A HIDDEN RESERVE: PAINTING FROM 1958 TO 1965

IN THE LATE 1950s, painting celebrated some of the greatest triumphs in its history, grandly ordained as a universal language of subjective and historical experience in major shows and touring exhibitions. But only a short while later, its very right to exist was fundamentally questioned. Already substantially weakened by the rise of Happenings and Pop art, painting was shoved aside by art critics during the embattled ascendancy of Minimalism in the mid-'60s. Since then, painters and their champions alike have tirelessly pondered the reasons for their chosen medium's downfall, its abandonment by advanced theoretical discourse. It is not coincidental that "Painting: The Task of Mourning" is the title of Yve-Alain Bois's seminal 1986 essay (republished in his 1990 book *Painting as Model*), which remains the last ambitious attempt to outline a history of modern painting and its endgames.[1] For Bois, painting will doubtless survive beyond its postulated conclusions. But for the past several decades, we nevertheless seem to have been presented with only two possible outcomes: the unrelenting yet joyful endgame, a celebration of past painterly devices; and its complement, "bad painting," the cynical appropriation and parody of the medium's former claims (as when Andy Warhol, Albert Oehlen, and Merlin Carpenter employ avant-garde strategies of montage or monochrome as farce or pose).

But how was painting forced to relinquish its claim to the articulation of subjective and historical experience? And how could advanced art criticism declare painting dead (yet again) while the very philosophers and theorists it cited had frequently focused on the medium in their own writings?[2] Explanations that set discursive or conceptual tendencies against the marketability of painting as a format come up short, since no medium has been

exempted from its star turn on the auction block. Today, it seems all the more urgent to scrutinize the expulsion of painting from the theory of the mid-'60s, to return to the crucial point at which the narrowing of the discourse took place—in the hope of opening up unexplored territories and placing our long-standing debates on contemporary painting within a new perspective. This uncharted terrain is what I would call painting's "hidden reserve": a remarkable period between, roughly, 1958 and 1965, in which artists explored possibilities that were subsequently largely suppressed, until recent practices reengaged them. These latent strategies would include an investigation of the dialectic between painterly substance and aesthetic transcendence, the use of the painted gestural mark beyond expressionism, and the semiotization of the mark itself.

WE MUST FIRST GO BACK TO 1958. With the international success of modernist painting and its rapidly increasing commercialization (the price of works even by living artists multiplied within a few months), the legacy of Abstract Expressionism became a pressing problem for a new generation.[3] Should gestural painting, now merely an emblem of prestige, be overthrown—or was rebellion itself a trite fashion? Around '58, the former option would seem to have taken hold: Jasper Johns, Yves Klein, Piero Manzoni, Robert Rauschenberg, and Cy Twombly mounted their first successful solo exhibitions; Allan Kaprow organized his first Happening; Frank Stella began his "Black Paintings"; groups such as the Situationist International and Gruppe Spur formed—the list could go on almost endlessly. And in the ensuing struggle for critical legitimacy in the early '60s, Minimal art soon became the point around which the entire discourse of modern art turned. But this tale of aesthetic succession, now something of an official history, is far too simple.

Leo Steinberg was the first to analyze this turning point in the aftermath of the original New York School. In 1957, in his introduction to the exhibition catalogue for "Artists of the New York School: Second Generation," which

