflective judgement), is a *part of yet utterly fails to account for* the ontological specificity of “art”’.
reason that art is the *sensuous presentation* of some idea or some perspective on the world; such an idea or perspective must have a material-aesthetic instantiation in order to function as *art*.

By re-admitting the aesthetic as a condition of post-conceptual art, Osborne goes beyond the limits of pure conceptual art. Nonetheless, if he is clear that the artwork must include a material-aesthetic presentation, he is less explicit (he makes no definitive statement) about what kind of *experience* we can expect to derive from such a presentation. Osborne is not anti-aesthetic, but neither does he wish to endorse aesthetic experience in the sense of exalted feelings of beauty or the sublime. The answer seems to lie in what Osborne calls ‘Kant’s dialectically ambiguous sense of aesthetic’ (p. 42). Kant took aesthetics beyond its ancient meaning so that it was ‘decisively of the mind’ as well as the senses (p. 41): in aesthetic experience ‘the mind feels itself’ engaging in reflection upon an object, and the reflection is accompanied by feelings of pleasure or displeasure, harmony or confusion. Such an understanding of aesthetic experience collapses the ancient distinction between *aistheta* and *noeta*. By including both cognitive and affective dimensions, it overcomes the dualism of mind *versus* the senses. Osborne later refers, somewhat cryptically, to ‘a critical historical experience’ of art (p. 51). It appears to be a kind of intellectual feeling that occurs whenever an artwork provokes the thought: *this* is the critically important art of our time. In which case, *artistic* experience (for Osborne) would primarily be an intellectual response to a conceptual or ontological operation of art, a response that affirms the operation as historically meaningful. Osborne clearly privileges such an intellectual experience of art over pure sensuous or visual experience. In consequence, Carrasco suspects that Osborne remains only minimally distant from the second dogma of conceptual art—‘the idea that the *sensuous appearance* of the artwork, being ineliminable, *is irrelevant*’ (Carrasco, 2012, p. 156, italics added). He grants the material-aesthetic only a minor supporting role; the important meanings of art are generated by conceptual operations.
Osborne (2013) makes this clear in his definitive claim that ‘contemporary art is not an aesthetic art in any philosophically significant sense of the term’ (p. 10). That is, contemporary art does not put the aesthetic to work in any ontologically meaningful way; contemporary art is predominantly about concepts in and of art—that’s where the ontologically significant work is done. This leads Carrasco to an important deduction: Osborne’s privileging of the concept inevitably creates a situation in which ‘you can’t experience art as such without the mediation of a critical discourse’ (Carrasco, 2012, p. 154). The deduction is confirmed by Osborne himself when he opposes the idea that art can ‘get along very well on its own … without critical discourse’. This, he remarks, ‘is perhaps less true now than it has ever been’ (Osborne, 2013, p. 6). I will address the issue of discourse in point 5 below.

**Point 3: The anti-aestheticist use of aesthetic materials**

We now come to Osborne’s third condition of post-conceptual art, in which he refers to the critical necessity of ‘an anti-aestheticist use of aesthetic materials’ (p. 48). Note Osborne’s use of italics. He wishes to distinguish between an ‘aesthetic’ use of materials—which, at bottom, could mean simply to present an artwork in material form—and an ‘aestheticist’ use of materials. The latter ‘sustains the claim that art could be art by virtue of its aesthetic dimension alone’.

For Osborne, this is the illusion of aestheticism: it perpetrates an ‘ideological fraud’ involving the ‘misrecognition’ of the artwork as an aesthetic object and nothing more (p. 50). He opposes it on a number of counts.

First, aestheticism is, in principle, ‘indifferent’ to all other possible functions of art. In the past, art served important religious, political-ideological and educational functions which ensured that it was always more than merely aesthetic. By obscuring these functions, aestheticism eclipses the memory of art’s historically changing contributions.

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80 See Osborne (2010) after approximately 43 minutes.
to society. Second, aestheticism is equally indifferent to what Osborne calls other ‘dimensions’ or ‘aspects’ of art. These include art’s ‘cognitive, relational, historical and world-disclosing’ capacities (p. 42). Aestheticism ‘seals and legitimates’ their exclusion by reducing art to ‘a single plane of significance’ concerned solely with questions of sensibility and taste (p. 43). Purely aesthetic artworks question neither the nature nor the function of art; nor do they seek to transform the viewer’s self-understanding or challenge our ideas about the world. Third—and most problematic from an ontological point of view—is the inability of aestheticism to differentiate between a work of art and an ordinary (non-art) object; it reduces both to the same narrow terms of aesthetic experience and makes no allowance for their diverse purposes, relations or potentialities. Philosophically, aestheticism is linked to a metaphysics of the subject through its focus on the subjective experience of art (from Kant to Greenberg). It is opposed by a tradition of thought (from Hegel to conceptual art) that focuses instead on ‘art as ontology’. For the latter, the artwork is ‘an ontologically distinct object … the site of an autonomous production of meaning and a distinctive modality of truth’ (Osborne, 2004, p. 655). From this perspective, the philosophical error of aestheticism is that it conflates art and aesthetics. ‘It mistakes art’s necessary aesthetic appearance for the ground’ (or founding principle) of its autonomous production of meaning (Osborne, 2013, p. 49). In mistaking this single condition for the whole of art, aestheticism fails to register the lesson of conceptual art: that the aesthetic is no more than a minimal condition for something to have the status of art. For Osborne, the aesthetic in itself is ‘blank’ as an ontological support; it is radically insufficient in this respect.

In response to this catalogue of failings, Osborne advocates an anti-aestheticist approach to the use of aesthetic materials. But what precisely are ‘aesthetic materials’ and how might they be deployed in an anti-aestheticist manner? Oddly, Osborne provides no definition of the term. Jarvis (1998), however, suggests that ‘aesthetic materials’ refers not just to the brute matter of art but also the history of its forms, and
their cognitive and critical mediation (pp. 107-108). In any case, Osborne (2013) contends that such materials must be used in ‘constructive or strategic’ ways for the express purpose of countering ‘aesthetic misrecognition within the work’ (p. 50). Post-conceptual art opposes aestheticism (not the aesthetic per se); it must not allow aesthetic experience to overwhelm the intended artistic function.

In proposing the ‘constructive or strategic aesthetic use of aesthetic materials’, Osborne is effectively redefining the role of the aesthetic in art. He argues that, because the aesthetic is a minimal but radically insufficient condition for art, it must be deployed in conjunction with other functions or aspects of art, principally its conceptual dimension. Second, the aesthetic must be used to construct new contexts of meaning, or to ‘plug into’ wider circuits of available meaning. Under these conditions, the aesthetic no longer has value in itself; it takes on a relational role within art and derives its significance from its contribution to the composite form and overall function of the artwork:

More generally, the artistic significance of aesthetic must be judged in the context of the historically shifting relations between aesthetic and other—cognitive, semantic, social, political and ideological—aspects of artworks. And the balance and meaning will be different in different kinds of art. (Osborne, 2013, p. 45. Italics added.)

If this is an internal requirement of the post-conceptual artwork (involving the self-relation of its component parts), Osborne also specifies the role of the aesthetic in relation to the social whole. All aspects of the artwork, but perhaps the aesthetic in particular, obtain their critical meaning from their relations to the ‘aesthetic dimension of other (non art) cultural forms’ such as ‘commodity design and display, advertising, mass media and communications technologies’ (p. 46). In sum, the aesthetic in art involves more than the immediate sensuous experience of the artwork; it ‘derives its
meaning, in each instance, relationally or contextually’ (p. 49)—that is, from its internal relations with other aspects of art, and from its external relations to the aesthetic dimension of non-art forms (above all, the highly aestheticised commodity form). These two sets of relations are necessary to the critical structure of the artwork, but were previously obscured by aestheticism.

3.1: An ontological role for the aesthetic in art?

Unfortunately, Osborne does not develop these remarks on the strategic and constructive use of aesthetic materials. There appears to be some affinity with Verwoert’s idea of strategic art, in terms of art’s relations within the art world or with society at large. Nonetheless, I disagree with the general nature of Osborne’s assessment of the aesthetic in art. I find that he gives too little attention to how the aesthetic actually works at the level of sensation and affect, and too little credit to the capacity of aesthetics to contribute to the ontology of art. Carrasco (2012, p. 156) asks what function we should assign to the aesthetic today: whether it should focus on the feelings that accompany our cognitive response to the artwork, or if aesthetic materials must be deployed in the anti-aestheticist manner advocated by Osborne. Ultimately, drawing upon Danto, and contra Osborne, she suggests that the aesthetic could play a deeper role in art—a role that is ontological, and more than minimally so.

I will briefly summarise Danto’s position before turning to what I think is a more compelling case (advanced by Bernstein) for the ontological significance of the aesthetic in art. From the 1980s, Danto was well known for his (Hegelian) argument that art had come to an end and was superseded by philosophy. In his view, an affective response to art could be ‘excised from’ an intellectual interest in artworks as embodied meanings, and ‘thereby made redundant to understanding what works of art are’ (Costello, 2004, p. 434). From 2003, with the publication of The Abuse of Beauty, however, Danto’s work took an ‘aesthetic turn’ in which he reconsidered the relation
between the aesthetic and contemporary forms of art. He now thought that the range of aesthetic experience extended well beyond the staples of beauty, ugliness and the sublime to include such new formations as an aesthetic of grunge, an aesthetic of public signage, and an aesthetic of ‘ready-made images’ (Danto, 2007, pp. 121-126). Under these conditions, the role of the aesthetic is to qualify the artwork’s mode of address to the viewer. The aesthetic supports the work’s embodied meaning in a manner that is rhetorical (designed to affect the viewer) and ‘pragmatic’ (has the practical outcome of directing the viewer toward an intended meaning). It is these capacities that constitute the aesthetic dimension of art for Danto. In his own words, aesthetic qualities ‘inflect’ the meaning of an artwork by disposing the viewer ‘to have feelings of one sort or another toward what the artwork represents’ (Danto, 2003, p. xv). In sum, the aesthetic serves to elicit and direct a range of responses, both affective and cognitive. If this is the case, then, according to Carrasco (2012), ‘aesthetic qualities could contribute to the meaning of the work … and to the meaning of art’ (p. 159). In her view, this opens ‘a critical standpoint’ missed by Osborne—the highly significant role of the aesthetic in the ontology of art and more widely in human thought, feeling and action (p. 163).

Danto’s late work acknowledges that the aesthetic modes in which artworks are presented can enhance art’s cognitive effects and contribute to its transformative power. Today, the aesthetic is no longer disregarded by ‘even those most politically or socially committed artists’, who, rather, recognise its capacity to motivate an audience by drawing upon a context of shared beliefs (Carrasco, 2012, pp. 160-161). Towards the close of her essay, Carrasco provides a telling quote from Danto (2003, p. 59):

[A]esthetics may itself explain why we have art in the first place. We have it in order that our feelings be enlisted toward what art is about.

This differs from Osborne in that it restores aesthetics to a more central role in art. It reclaims a social function for the aesthetic, and re-admits the relational and world-
disclosing *aspects* previously excluded by (and from) aesthetics, albeit under the continuing domination of the concept. Despite these gains, I find that Danto’s approach remains overly pragmatic. He tends to instrumentalise the aesthetic, to conceive of it as subordinate to the artist’s intention, supportive of the cognitive in art but insufficient to carry meaning in itself. Finally, for Danto, our experience of art proceeds in one direction: from the understanding of a work’s meaning to an appreciation of its aesthetic qualities. As Costello (2004, p. 432) points out, this reverses the normal experience of art, which *begins with an aesthetic encounter* before the question of interpretation arises (see below on the judgement of art). Costello presents a convincing case that Danto’s own logic necessarily leads to the conclusion that ‘the aesthetic now counts as an irreducible feature of art’ (p. 434). That is, it is an integral and highly significant component of art’s ontology.

Given my concerns with Danto’s theory, I will turn to what I consider to be a stronger argument for the importance of the aesthetic in art. This is presented in a series of works by J.M. Bernstein. Whereas Danto and Osborne hold divergent views within the Hegelian camp, Bernstein’s reading of art returns to Kant’s epistemology.

3.2 Bernstein on aesthetics and sensuous particularity

What hibernates, what lives on in an afterlife in the modern arts, is our sensory *experience* of the world … *sensory experience as constitutive of conviction and connection to the world of things.* (Bernstein, 2006, p. 3)

Bernstein is unusual among contemporary writers on art in that he has presented an explicit defence of modernist painting and aesthetic experience, and has done so on philosophical grounds. His basic position is that the task of the arts—above all, painting—is to rescue our embodied experience of the world from ‘cognitive and rational oblivion’ (Bernstein, 2006, p. 7). That is, to rescue it from being ‘systematically
vanquished’ by the rule of the concept ‘cut loose from its moorings’ in materiality and bodily sensibility (pp. 6, 15). Bernstein’s historical diagnosis is that our capacity for lively sensory experience has been deadened by the forces of modernity—the dominance of technological and instrumental-calculative forms of rationality including what Foster called the ‘abstractive tendencies’ of contemporary capitalism (see chapter one). These same forces expelled and excluded art from everyday life (p. 3), forcing it to seek an autonomous basis, whilst reducing experience to mere (mental) representations of objects rather than embodied sensuous encounters with them. Art’s claim upon our ‘rational attention’, and its ‘rational authority’ today, according to Bernstein (p. 1), relies upon its ability to redeem our impoverished sensory awareness. This is an aesthetic task, and one for which painting is particularly well suited. An aesthetic encounter with painting holds the promise of activating our responses to the sensuous particulars of colour, line and form, and of doing so for the sake of experience in general. Bernstein’s philosophical justification for this claim goes back to Kant. The issues are complex and are presented here in summary form.

Bernstein’s starting point is his opposition to all theories of aesthetics based on beauty as an objective property inhering in things. In place of objective beauty, he focuses on aesthetic experience construed as any ‘enlivening’ encounter with ‘compelling sensuous particulars’ (Bernstein, 2008, p. 41). This experience has been lost in the era of modernity; the task of the arts is to salvage it on our behalf, and on behalf of experience in general. To explain the logic and the consequences of this loss, Bernstein (2006, p. 4) turns to ‘the notion of experience that has become authoritative’ for us, which he traces back to Kant’s epistemology. He presents a reading of Kant’s account of knowledge and

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81 See Bernstein (1992) for an account of art’s ‘alienation’ from knowledge and truth under the conditions of modernity. Art is forced to retreat into the ‘merely’ aesthetic, but, in turn, uses the aesthetic to overcome its alienation. The role of aesthetics is to achieve ‘the entwinement of art and truth, the experience of art as somehow cognitive and of truth as sensuous and particular’ (p. 2).