included the work of Grace Hartigan, Alfred Leslie, Joan Mitchell, Rauschenberg, and others, Steinberg saw painting as having reached a point of radical disenchantment: Indeed, even the need for revolt was not inspiration enough.[4] The following year, encountering a painting by Johns, Steinberg was assailed by the feeling of *literalness*, of "the end of illusion. . . . There is no more metamorphosis, no more magic of medium. It looked to me like the death of painting, a rude stop, the end of the track."[5] But Steinberg came to see the standstill of literalness as a beginning rather than an end. Indeed, throughout modernism, the shock of literalness (for example, the introduction of "regular" objects into Cubist collage) has been constantly accompanied by the search for new modes of aesthetic experience. According to Steinberg, what was fundamentally singular about the situation around 1958 was that this dialectic of the literal and the aesthetic had been laid bare: "[W]e are invited to stare into the gap and to experience the tension of irreconcilable poles."[6] This tension itself becomes the starting point of another formation of discourse. Beholding does not take place *either* in literalness *or* its transcendence, but rather as a constantly shifting series of events—during which different modes of perception and faculties of cognition collide but also form occasional connections. Any moments of a "leap of faith," according to Steinberg's emphatic formulation, are repeatedly referred back to the sheer materiality of their means. To paraphrase Steinberg, a specifically *aesthetic* consciousness is now constituted only in the discontinuous (de)stabilization of meaning—as opposed to the timeless and absolute truth of religious symbols. In this respect, Steinberg could assert that painting around 1958 had arrived at a point at which it "reveals something of the essential nature of art."[7]

Michael Fried is, of course, the critic who drew the final line in the sand between literalism and transcendence, painterly substance and optical immateriality, objecthood and art. But it is seldom noticed that, at first, Fried recognized a broad spectrum of artistic positions in his early criticism—

including those of John Chamberlain, Johns, Warhol, and even Donald Judd. Like Steinberg before him, around 1963 Fried took up the basis of a conflict that had been smoldering since the beginning of modernism, the friction *between* the brute literalness of artistic materials and their transcendence.[8] In Fried's conception, too, it is the neo-Dadaist artists of the "transition period," in particular Johns, who expose the contradictions and problems of Abstract Expressionism: "Johns's art becomes an exploiting, heightening, and showing off of the problem itself."[9] However, according to Fried, Johns leaves these contradictions open *instead* of bringing them into a new synthesis. Meanwhile, in the work of Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, and Stella, there arises a new formation, which leads to the clarification of neo-Dadaist "ambiguities." In his famous 1966 essay "Shape as Form," Fried goes one step further: He describes Stella's "Irregular Polygons" series as a Hegelian sublation, a dialectical inversion, of the conflict between optical illusion and literalness: "[T]he distinction between depicted and literal shape becomes nugatory. . . . Each, one might say, is implicated in the other's failure and strengthened by the other's success."[10] Fried argues that this dialectic will spur the birth of a "new art."[11] And now it is no longer neo-Dada but Minimal art that is dubbed the polemical adversary for such a new art. This shift is key. Unlike neo-Dada, Minimal art aligns itself undialectically with literalness and ignores the actual conflict: "[Minimalist] pieces cannot be said to acknowledge literalness; they simply *are literal*."[12]

In view of Minimal art's increasing prominence, Fried must have felt under duress. One year later, in "Art and Objecthood" (published in these pages), he launched a frontal attack against all literalizing tendencies in contemporary art.[13] A polarization ensued, with major consequences. Fried irrevocably gave up the idea of a *dialectic* between literalness and transcendence: Instead, painting now had to decide whether it wanted to be perceived as sheer object *or* as transcendent form. The sublation advocated in "Shape as Form" was

disclaimed, and Fried decided unilaterally in favor of "optical illusionism." As is well known, in "Art and Objecthood" the entire destiny of painting hung in the balance: Nothing less than painting's survival as art depended on whether it was capable of negating and rejecting its own objecthood. With this essay, Fried consummated the separation of modernism from Minimal art, and all subsequent opposition to him has been automatically associated with a fundamental skepticism toward painting. By the late '60s, Rosalind Krauss, Douglas Crimp, and others would argue that painting could remain theoretically sustainable only if it adopted an antimodernist perspective, subjecting itself to the dictates of Minimal and Conceptual art. The baby, one might say, was thrown out with the bathwater: In answer to Fried, these critics isolated the literalist component from the original dialectic and established it as the determining criterion of painting.

In the mid-'60s, the options available to painting thus closed in—at least in the eyes of advanced criticism. Due to the dominance of this schism, alternative models and approaches were cast in shadow. Many artists were simply dropped from the new canon. The tone had changed so fundamentally that artists whose practices were rich with implication—from Martin Barré to Lee Bontecou, Öyvind Fahlström, Simon Hantaï, Alfred Jensen, Mitchell, Kimber Smith, and Twombly—were hardly noticed anymore, not to be rehabilitated until the '80s. An increasing gap between advanced criticism and contemporary painting had been set in motion, a split that essentially continues to this day.