82 Bernstein (2006): ‘[T]he issues that I contend are focal … namely, the standing of perceptual experience as orientational, as providing conviction and connection to the world, and the role of art mediums as stand-ins for the lost authority of nature—are most forcefully and radically raised in modernist painting’ (p. 11, italics added).
experience and draws conclusions for our contemporary experience of the aesthetic in art.

Bernstein begins his reading with Kant’s definitive statement: ‘Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind’. *Intuitions*, he explains, stand for ‘the immediate, sensory, embodied’ element in knowledge that depends upon our encounter with objects in the world. They are equivalent to what we now call (non-rational) sensory awareness. *Concepts*, in contrast, are spontaneously generated by the mind; they are ‘general representations’, representations of what several different objects have in common; they enable us to comprehend objects ‘through the recognition of the features and properties that they share with other objects’ (p. 4, italics added). Knowledge, then, is what occurs when intuitions are subsumed under—are classified, rationally organised and articulated by—concepts. It is at this point in the argument that Bernstein makes an important intervention. He claims that a problem arises in the detail of Kant’s account of the concept-intuition relation. As indicated in Kant’s definitive statement (quoted above), concept and intuition are each incomplete on its own; each realises its potential for rational knowledge only when it acts in harmony with the other, when their relation is one of equality, reciprocity, and mutual determination.

But, according to Bernstein, there is a ‘technical puzzle’ in Kant’s account. Kant contends that intuitions can only contribute to knowledge by *first* being subsumed under concepts. This requirement has the effect of ‘handing over all capacity for recognition’ of objects to conceptuality alone, whilst depriving sensory awareness of the means of doing so (p. 6). As a result, ‘the moment of intuition’ is dispatched outside of reason

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83 Bernstein (2006) provides a useful summary of ‘four dualisms’ that structure the concept-intuition relation in Kant: concepts stand to intuitions as form stands to matter; as the general (or universal) stands to the particular; as the products of spontaneity or intellectual activity stand opposed to the products of receptivity; and as what belongs to the domain of the intelligible stands opposed to what belongs to the domain of the sensible (p. 5).
and cognition (p. 4); intuitions are ‘given all the meaning they can possess’ by the work of the concept alone. The concept, in turn, is absolved of its internal relation to the sensory: the two are split apart. The senses are rendered ‘utterly and irredeemably passive’, so that sensory experience ‘becomes a mere shadow cast by (abstract) conceptuality’ (p. 6). This amounts to a breakdown of fully embodied experience, which is reflected, Bernstein claims, in the forms of rationality that have come to prominence in the era of modernity. The outcome has been that individual, embodied experience ‘is increasingly and systematically vanquished’ (p. 6), and the objects of such experience have suffered a loss of status: they are reduced to mere shadows of our representations of them, inarticulate and meaningless, unable to constitute a connection to the world or to provide us with orientation in the world. Conceptuality today is increasingly independent of its sensory bearer (Costello & Willsdon, 2008, p. 20). This is evidenced in the ‘abstractive tendencies’ identified by Foster—the abstractions of scientific, economic and bureaucratic reasoning that have normalised the ‘delegitimation’ of significant sensory experience (Bernstein, 2006, p. 7). Pure conceptual art only served to extend this delegitimation into the practice of the arts.

Bernstein now comes to his major claim, which involves the arts and, in particular, painting. Having diagnosed that ‘the dominant practices governing everyday life’ no longer depend upon our ‘sensuously bound, embodied encounter with the world’ for their operation and reproduction (p. 3), he goes on to define the role of the arts within this context:

The conceit upon which my argument turns is that the arts have become the bearers of our now delegitimated capacity for significant sensory encounter: emphatic experience—and it is because the arts do (or did) fulfil this role that … the arts matter and possess authority … The task of the arts is to rescue from cognitive and rational oblivion our embodied experience and the standing of
unique particular things as the proper objects of such experience, albeit only in the form of a reminder or a promise. (Bernstein, 2006, p. 7)

The claim being advanced by Bernstein is that the task of the arts is to rescue not just our aesthetic experience of (say) line, colour and form but ‘experience in general’: experience of the sensuous particularity of everyday objects and thus of ‘nature’ understood as what is given to us to encounter in the world. Contra Osborne, this is both a strong epistemological-ontological claim on behalf of the aesthetic dimension of art, and one that would restore a social function to art via the aesthetic. Aesthetic experience of art is epistemological insofar as it overcomes representation and provides insight into (knowledge of) the embodied, and always particular, nature of things. And this act of reclamation is one of the key functions of art today: its contribution to a fuller experience and a more rounded understanding of our world, and of our selves as embodied beings in that world. These twin capacities for accessing sensuous particularity and embodied experience belong to the very nature of art: ontologically considered, whatever else an artwork may prove to be, it is necessarily dedicated to the provision of such aesthetic experience.

In some paragraphs on Deleuze, Bernstein consolidates this ontological claim: he defines modernist artworks as objects specifically ‘designed for aesthetic encounter, designed to operate at the level of sensation’ (Bernstein, 2008, p. 43, italics added). Sensation acts directly on the body, on the nervous system; it bypasses the deadening effects of representation and secures access to aspects of experience ‘repressed by ordinary cognitive engagements’ (p. 43). This is the principal effect of Matisse’s

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84 Bernstein (2006) argues that art ‘raises a philosophical claim’ on behalf of sensuous embodied experience and its importance for ‘cognition and rationality’ (p. 8). It does so in a manner that philosophy cannot, because philosophy remains on the side of the concept divorced from intuition.

85 Here lies the difference between Bernstein and Danto. For Danto, the aesthetic dimension of the artwork inflects our feelings (e.g. of admiration or disapproval) about the meaning of the artwork, the idea it represents. For Bernstein, the aesthetic enlivens our capacity for sensuous embodied experience prior to, or in excess of, conceptual capture and the work of representation.
paintings, according to Bernstein. Such paintings function as means for ‘disabling intellectual perception, the seeing of things by understanding them, conceptually grasping them’ (p. 53). Matisse deploys painting otherwise: he utilises its distinctive capacity for ‘interrogating experience’ by producing ‘irreducibly unique particulars’. His work fractures and fragments form and proportion (p. 41), and disintegrates representational space (p. 45) for the sake of aesthetic encounter. It confronts us with images that are difficult to process cognitively and so ‘demand to be responded to in their own right and on their own terms’ (Bernstein, 2006, p. 8). When the cognitive act of seeing is denied in this way, we are confronted instead by ‘mere’ appearance, the appearance of sensuous particulars that resist capture by familiar concepts (Bernstein, 2008, p. 53). As in the case of Bois’ perceptive model, this awakens an ‘uneasiness’ in the spectator, a disturbance of the normal structures of perception. Badiou has commented on this rescuing of appearance in art. Appearance ‘must be absolutely respected’, he argues, for it is in appearance that ‘what there is to think first presents itself as being something other than thought’; it is in appearance that difference—the truly new—initially emerges and presents itself as something that cannot be ‘preconfigured by thought’ (Badiou, 2010, p. 44). In Bernstein’s terms, to encounter the sensuous appearance of things is to experience what is ‘other to’ the conceptual productions of the mind (Bernstein, 2006, p. 7). This takes us beyond our governing concepts and habitual categories of understanding. We reconnect with nature beyond our representations of it, and begin to experience nature’s power to make sense—to possess ‘a material-specific potentiality for sense-making’—on its own terms (Bernstein, 2003, p. xi).

This last claim takes us to the heart of Bernstein’s whole argument. It enjoins him to defend the artistic medium (or material specificity in art) as the means to move from matter to meaning. He contends that meaning in art cannot be ‘indifferent’ to its

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86 Bernstein (2003, 2006) defends the artistic medium as the condition of possibility for a meaningful, aesthetically based art. He traces a logical chain that runs from nature through materiality to medium
material bearer. If that were the case (as in pure conceptual art), the material would merely transmit an immaterial idea instead of being the condition of possibility for an idea to emerge in visible form. ‘Art-meanings, the kind of meanings artworks have, are non-detachable from the medium … There must be an exchange between matter and meaning’ if an idea is to appear (Bernstein, 2006, pp. 75, 77). Bernstein defines a medium as ‘minimally, the material conditions of a practice as they appear within an artistic community at a given time’ (Bernstein, 2003, p. x). A medium includes ‘raw materials’ and the operations required to transform them into artworks. Artistic mediums are ‘matter conceived as a potential for sense-making’ and therefore, by logical extension, they are ‘perhaps the last idea of material nature as possessing potentialities for meaning’ (p. xi, italics added). What Bernstein ultimately calls ‘aesthetic reason’ is a claim about art’s capacity to ‘engender a compelling synthesis of freedom and materiality, reason and nature, with artistic mediums playing the key mediating role’ (p. x). This claim, he argues, ‘can suspend or displace the competing claims of scientific knowing and moral cognition’ (p. ix).

Contra Osborne, therefore, Bernstein assigns a vital role to the aesthetic and to ‘aesthetic materials’ in contemporary art. Ontologically, he defines the contemporary artwork as an aesthetic object designed to reconnect us with a repressed dimension of embodied experience. Epistemologically, he defines aesthetics as ‘a mode of revealing’ in which bodily sensations and feelings are ‘ingredients in objective knowing and public meaning that cannot be left fully behind’ (Bernstein, 2006, pp. 82-83). In contrast to a purely conceptual approach to art, aesthetic revealing does more than simply extract (linguistic) meaning in isolation from the sensuous experience that conditioned it. Moreover, the innate opacity of a medium like painting tends to both exceed and resist
the ideal transparency of the concept. We can neither fully reduce a painting to conceptual meaning nor be sure that, on renewed acquaintance, it will not yield up still further potential for meaning. The reception of painting therefore involves a necessary process of oscillation: our idea of a particular work must be continually tested against experience of the work’s material form.

3.3: The ontological importance of the aesthetic component of post-conceptual painting

To summarise, I have drawn upon Bernstein’s defence of aesthetic experience as a necessary corrective to what I regard as Osborne’s insufficient appreciation of the place of the aesthetic in contemporary art. Whilst retaining Osborne’s six-point framework of post-conceptual art, I argue for a rethinking of points 2 and 3, as indicated above.

According to point 2, the aesthetic is ineliminable from art but makes no significant contribution to the ontology of art and obscures art’s other important dimensions and functions. I have shown, on the contrary, that the aesthetic is essential to the ontological make-up of the artwork as an object designed for aesthetic encounter. In addition, the aesthetic performs a vital social function in revealing the need for—and in demonstrating the possibility of—the recovery of a lost dimension of everyday embodied experience. As for Osborne’s point 3, it proclaims the need to protect art from ‘aesthetic misrecognition’. In general, Osborne advocates a balance between the aesthetic and other capacities of art (Osborne, 2013, p. 45), but here takes an anti-aestheticist stand that over-rules an overtly aesthetic use of materials. Again, I draw upon Bernstein to contest this position. My claim is that ‘aesthetic materials’ must be used aesthetically—specifically in post-conceptual painting—if they are to contribute to the fullest possible meaning of the artwork. An important effect of any artwork derives from our aesthetic encounter with its material and sensuous particulars. Moreover, according to Bernstein, an aesthetic encounter with art may well be the sole means left
to us for the recovery of embodied experience, and thus for renewed appreciation of nature’s potential for meaning.

In contesting these points, my overarching aim is to affirm the possibility of post-conceptual painting, a possibility that is nowhere discussed by Osborne. By post-conceptual painting, I mean an art practice that is oriented by the medium and historical achievements of painting; that includes essential dimensions of conceptuality and the aesthetic, in which both contribute to the ontological definition of art; in which materials are used aesthetically as well as conceptually; and within which the balance of concept and aesthetic may differ according to interest. Such practice, as was explained earlier, has the capacity for conceptual operations at various levels from the painterly to the strategic and world disclosing. And it is subject to judgement as art according to a combination of criteria that includes the aesthetic, the conceptual and the critical. The question of judgement will be discussed further below. But first, I will conclude this section with a brief review of Bernstein’s ideas on modernist painting, including the ‘ascent’ from matter to meaning.

In an essay on Matisse, Bernstein (2008) argues that modernist painting attains to experience, and so to meaning, not by representing people and things but by ‘liberating’ sensation, which is achieved by a return to the most basic elements of painting practice (colour, line and form) (p. 42). Freed from its traditional end of depicting objects, painting becomes ‘an art of means’: it takes its own elements as its primary subject matter and affirms them as the source of its power. According to Bernstein, this is ‘the truth of painting’ as revealed by modernism. Matisse’s The Red Studio is an exemplary instance. It generates a sensation of colour (of redness) sufficiently powerful, on Bernstein’s reading, to overturn the previous categories by which painting had been understood. In particular, the painting enacts ‘a violent inversion of the categorial roles of substance and accident, thing and property’ (p. 47). Colour sheds its subordinate role of ‘shading, modelling, contouring’ (p. 44) to become the primary substance of the
painting, the thing that is painted (p. 46). The depicted objects, by contrast, appear insubstantial, merely serving to structure the display of colour, to lend it variable shape. Figure/ground relations are thoroughly inverted, perspective is distorted, and an important structuring line is omitted (in the left corner). The overall effect is to elevate the colouring matter, the red paint, ‘from descriptive means into the thing itself’ (p. 47).

For Bernstein (2006), the great achievement of modernist painting is to allow sensation and feeling to orient us once more, so that they can provide ‘conviction and connection to the world’ and help to redeem ‘the lost authority of nature’ (p. 11). These are grand claims. To support them, Bernstein argues for a ‘different history of modernism’ focusing on key artworks in which ‘there is an uprising of meaning from materiality (or a sinking of meaning back into its material conditions of possibility)’ (p. 191). This is evidently the case with The Red Studio, a painting which enacts ‘a metaphysical contesting of the meaning of art’, as well as a ‘philosophical argument in paint’ about what makes an object (any object) ‘capable and worthy of sustaining aesthetic attention’ (Bernstein, 2008, pp. 46-47). It is an exemplary instance, then, of an aesthetic-conceptual achievement of painting, a successful ascent from matter to meaning.

**Point 4: Materials and mediums of art**

Osborne’s points 2 and 3 were contested in the name of post-conceptual painting. There appears to be no such basis, however, for disputing his fourth point, which stipulates ‘an expansion to infinity of the possible material means of art-making’ (Osborne, 2013, p. 50). After all, an infinity of material means would, by definition, include the material means of painting.