WHAT WERE SOME OF THESE forgotten avenues of painting? And what prospects might they hold for us now? To understand this hidden reserve in painting's recent history, we would do well to consider a shift in the meaning of the pictorial mark itself: In 1955, the purchase of Claude Monet's *Water Lilies*, ca. 1920, by the Museum of Modern Art led to a rediscovery of (Post-)Impressionism and, with it, the gestural mark.[14] For many artists made newly

aware of this passage from art history, the mark was now stripped of its pathos and bravura; it was no longer simply the "natural" trace of the body of an angst-ridden Pollock or de Kooning. At first, this shift was accompanied by a loss of legitimacy; the brushstroke became a questionable device. However, a reevaluation of its possibilities occurred as well: The brushstroke was deflated, parodied, vulgarized, sexualized, narrativized. One consequence was the gender-specific analysis of gestural vocabulary that emerged at the time. In his "Ray Gun" project, Claes Oldenburg fetishized Abstract Expressionism and made explicit the phallic connotations of Pollock's drip technique. Twombly also sexualized the painterly gesture, alternating between toilet-stall graffiti and mythic tradition. And Bontecou, Eva Hesse, and Lee Lozano generated eccentric openings, hollows, folds, and curves, anticipating the "central core" imagery of feminist artists.

During this transition period, then, a number of painters devised a highly differentiated language of painterly gesture that went beyond the expressionist trace. In the work of Mitchell, for example, each brushstroke is individualized, an element to be observed or enjoyed for its own sake. Nevertheless, each stroke joins into relation with others; syntactic connections and mental images emerge, which eventually dissolve again in the chaos of lines, impelling the eye to begin searching anew. In 1957, Mitchell stated that the semiotic power of her paintings "came out of the picture material itself. This is what Mallarmé did with words. He took several hundred words and then chose just those that would suggest the smell of a rose."[15] Mitchell's painting process seeks to reconstruct the intricate cognitive and physical procedures of memory (she speaks of "memory working"). Her project is far from any simplistic expressionist theory of the immediate transmission of emotion or intention: "I want to lose consciousness of myself. I want to be able to give to something outside of myself—and in this sense painting is outside of myself." Indeed, in its complex engagement with sensation and cognition, Mitchell's

practice would seem to correspond closely to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's description of painting as an allegory of perception: "[T]he interrogation of painting in any case looks toward this secret and feverish genesis of things in our body."[16] In view of the parallels between Mitchell's painting and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception, it could be asked, in retrospect, why the philosopher's specific observations about painting were not deployed in the art criticism of the '60s. In contrast to the Minimalist reception of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, which emphasized physical experience and the perspective of Gestalt psychology, critics could have used the full breadth of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy to analyze the myriad entanglements of and transformations between bodily *and* mental faculties of perception—between corporeal experience, memory, and imagination—during the act of painting as well as the act of reception.

The question of emotion, cognition, and sensation—cast aside by most critics and artists by the mid-'60s—would persist in the context of postwar spectacle. An entire strain of practice sought to understand how subjective experience might survive the age of simulation. Early on, in the '50s, it was poet Frank O'Hara who posed these questions most provocatively, mediating between notions of "feeling" and cultural constructions of subjectivity.[17] His impact on Mitchell, Johns, Twombly, and others in his milieu led, I would argue, to a stunning inquiry into the semiotization of the painterly mark, and not just as a form of rhetorical appropriation. Johns and Twombly, for example, would act out the entire range of mark making and its conflicting implications: expressionistic outbursts, erasure, the mark as cliché, and so on. But these artists still held a *belief* in the narrative possibility of mark making—a possibility that numerous artists, as we shall see, are revisiting today.