But why should there be such an expansion? Osborne appeals to a combination of fact and logic. His point follows from ‘conceptual reflection on the *de facto* expansion of means’ within the art world, the fact that artists are increasingly working in ways that
are no longer confined to the means, materials and categories that previously constituted the system of the arts. This great shift in practice has effectively destroyed the ontological significance of traditional mediums (p. 50). At the same time, the expansion of artistic means is a *logical* consequence of Osborne’s first two points. Post-conceptualism acknowledges that ‘there is nothing, in principle, that cannot be art’. This negative presupposition refuses to deny the status of art to any combination of material means and concept. In short, post-conceptual art is a ‘trans-categorial’ art: it includes works that operate across, between, or attempt to elude all previous categories by which art was understood.87

Clearly, such an ‘infinite’ expansion of means threatens to displace the idea of *medium* as a fundamental category of the arts. Not only would mediums no longer have any ontological significance (playing no part in post-conceptual art), neither would they form a critically useful basis for the production and evaluation of works that are no longer conditioned by them. The very notion of post-conceptual *painting* would therefore seem to be contradictory, simultaneously rejecting (as post-conceptual) and retaining (as painting) the category of medium. The resolution of this conundrum, I suggest, lies in the changing understanding of what ‘medium’ is taken to mean.

Today, medium is no longer equated with medium-specificity. A number of leading theorists have rejected the core (supposedly ‘Greenbergian’) notion of the medium as *given*, as a unique set of properties constitutive of the ahistorical essence of an art form.88 The medium of painting is, for example, no longer regarded as its physical support, the paint and canvas; nor does painting possess an irreducible essence such as

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87 See Osborne (2010) after approximately 44 minutes.
88 In what follows, I draw upon the work of Diarmuid Costello, especially his essay ‘On the Very Idea of a Specific Medium’ (2008), which sets out in clear detail a range of arguments that I can reproduce only summarily. The ‘leading theorists’ referred to include art historians Rosalind Krauss and Michael Fried, and philosophers Stanley Cavell and Jacques Rancière. The positions of Fried and Cavell are well explicated by Costello, who also discusses Krauss’s ‘late appeal to’ the work of Cavell (Costello, 2012). Rancière’s essay ‘Painting in the Text’ (2007) discusses the idea of medium in relation to discourse (see below).
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flatness. It is acknowledged, too, that mediums are neither ontologically nor historically fixed. Traditional mediums are subject to change, and new mediums may be invented. Indeed, according to art historian James Elkins, modernist criticism has reached the point of ‘structural inability to determine what constitutes the specificity of a medium’ (quoted in Costello, 2008, p. 276). The category is so fluid and open to historical change that mediums can no longer place any ‘substantive constraints on artistic practice that may be specified in advance’ (p. 279). An important consequence is that ‘a principled demarcation between artistic media is no longer possible’ (p. 311). Instead, the identity of a medium must be determined by ongoing agreement, by what de Duve (2010) calls a ‘social pact’ between arts professionals and the art public concerning the ‘rules of the trade’ (p. 65). A medium has to be socially constructed in this way; it is not something given and available. It is a matter of _convention_, an underlying consensus about what constitutes the identity of an art form at a particular time.⁸⁹ Such a convention, by its very nature, is open to challenge and transformation—and particularly so, through the _ongoing practice_ of the medium or discipline itself. Given this situation, there is nothing (in principle) to prohibit contemporary painting from claiming access to an extended range of material means, perhaps even an infinite range. Nor is there anything internal to the idea of ‘medium’ that prohibits painting’s development in an overtly conceptual direction. In which case, the category of medium no longer stands in contradiction to the defining conditions of post-conceptual art (as set out by Osborne); such art may legitimately operate in the guise of _painting_. In practice, it will be open to post-conceptual painting to define, in each case, the terms of its relation to the material means, aesthetic effects, and concepts associated with the historical medium of painting.

⁸⁹ For Cavell, conventions are all we have; they constitute the bedrock of human society. Rooted in forms of life, they are deep and pervasive patterns of underlying agreement. For Fried, the perceived essence of an artistic medium is itself ‘a product of convention’; while it is not immutable, it is nonetheless clearly not arbitrary. This amounts to a historicisation of the idea of essence. As a consequence, we can no longer conceive of the essence of an art form as being independent of its ongoing practice. (See Costello, 2008, pp. 288-292.)
This claim about painting being open to an extended range of material means is not altogether new. Grounds for the claim can be traced back to the 1960s, when the idea of an immutable essence of painting began to be questioned. In his seminal essay ‘Art and Objecthood’ (1967), Michael Fried argued that the task of the modernist painter was not to seek such an essence, but instead ‘to discover those conventions which, at a given moment, alone are capable of securing his work’s identity as painting’ (p. 23, fn. 4). Since it was no longer clear a priori what counted as a painting (a tacked-up piece of canvas was considered a test case), criteria would have to be created, and created from within the continuity of painting itself. For Fried, the sole basis of success in this quest was that a painting should withstand comparison with ‘the vital work of the recent past’. But, as Costello points out, if such comparison is the only basis for securing agreement about a new convention or a new set of criteria for painting:

This leaves open in principle, if not entirely in practice, what might count as an instance of painting and thereby bear comparison to its greatest past achievements … [It] is not open to Fried to respond that a given work cannot be a painting because it is not made of paint, since that would be to fall back into a version of the essentialist account of artistic media. (Costello, 2008, p. 295. Italics added.)

Costello pursues this deduction to its logical conclusion. He shows that Fried’s idea of an artistic medium is not grounded ‘in any literal properties of the medium in question’ (p. 300). It is not defined ‘materially, causally, or ontologically’, but solely in terms of ‘compelling conviction’ and securing agreement (p. 306). As such, the category of medium is ‘so accommodating’ as to be unable to impose any substantive a priori constraints upon practice (pp. 279, 310). This leaves painting open to, in Osborne’s terms, ‘an infinity of material means’, with the important proviso that those means are utilised in relation to the historical achievements of painting. Costello’s term for this
requirement is ‘participation’ in the ‘structures of artistic intention’ that constitute the tradition of painting (p. 300).  

Costello completes his argument with a final ironic twist. He contends that, in accordance with Fried’s logic, there is no compelling reason why certain photographic works (for example) should not be considered as painting. It is possible for an artist working with any material or technique to take up questions raised by painting, and to attempt to produce work comparable to great painting of the past. Under those conditions, it is conceivable to regard such work as being painting, or at least a continuation of painting by other means—so long as it is demonstrably working in relation to the discourse, set of questions, objects and achievements that historically belong to the archive of painting.

4.1: Post-conceptual painting: the question of judgement

In the artworks submitted for this thesis, I have included lithographic techniques and installational operations that do not strictly belong within the traditional repertoire of painting. Yet, as I have argued, they are readily accommodated within the expanded means of the medium of painting as a convention open to change. The use of ‘borrowed’ techniques also presents no problem for artworks categorised as post-conceptual painting. This gives me the freedom to draw upon other artistic practices as and when they seem appropriate.

A problem arises, however, when an art form strays too far from its traditional norms—a problem of judgement. It happened to the visual arts, in general, with the advent of conceptual and ‘postmodernist’ forms of art. As Osborne (2013) points out, supporters

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90 For Costello (2007b), a structure of artistic intention is ‘embodied by its mode of address to a particular artistic tradition, and the kind of conviction it seeks to elicit in its viewers as to its standing in relation to past work in that tradition’ (p. 27). It is indexed to the traditional medium but not constrained by it. This approximates to what I have called fidelity to the archive of painting.
of the new work were unable to provide a secure basis for its critical evaluation; they had no principled means of deciding which (if any) of these works were ‘better’ than others (pp. 4-5). In the case of pure conceptual art, the discounting of aesthetics and traditional mediums left no criteria of judgement other than a vague appeal to what a work ‘added’ to the concept of art. The very idea of critical judgement ran into intractable—indeed, insuperable—difficulties (first acknowledged in the 1980s and still causing ‘consternation’ in the new millennium, according to Osborne). In these circumstances, the critical vacuum was liable to be filled by politics. Foster (2010) remarks upon a reactive ‘displacement from politics to art’ in which artists, theorists and reviewers have utilised artworks and art occasions as a forum for political ideas.