The cleaving of gestural mark from expressionist trace thus spawned an expansive cache of possibilities that form part of our hidden reserve. In the diverse gestural vocabulary that developed in the second half of the '50s, one

type of mark especially catches the eye: In paintings by Mitchell, Twombly, Johns, Norman Bluhm, and others, the brush is drawn horizontally across the surface so that the paint runs down in long rivulets; the device has belonged to the inventory of painterly tools ever since. Form is turned over to the natural gravity of its materiality, and the brushstroke therefore reflects its elapse in time. In contrast to period readings of Pollock's drip technique, for example, the downward-streaming paint does not seem to aim for an everlasting *now*, a perpetual present. This stroke identifies itself as a gesture that has already passed, the trace of an act whose origin is unknown. In this way, the downward-streaming paint constructs an elegiac temporal structure: The present is perceived in the mode of the past. Thus, Johns's aptly titled *In Memory of My Feelings—Frank O'Hara*, 1961, is an allegory for the loss of the subject, the moment of perception that has always already vanished. This elegiac mode was to be just one of the productive possibilities for painterly gesture; artists would seek to plumb its semiotic capabilities in other ways as well.

THE RADICAL CONSEQUENCE that resulted from the dialectic formulated in 1958 between literalness and transcendence was the attack on painting from both without and within. Kaprow, Yayoi Kusama, Gustav Metzger, Oldenburg, and Jean Tinguely sought to outperform modern painting as a whole, in order to move from "art" into "life." At the same time, the status of the image was questioned from within, when it was structurally adapted to conform to the banal commodities of everyday life. Numerous young artists exposed the components of the painting process as mere things: Johns presented the bronze casting of a coffee can with brushes; Klein built a sculpture out of paint rollers; Giulio Paolini leaned the brush and bare support against the wall; Hélio Oiticica exhibited jars of pure pigment. Strategies both of exiting painting altogether and of evacuating it of meaning were thus designed with constant reference to painting and its zero degree. These gambits extended to

performative endeavors as well as to concepts of expanded sculpture. Topoi developed from process-oriented painting are plainly evident in the post-Minimalist works of Barry Le Va, Robert Morris, Richard Serra, and Robert Smithson. It is as if, ever since its putative end was declared, painting displaced its discourse into other fields. The implications of painting would be seen in the unlikeliest places.

One of these secret wellsprings was the work of John Cage. Without a doubt, the discussion of the dissolution of medium specificity in the late '50s centers on Cage. His influence is most often restricted to the *defeat* of painting, of subjective expression, and of transcendence—associated with the development of the Happening, Fluxus, and so on. Nevertheless, Cage developed his aesthetic in a productive engagement with gestural abstraction. For example, when he characterized the tonal structure of his compositions as "actions," as he did until the early '60s, he was overtly drawing a parallel to the working methods of the Abstract Expressionists.

Indeed, a polemical opposition between Cage and gestural abstraction was postulated in art criticism only from the mid-'60s onward. In the late '50s, however, various forms of desubjectivized gestural painting had actually developed under the influence of Cage's aesthetic (indebted to O'Hara's), some better known than others. This is evidenced not only in the early works and writings of George Brecht and Kaprow but also in the statements of artists such as Twombly and Jack Tworkov. If Kaprow famously spoke of the "Zen quality of Pollock's personality,"[18] it could be said that a central concern of painting around 1958 consisted of looking at Pollock through the lens of Cage. By doing so, gestural painting might free itself from its transcendental and expressionist moorings. Even artists who were not directly involved with Cage made a similar move: Klein in his weather pictures, Toti Scialoja in his imprints, Bernard Aubertin in his textures, and Hantaï in his foldings.

These reinterpretations of gestural abstraction ran parallel to Cage's conception of indeterminacy. In direct response to Cage, in the period after 1958 Johns, Rauschenberg, Twombly, and even Kaprow all became preoccupied with attempting a kind of semiotic "narration of indeterminacy," a dynamization of the picture plane as a dispersed field of signs. Twombly's practice in the years following '58 is striking in this regard. In suites of drawings such as *Poems to the Sea*, 1959, he establishes an arsenal of symbolic, iconic, and indexical signs, which set in motion a madcap vocabulary of marks, an uncontrollable reading process beset by varied associations, glosses, disruptions, indifference. Suggestive titles give these elements an even greater charge: *Triumph of Galatea, Empire of Flora, Ferragosto*. In these narrations of indeterminacy, the simultaneity of competing perspectives and signs confers the act of composition on the viewer, repeatedly urging him or her to form unstable structures of signification. The result is a vacillation of textual and visual meaning, an undirected movement between the poles of disintegration and imaginative flight. In between, spaces open for paradoxical figures, vague connections, and contradictory and ironic gestures, which Georges Didi-Huberman has described as the "phantasms" of painting.[19]

The painters of the transition period I am charting clearly perceived the threat to their field of action in the face of Minimalism's rise. As if in self-defense, large-format, programmatic "history paintings," in which the semiotic riches of process-oriented painting are arrayed, appeared in the early '60s. Helen Frankenthaler, Hantaï, Johns, Klein, Mitchell, and Rauschenberg all made imposing tableaux displaying the potential diversity of gestural painting, its elastic grammar and vocabulary. Expansive pictures such as Mitchell's *Grandes Carrières*, 1961–62, and Twombly's *Triumph of Galatea*, 1961, release painterly pyrotechnics: The triumphal action of these images calls to mind the grandiosity of Baroque ceiling frescoes—though at the same time, their senseless scrawls of color on canvas, swarming with genitalia and bodily

fluids, cause the entire pompous history of Western painting, from the Renaissance to Abstract Expressionism, to cave in on itself. In these pictures, there emerges what Roland Barthes called the "real semiotic power" of art: "to *play* the signs rather than to destroy them . . . to bring them into a machinery of language that has burst its deadbolts and safety latches, in short, to generate even in the lap of servile language a true heteronomy of things."[20]

ALTHOUGH THE ART OF THIS TRANSITION PERIOD was largely stifled by advanced criticism and the breakthrough of Minimalism beginning in the mid-'60s, it has continued to function as a font of possibilities for painters since. In a return of the repressed, stylistic devices and motifs resurface, subject to further manipulations: the renewed exploration of gesture, semiotization, and the dialectic between literalness and transcendence. In fact, it is remarkable just how vehemently painters in the years immediately following sought to evade the polemical opposition of Minimal art versus modernism.[21]

This phenomenon is nowhere more evident than in the work of Joan Snyder. As a student, Snyder engaged with the formal language of Pop art, before beginning her series of "Stroke Paintings" in 1969 in reaction to the process pieces of her teacher, Morris. Simple, mostly horizontal brushstrokes are distributed across the canvas with varying configuration, color, density, and mode of execution. At first glance, it seems as if Snyder were merely translating the operations of process art into painting. But in fact, the opposite was the case: The artist was systematically working her way back to the point at which painting was left behind in the mid-'60s. THE ILLUSION THE REALITY THE STROKE, she writes on the drawing *Paint the House* in 1971, thus alluding to the inescapable play between literal materiality and transcendence. She characterizes her horizontal marks as "story lines"[22] that display the "anatomy of a stroke."[23] This dialectical examination would extend to her feminist reevaluation of modernist painting—an engagement elucidated

in the fragments of handwriting she inserts, for example, into the triptych *Small Symphony for Women*, 1974: IF THERE IS A FEMALE SENSIBILITY, LANGUAGE, ART / EMERGING HOW CAN AN ALL MALE FACULTY AT DOUGLASS CHOOSE SELECT JUDGE / WOMEN ARTISTS WHO APPLY? THEY / CAN'T THEY DIDN'T . . . On the same panel, there is a list of colors and materials utilized; in between are words such as FLESH, LANDSCAPE, WOMEN HUNGER, and WOUNDS. Snyder connects gendered expressivity to writerly gesture, painterly materials to linguistic meaning. In the '70s, however, art criticism had shied so far from the development of painting that Snyder's project of feminist re-evaluation was misunderstood as naive neo-expressionism.[24]

With the enormous commercial success of actual neo-expressionism in the '80s, gestural painting was raked through the mud once again. In this instance, painting returned in a postmodern guise, as a ghost that believed it could continue the discourse on painting only with cynical exaggeration, empty pathos, and simulated rhetoric: transcendence as a tired joke, the evacuation of painting as a party that never ends. Advanced criticism, of course, deemed these strategies to be amnesiac naïveté, uncritical affirmation, even politically reactionary. How might a serious engagement with painting persist in the shadow of such opprobrium?