The question of judgement in art has a long and complex history which I cannot reproduce here.91 I will confine my remarks, therefore, to an original conception of artistic evaluation that borrows from, and extends, the work of de Duve. It is a conception whose structure makes it particularly appropriate for application to post-conceptual painting. In his book on Greenberg, de Duve (2010) writes that the interpretation of art lies ‘between two judgements’ (p. 25). The first is a ‘perfectly intuitive’ response, an aesthetic experience of the artwork that gives rise to the desire to understand it better. The same judgement is then ‘nourished by reflection’, and takes comprehension of the work to a conclusion. This two-part judgement accords well with the experience of artworks that hold, and reward, prolonged thoughtful attention. Nonetheless, at the heart of his definition, de Duve de-emphasises theoretical forms of reflection, and threatens to negate the conceptual dimension of art itself: ‘almost nothing in art is a matter of concepts or theory in the strict sense of the words’.

91 For the Kantian background to the question, see Osborne, 2013, p. 42. The crux of the matter is that there are two distinct forms of judgement in Kant: aesthetic and artistic. A judgement is purely aesthetic when it is indifferent to the nature of the object judged (whether a sunset, a dream or a painting). It is the experience of beauty that matters; there is no role for a concept of what type of object is experienced. By contrast, an artistic judgement is ‘logically conditioned’; it takes account of the fact that it is an object of a particular type (an artwork) that it being judged. To say ‘this is a beautiful painting’ is to judge the object in accordance with a prior concept of painting.
Consequently, de Duve’s definition needs to be amended for application to post-conceptual art. The result is a tri-partite judgement that proceeds from a primary aesthetic engagement (at the level of sensation), through conceptual reflection, to a critical evaluation. The evaluation weighs the aesthetic and cognitive dimensions of the artwork, and reckons the work’s strategic contribution within the art world and as a function of world-disclosure more generally. A successful work, on these terms, would be one that is taken up by the viewer as a key point of reference in thinking about art and life. It would provide a focus for personal values and commitments, but, importantly, it could also play a role in the development of shared ideas and actions. Post-conceptual painting operates within this overall context of judgement: it is grounded in the aesthetic but always maintains a strong orientation towards, and commitment to, the wider life world.

**Points 5 and 6: Painting as a distributive practice**

The final two points of Osborne’s definition may be taken together. Osborne (2013) describes them as following directly from point 4, as its ‘logical’ and ‘temporal’ consequences, respectively (p. 48). Point 5 raises the question of the unity of the post-conceptual artwork. Unity becomes a question only as a logical consequence of the ‘expansion to infinity’ of the material means of art. A post-conceptual artwork is no longer necessarily a single unique object, such as a painting or a sculpture. Instead, the work may be distributed across multiple related objects, or it may be reproduced in different forms across time. Osborne is not referring to consecutive editions of prints, photographs or digital artworks. Rather, he cites conceptual practices that exhibit both ‘preparatory’ and ‘subsequent’ documentary materials as an integral part of the artwork (p. 50). This is common practice in performance art, in which the artwork is ‘distributed’ between the performance and its documentation in textual and photographic or videographic form. Osborne also gives the example of *Spiral Jetty* by Robert Smithson (pp. 110-114). He describes this as the combination of an ‘earthwork’
made in 1972, an essay written in 1974, a script for a film, the film itself, and a ‘variety of related paraphernalia’. These examples show that an artwork may consist of heterogeneous objects, be (re)installed at successive sites, or (re)produced in variable forms or different materials on different occasions. Each successive instantiation contributes to the relational unity of the work, while leaving it open to further transformation. Osborne’s point 6 refers to the ‘historical malleability’ of the artwork, the fact that it might ‘expand’ or even ‘contract’ over time: ‘there is no necessity for an artwork to be identifiable with the same set of material instantiations across historical time’ (Osborne, 2010).

An important corollary of Osborne’s argument is that the unity of an artwork can no longer be aesthetic. A unique aesthetic experience of an art object is still possible and important. But it is insufficient to account for the full meaning of a post-conceptual work if that work also consists of further (earlier or later) instantiations. Once again, Osborne does not develop his point at length, but relies on its status as a logical entailment that (if correctly deduced) brooks no argument. In his 2010 podcast, he affirms: ‘there is nothing to be said about the unity of the artwork beyond the fact that it is the totality of its possible material instantiations’.

What, then, are the consequences of points 5 and 6 for the practice of post-conceptual painting, and for the viewer’s aesthetic encounter with such painting? With regard to the question of unity, this was traditionally attributed to a painting’s status as a unique integral object (never to be reworked or repeated). Or, from a formal point of view, unity was located in the relational totality of the painting’s component parts (lines, colours, forms). Or, again, such unity might be constructed as the totality of interpretations that a painting accumulates over time. Yet, Osborne’s argument opens the way to another possibility. The identity of a painting may lie in the ‘distributive unity’ of the art object plus the statements made about it by the artist (and possible others). Osborne himself seemed to glimpse such a possibility. Discussing the discipline
of art criticism, he noted the ‘growing willingness’ of artists to engage in ‘definitional questions’ and discourses about art (Osborne, 2000, p. 88). This was not just a question of artists seeking to maintain control over the reception of their work, but also of using theoretical discourse as artistic material, as a ‘productive resource for practice’. The ‘most radical effect’ of this development was ‘an expansion in the notion of art practice (and hence, the art work) to include—at its limit—the products of all of the artist’s art-related activities’.

This development promises to radically alter our understanding of the practice of painting. Post-conceptual painting, as I have argued throughout this thesis, includes both an aesthetic and a conceptual dimension. It now seems that the latter need not be confined to conceptual operations carried out in the medium of paint, whose visible effects are then embodied in the art object. According to this new understanding, conceptual researches related to a painting may be published in textual, oral, video or other discursive formats, which may be presented as an integral part of the painting itself rather than its incidental supplement. This would mean that painting, today, has an integral discursive dimension; each painted artwork surrounds itself with a ‘rhetorical envelope’ of linguistic statements that extend and refine its meaning. This discursive dimension opens up painting to what Osborne calls a ‘distributive materiality’. That is, a painting no longer consists exclusively of a painted object; rather, its distributed unity may also include printed or spoken or videographic discourses that surround it—including those of the artist herself in the first instance.

Radical as it seems, this is not such a new development. Historically, it has antecedents in the manifestos of the early twentieth century (Surrealist, Futurist, Vorticist etc.) and in the art-related writings and correspondence of great modernists from Cézanne to Kandinsky, Matisse and Klee. In retrospect, these writings appear not as supplements to

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92 Badiou (2007) uses the term ‘rhetorical envelope’ to refer to the manifestos and declarations produced by the twentieth century avant-garde (p. 139).
the artwork but as elaborations of the discursive practice of painting within the medium of language or text. No doubt, this phenomenon of artists’ writing may be viewed from a number of theoretical perspectives. Nonetheless, the *integral belonging* of the texts to the production and identity of the artworks remains a constant.