One course of action was plotted by Jutta Koether. In the early '80s, Koether distanced herself from the painting of strong poses and empty gestures. At the same time, she became preoccupied with institutional critique and feminist theory but also developed a healthy skepticism toward these tendencies. Consequently, Koether has since fashioned an intentionally conflict-laden painting practice—one that is only constituted through exchange and interaction with other activities. She works in equal measure as musician, theorist, performer, and writer, proposing to "play out painting against a 'ground,' in order to visualize painting's possible connections to the other, and

to open up its impossible ones . . . so painting became a flyer, theatrical prop, site of historical debris, musical/painting score, a door, a feeling enhancer, a word game . . . or just a support for thoughts and feelings and body weight."[25]

In this regard, Koether has entered the discourse of painting's transition period—not in order to forget or conquer painting, but to make the fault lines and boundaries of its historical polemic productive. "Kissing the canvas" is what she calls the moment "when the boxer goes down, but isn't KO'd yet." This is "an expression of deliberate ambiguity as a directive for the artist who's a painter"[26]: Koether pairs existential involvement with an unconditional surrender to cliché and commodity. She cites Barnett Newman's creed "[E]xpressionist fluidity is freedom" but in the same breath demands that artists represent what is "unbearable" in consumer society—"the purest kind of Pop Art there is."[27] In the words of artist John Miller, Koether's artistic practice can be characterized as "process expressionism."[28] Here, "expression" is intended neither to resuscitate nor to parody the previous conception of an autonomously imagined subject. Instead, Koether generates a confrontational encounter between disparate fragments of meaning—an experience that is divided between alienation and authenticity, a fractured mode of subjectivity that nods to the aesthetics of O'Hara.

Christopher Wool has also worked with the various postwar traditions of process and gesture, albeit in an extremely reduced fashion. His works concentrate on familiar and coded expressive devices: splatters, abstract lines, smears, stenciled writing, decorative patterns, dripping paint, overpainting. Although he applies the resources of painting with the greatest possible directness, Wool is able to muster a diverse wealth of references and discursive formations. Indeed, the very concision with which Wool locates the reputed dead ends, oppositions, and inner contradictions of painting's history allows these to become points of departure for pictorial discovery. His works draw myriad connections between painterly surfaces and graffiti, street

vulgarity, and subcultural language forms, between the individual mark and mass-media reproduction. In this respect, there are surprising links between Wool and painters of the transition period, not only Michael Goldberg and Leslie but also Johns and Twombly. Wool seems interested in precisely this historical moment, when gestural abstraction was no longer self-evident or "natural," but belief in some of its devices and effects still existed. He similarly endeavors to mediate between subjective and historical experience. I would go so far as to suggest that Wool aims to unearth suppressed or displaced ties between Pollock and Warhol, rendering the affinities between, say, Pollock's use of house paint and the glam grit of street culture.

Wool's use of decorative and floral patterns investigates the age-old topos of painting as wallpaper, as mere living-room adornment. Some of these works produce an inexorably claustrophobic allover, conveying a sense of the uncanny that often escalates into *horror vacui*. In contrast to these monstrous growths, other pieces form delicate garlands, which in their unpretentious loveliness make the dispute between high art and decoration, between avant-garde and kitsch, seem nothing more than philistine trifling. In Wool's photographs of these works as installed in museums and living rooms alike, he demonstrates that his paintings reflect their integration into display. These patterned paintings can be described as "parergonal": Although stand-alone works, they are conceived in their relation to the world as accessory, as frame.[29] They depend on their surrounding context, which endows them with meaning—they are alternately "hidden" as wallpaper and foregrounded as painting. The works' vacillation between ornament and sublime pushes the age-old dialectic between the literal and the pictorial to the point where the status of the picture is constantly caught between marginalia and autonomy.