As for the viewer’s experiential encounter with a painting, it does not escape the discursive envelope. Rancière (2007) has shown how ‘words amend the surface’ (p. 76). From pre-production to ongoing reception, discourse can serve to code, recode or over-code the artwork conceptually. Texts on art can alter our perception of what we see, and how we see it. And they can keep on doing so over time, so that our aesthetic experience of the artwork, our conceptual understanding of it, and our critical judgement all shift in positive or negative directions.
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Reflections on the afterlife of painting
These final sections consist of a series of reflections driven by a single unifying question: what may we conclude from this programme of research? In what ways, following an ontological change in the period between the 1960s and 1980s, has post-conceptual painting emerged as something new and different? My response will be firmly grounded in the work of the previous chapters but will also be somewhat speculative, in the sense of anticipating future research directions. The aim is to provide a horizon, or framework, for the understanding of painting’s afterlife—that is, for pointing towards what painting might yet turn out to be.

I will begin by elaborating some different readings of the term ‘afterlife’. This will lead into a more general consideration of painting’s temporality, followed by a brief discussion of the recent ‘return to aesthetics’ within the visual arts. A final area of enquiry will be the ways in which ‘dumb materiality’ and studio technique may be said to contain a kernel or a promise of social meaning.

**Meanings of the term ‘afterlife’**

The general concept of afterlife refers to the third term in a sequence comprising a previous life, a presumed death, and a restoration of life in renewed form. I have argued on behalf of post-conceptual painting as evidence of a new lease of historical life for painting after the ‘death’ of modernist formalism. As post-conceptual, contemporary painting combines aesthetics and conceptual enquiry in the production of art objects and related discourses.

But there is a second meaning of afterlife, which applies to the fate of an individual painting. Whether ignored on first appearance or scrutinised to the point of exhaustion, a painting may retroactively be found to harbour ‘a hidden reserve’ of new possibility. It may come back to life, as it were, under changed circumstances so that an unsuspected meaning becomes not only visible for the first time but also current and
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compelling. Osborne (2013) argues that a work of this kind enters into new relations ‘in the course of its “afterlife”’, and these new relations constitute (or reconstitute) ‘what it is’. The afterlife ‘gives the artwork a retroactive ontology’ (p. 50). I would add that paintings are more susceptible to retroaction of this kind than artworks founded on transparent concepts. Their material opacity resists unequivocal meaning, while disposing them to new and different interpretations.

Under certain conditions, retroaction might be a form of practice-as-research, involving the re-hanging or curation of paintings in ways that renew or ‘re-purpose’ them. For example, Rancière (2007) has argued that ‘words amend the surface’: words can alter the ways in which we give ‘visibility and significance’ to practices of painting and decide ‘what a painting is, what one does by painting, and what one sees on a painted wall or canvas’ (pp. 74-76). But discursive re-description is just one way in which an individual painting may have an afterlife.

Chapter three discussed the strategic positioning of paintings. This now appears as yet another means to an afterlife, in which a painting’s signifying capacity—and apparent identity—is transformed by an act (or successive acts) of re-contextualisation within a larger spatial environment or a wider network of references. Joselit (2009) has taken this idea further. He argues for a new type of painting that not only partakes in a network but is assigned a key role in ‘explicitly visualising the network’—making apparent both its constructedness and its functioning (p. 125). Reception of such painting is not limited to visual-aesthetic experience (although that is included), but opens onto ‘extra-perceptual’ circuits of meaning that have an essential social dimension (p. 132). These works model the structural intelligibility of the world, and visibly enact patterns of cognitive mapping.

Nonetheless, the idea of a network, while dynamic, tends to be *synchronic*: the entire web of references is thought to co-exist in the same moment (or time frame), with each point simultaneously available for activation. As seen in chapter one, Warburg and Benjamin offer a quite different, *diachronic* reading of *Nachleben* or afterlife, which points to a third distinctive meaning of the term. Benjamin (1979) remarks on collections of past works of art: ‘[T]hese works incorporate both their pre-history and their after-history—an after-history in virtue of which their pre-history, too, can be seen to undergo constant change’ (p. 351).

Benjamin’s point is not about present networks of (synchronic) meaning. Instead, he emphasises the historical or mnemonic role played by *obsolete* objects or artworks. Supposedly ‘overcome’ in their function and significance, such objects may yet enjoy an afterlife in which they serve to awaken a consciousness of history. They become visible emblems of a historical process that discards older technologies, values, and forms of life but does not fully erase them. Lawson (1981) makes a related argument about obsolescence, but does so on behalf of painting as a practice rather than individual works (see chapter one). For Lawson, it is precisely *because* painting is an obsolete craft practice, out of step with historically mandated technology, that it acquires a degree of freedom and subversive potential. This includes the potential to question technology itself. Painting, through its contrasting (technically redundant) operations, has the capacity to reveal how advanced technologies affect our modes of seeing, acting and being in the world—in ways that we otherwise struggle to perceive.

**Painting and temporality**

Each of the above meanings of ‘afterlife’ converges on a complex but fundamental question: the temporality of painting as an art form. I will confine my remarks to post-conceptual painting. Unlike Kosuth’s linguistic-conceptual art, such painting does not aim for fully present, fully transparent, fully transmissible meaning. (That would be to
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subsume art under the model of communication of information, rather than the performance of possible new meaning.) It does not declare ‘this is art’ with immediate effect. Instead, it is anticipated that an interval of time will elapse before an innovative painting achieves the public status of art. That is, before (if successful) it is accepted, valued and taken up by a community as a shared point of reference: one that actively contributes to the community’s ethos or self-understanding. That interval, or time delay, marks the passage from being a painting to becoming a functioning and formative work of art. This is not a contingent fate but a structural feature of the ‘delayed’ temporal ontology of painting (and other aesthetic forms of art). At the moment of production, or display, the artist can only affirm ‘this will have been a work of art’. It is well understood that an innovative painting may struggle to find an audience, but the structure of affirmation is one of anticipation of subsequent success. Hallward (2005) describes the prescriptive logic of such affirmation: ‘it operates in a present illuminated through anticipation of its future’, through commitment to its consequences, via a process of ‘disruptive innovation and retrospective justification’ (pp. 769-771).

These remarks point beyond internal art world concerns, and market considerations, to the wider territory of ethico-aesthetics and painting’s relation to society at large. If paintings are absorbed (whether quickly or more slowly) by the market or the art world—to be reduced to the single dimension of exchange value or current acclaim—they are not so readily incorporated into the historical realm of shared social meaning. It is the pace, and the structure, of the latter incorporation that is at issue here. The term ‘the afterlife of painting’ contains a promise of the future as something historically different from, and irreducible to, the present: it holds open a dimension of the future itself. And this capacity rests on painting’s aesthetic power, as acknowledged by Osborne.

In his essay ‘Time and the Artwork’, Osborne (2000) stresses the interruptive and ‘de-
temporalizing’ power of aesthetic art, its ideal capacity to detach us from present time in
moments of concentrated attention (p. 84). This de-temporalising function first serves to isolate the artwork for aesthetic (affective) experience, before ‘projecting it’ into a domain of artistic judgement. Osborne describes such judgment as ‘conceptual, comparative and historical’; its purpose is to assign the work a place within society and history. Artistic judgement may thus form the basis for a general ‘re-historization of everyday life’ (p. 85)—a renewed consciousness of our historical situation and awareness of potential for future change. For Osborne, if art is to mobilise that consciousness it will require the support of critical discourse to facilitate the move ‘from sensibility to meaning’, from ‘timeless’ aesthetic experience to engagement with history. This move is never completed, but ‘constantly doubles back upon itself, renewing meaning through sensuousness, fracturing meaning against sensuousness’ (p. 84, italics added). These ideas align with the tripartite structure of judgment set out in chapter three, and the concurrent emphasis on the aesthetic and discursive dimensions of post-conceptual painting.