Everywhere the possibilities of the hidden reserve seem renewed rather than expired: Painting in recent years has applied itself to the very problems that the polemics of the '60s declared dead. Amy Sillman concentrates on affective

charge, on embarrassment and fear, in order to foreground the question of how feelings might enter into painting—how they might be stored in the artwork as a "bloc of sensation" (in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's formulation) and become accessible to aesthetic experience.[30] Josh Smith extends Steinberg's notion of the "flatbed picture plane," combining expansive painterly gestures, splashes of color, and various printing and collage techniques with tactics drawn from appropriation art and institutional critique. Social and material conditions of production here become integral components of an expanded field of painting. Hence, the base layer for a new series of the artist's collages is made of coasters from the Belgian brewery Duvel that Smith designed for the Lyon Biennial in 2007. They form a patterned ground that visually binds the collages together in an allover formation, yet at the same time they reflect the process of their own institutionalization. The cachet of biennial participation literally forms the support for a subsequent set of works. Or, for example, Smith's paintings of the fragmented letters of his own name are at once acts of self-assurance and a strategy of self-promotion. It is as though the process of artistic production, in all of its entangled institutional limitations and aesthetic utopias, has come into representation.

Painting has reached a point, it seems, at which it has made visible the polarizations and polemics of the '60s. The repressed paradoxes and contingencies of painting's history—its phantasms—become the preconditions for the development of new images. When one is faced with a work by Koether, Wool, Sillman, or Smith, the question of the end of painting becomes obsolete, since these artists have integrated the very implications and consequences of doomsday scenarios into a more comprehensive concept of the image.

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Translated from German by Elizabeth Tucker.

NOTES

1. Yve-Alain Bois, "Painting: The Task of Mourning," in *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 229–44.

2. So, for example, Cubism is at the center of Theodor W. Adorno's conception of art; Maurice Merleau-Ponty focuses on Paul Cézanne; Martin Heidegger engages Vincent van Gogh; Jacques Lacan develops his theory of the gaze in constant reference to painting; in his autobiography, Roland Barthes discusses Cy Twombly; Gilles Deleuze writes on Francis Bacon; Jacques Derrida devotes a book to the topic.

3. "Has the Situation Changed the Content?" was the suggestive title of an event at the beginning of January 1958 at the Artists' Club in New York, to which Harold Rosenberg; Thomas Hess, publisher of *Art News*; and Alfred Barr, director of the Museum of Modern Art, were invited. Barr urged the painters present to rid themselves of their fixation with Abstract Expressionism: "Should there have been a rebellion by 1958? I looked forward to it, but I don't see it. Am I blind or does it not exist? Are painters continuing a style when they should be bucking it?" Michael Goldberg, Paul Brach, Nicholas Marsicano, Sidney Gordin, and Allan Kaprow later spoke, and it can be assumed that Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, whose *Target with Four Faces*, 1955, was depicted on the cover of the current issue of *Art News*, were also present. Transcript of "Has the Situation Changed the Content?," January 1958; Irving Sandler Papers, Getty Research Institute, Research Library, box 46, folder 8.

4. Leo Steinberg, introduction to *Artists of the New York School: Second Generation*, exh. cat. (New York: The Jewish Museum, 1957), 7.

5. Leo Steinberg, "Contemporary Art and the Plight of Its Public" (1962), in *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 13.

6. Steinberg, introduction to *Artists of the New York School*, 6.

7. Steinberg, "Jasper Johns: The First Seven Years of his Art" (1962), in *Other Criteria*, 23.

8. Fried writes that the conflict between optical illusion and literalism has "been among the issues of Modernism from its beginning." Cf. Michael Fried, "Shape as Form: Frank Stella's Irregular Polygons" (1966), in *Art and Object hood* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 87–88.