Such future-oriented painting has the capacity to overturn ‘presentism’ in a way that ‘opens onto social issues’ and acts as a force for historical transformation (Foster, 2002, p. 130). Pushed to the limit of its meaning, ‘the afterlife of painting’ refers to a changed world in which painting again has a place, perhaps even a place it has created for itself by re-shaping the cultural ethos. This is painting’s utopian gesture—weak and speculative, conditional but affirmative. All ambitious painting lays claim to the public status that defines the work of art as a work of art; it aims to acquire a degree of visibility and presence sufficient to make a difference.

In the following sections, I will look more closely at the role of aesthetics in relation to this question of public meaning and its corollary: ethics.
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Aesthetics and ethics

In chapter three, I argued for a more important role for aesthetics within post-conceptual art. That argument was partly developed in opposition to two entrenched and still influential positions. The formalist (Greenbergian) position holds that aesthetics has nothing to do with semiotics, or more generally, with collective social meaning. The postmodern position, represented by Foster (1983), is that aestheticism serves to obscure, and thus obstruct, the ethical and political dimensions of art. Today, however, the idea of ‘aesthetics’ has been opened up to a much wider range of meanings. For example, Costello and Willsdon’s 2008 anthology (subtitled Ethics and Aesthetics) maps out a widespread ‘return to aesthetics’ by identifying three ‘broad tendencies’ of recent art: the return to beauty, to participatory artistic practice, and to engaged art (p. 10). In describing these tendencies, the two editors rethink the relationship between ethics and aesthetics as ‘no longer antithetical’; they question beauty ‘as the mark of aesthetic value’; and they point to ‘an aesthetics of commitment’, political agency and social purpose (pp. 11-14).

In agreement with this general trend, the present thesis has discussed a number of ways in which painting may operate between an aesthetic and an ethical dimension. Bernstein argues for painting’s unique capacity to reclaim sensuous embodied experience on behalf of experience in general. O’Sullivan calls for an ethico-aesthetics of art grounded in open encounters with the world. And Deleuze redefines aesthetic reception as the creation of an ‘affective assemblage’ with enhanced powers of engagement. Taken together, these positions contend that aesthetic forms of art (painting in particular) can assist the recovery and intensification of everyday sensuous-aesthetic experience, thereby increasing the viewer’s capacity to see, to feel and to act. Danto (2003) also reaffirms aesthetics, but on different grounds. He construes it as a form of rhetoric, a concern with the way in which a work disposes its viewers to see and understand the world. On this basis, he proposes ‘a plurality of aesthetic modalities’ other than beauty,
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citing grunge, for example, as a ‘Rauschenbergian’ aesthetic of affected slovenliness and disorder (Danto, 2007, pp. 123-124). All four perspectives are unanimous in rejecting any notion of detached aesthetic judgement. Each directs the art public towards newly enlivened experience of, and engagement in, the world.

What I call ‘affirmative’ painting establishes a ground for such ethico-aesthetic perspectives. It develops a material practice—a set of technical, aesthetic and discursive means—that together forge, and make transparent, a passage from matter to meaning and to ethical meaning. In chapter two, I described my own practice of such means. I will end this thesis by reiterating their importance for my programme of practice-as-research.

A grounding in matter and technique

At the most fundamental level, my creative practice is grounded in ‘dumb materiality’ and the techniques employed to allow for the emergence of possible meaning from and with that materiality. Those techniques include the ‘staging’ of colour, the constructedness of form, collage as ‘self-showing’ or evidential, an indebtedness to effects auto-generated by liquid tusche, the acceptance of chance and contingency, and so on. None of that activity would have been possible without the willing acceptance of a prior condition nicely captured by Stephen Melville (2001) in the phrase: ‘matter thinks’ (p. 8). What this means is that matter shows itself in multiple forms, and in so doing gives itself over to the structuring of difference. Matter ‘interrupts’ or divides itself in ways that invite discrimination between sensuous particulars, as well as their comparison and relation. Melville argues that it is the articulation of those differences and relations that provides the ground for perception, visibility, language, meaning—and thought.
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This, I suggest, is where aesthetics properly begins: with a materiality that is open to and implicated in, but also resistant to, processes of thoughtful articulation. In Deleuzian terms, sense, as the condition of public meaning, is not simply given; it first has to be produced. And it is the play of a-signifying elements, themselves nonsensical, which makes possible that production: it ‘enacts the donation of sense’ (Deleuze, 2004, p. 83). In painting, the process of donation is helped along by, or performed by means of, the application of technique, with matter providing the enabling yet refractory elements. Bernstein has called such matter ‘nature as potentiality for meaning’. Osborne, by contrast, has cautioned that aesthetic materials ‘have form’, so to speak. They come to us not from a state of innocence, or mere brute being, but are historically pre-processed: they arrive both cognitively and critically mediated. Yet, with Bernstein and Deleuze, I claim that painting can work a way through again to the level of material sensation, seize it and work with it as such. And the labour required to achieve this would be already ethical, in the sense of breaking through to the bedrock of potential meaning within nature, in order to reclaim and rehabilitate it on behalf of a possible new ethos (or shared way of life).

This is a claim that is firmly rooted in the present thesis but remains somewhat speculative and in need of further research. One line of enquiry might be to explore the conviction that the relation between art and ethics must be based on art’s own terms. That is, art arrives at ethical meaning not by illustrating a moral idea but by allowing the meaning to emerge in the process of making the artwork. For the present, I will claim only that if there is an ethical strain in my work it is the desire not to stray too far from this base level of matter and technique—to keep it before my own and the viewer’s eyes. Yet the artworks also aim for a certain transparency or readability. It is at this point that the discursive dimension of post-conceptual painting comes into play. The discursive elaboration of the technical and aesthetic aspects of the work would facilitate its introduction into the more overt realm of ethics by presenting it as performatively or analogically modelling ethical behaviours. In chapter two, I gave the
example of liquid tusche and the staged refusal to unilaterally imprint meaning upon supposedly inert matter. Analogically transposed to other realms, this might refer to respect for nature or our fellow humans as beings in their own right, rather than resources available for instrumental usage or disposal. In chapter three, I discussed Bois’ idea that painting can provide models of thought, and here cite the historicising and constructionist work of post-conceptual painting as emblems of the possibility of futurity and change. But such claims will always appear exorbitant so long as painting remains in a marginalised position.

Rather than press these claims further, then, I will conclude with three guiding thoughts about painting gathered from the various works cited in this thesis. They are presented here as affirmations on behalf of painting, and as pointers to possible further research. First, painting is a mobile convention. At any given time, it holds together (in a dialectical tension) what may be seen as painting, and what painting enables us to see. Second, the ongoing practice of painting puts painting itself on trial and in question. (‘Painting finds itself most fully where it is most deeply in question.’ Melville, 2001, p. 3). Finally, as painting transforms itself, it does so not in search of a putative essence but of renewed formative power. In however tenuous and weak a fashion, painting seeks to take up once more the abandoned promise that human lives may (still) be ‘convened by works of art, brought into ethical community’ (Costello & Willsdon, 2008, p. 17).
FINAL PRESENTATION

For my final presentation, I chose a representative selection of artworks produced throughout the period of PhD study, and exhibited them in my studio space rather than the normative ‘white cube’ of a gallery. I did so for two reasons: to emphasise the place and processes of production, rather than focus exclusively on completed art objects; and to show the development of the work, including earlier iterations.

Final presentation for PhD. Elam B studios, 2015. Mixed media, various scales.
REFERENCES


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