9. Fried, "New York Letter: Johns" (1963), ibid., 291.

10. Fried, "Shape as Form" (1966), ibid., 90.

11. Ibid., 88.

12. Ibid., 88.

13. Fried, "Art and Objecthood" (1967), ibid., 148–72.

14. This belated reception of Monet's late work, while at first glance a fleeting fad, proved a momentous shift in perspective on the development of modern painting among critics and artists alike. Cf. Louis Finkelstein, "New Look: Abstract-Impressionism," in *Art News* 56 (March 1956), 36–39; Clement Greenberg, "Impress of Impressionism: Review of *Impressionism* by Jean Leymarie" (1956), in *The Collected Essays and Criticism: 1950–1956*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 257–58; "The Later Monet" (1957), in *The Collected Essays and Criticism: 1957–1969*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1993), 3–11.

15. This and all subsequent quotations of Joan Mitchell are from Irving Sandler's conversation notes from the year 1957 and can be found in the Irving Sandler Papers, box 22, folder 14. On the linguistic constitution of Mitchell's vocabulary of brushstrokes, also cf. Helen Molesworth, "Joan Mitchell," in *Joan Mitchell: Leaving America: New York to Paris: 1958–1964* (Göttingen: Steidl Hauser & Wirth, 2007).

16. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind" (1961), in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, trans. Michael Smith (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 128.

17. In his writings of the time, O'Hara astonishingly reflected on the pop cultural implications of Abstract Expressionism—revealing associations between "authentic" expression, consumption, and mass media. Cf. Lytle Shaw, *Frank O'Hara: The Poetics of Coterie* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2006); *In Memory of My Feelings: Frank O'Hara and American Art*, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1999).

18. Allan Kaprow, "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock" (1958), in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 7.

19. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Die leibhaftige Malerei* ([1985)] (Munich: Fink, 2002), 89ff. Each pictorial event, according to Didi-Huberman, is at once thing and fetish, material and flesh. A "gem" is his term for a picture in which the "undecidedness between optical and haptic space" becomes apparent, in which the surprising effect of "discovery, of finding and finding again, in the order of the visible" occurs.

20. Roland Barthes, *Leçon/Lektion: Antritt-svorlesung am Collège de France* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1980), 41.

21. Only recently, the exhibition "High Times, Hard Times,"curated by Katy

Siegel with David Reed for Independent Curators International in 2007, impressively called attention to the multifaceted painting discourse of this period between 1967 and 1975.

22. Joan Snyder, quoted in Hayden Herrera, "Joan Snyder: Speaking with Paint," in *Joan Snyder*, exh. cat. (New York: The Jewish Museum, 2005), 25.

23. Snyder, quoted in ibid., 29.

24. Snyder recalls, "At the height of the Pop and Minimal movements, we were making other art—art that was personal, autobiographical, expressionistic, narrative, and political. . . . They called it neo-expressionist. Except it wasn't neo to us." Snyder, quoted in ibid., 38.

25. *"Große Erwartungen: Jutta Koether im Gespräch mit Sam Lewitt und Eileen Quinlan," Jutta Koether*, exh. cat. (Cologne: DuMont, 2006), 149.

26. Jutta Koether, "Kissing the Canvas," *Texte zur Kunst* 1 (Fall 1990), 41.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.

29. Cf. Jacques Derrida, "The Parergon," in *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 37–82.

30. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Birchill (New York: Verso, 1994), 164. Cf. Amy Sillman and Gregg Bordowitz, *Between Artists* (New York: A.R.T. Press, 2007).

Joan Mitchell, *Grandes Carrières*, 1961–62, oil on canvas, 119 x 78¼". © Estate of Joan Mitchell/Joan Mitchell Foundation and Cheim & Read, New York.

A Hidden Reserve

PAINTING FROM 1958 TO 1965

ACHIM HOCHDÖRFER

IN THE LATE 1950s, painting celebrated some of the greatest triumphs in its history, grandly ordained as a universal language of subjective and historical experience in major shows and touring exhibitions. But only a short while later, its very right to exist was fundamentally questioned. Already substantially weakened by the rise of Happenings and Pop art, painting was shoved aside by art critics during the embattled ascendancy of Minimalism in the mid-'60s. Since then, painters and their champions alike have tirelessly pondered the reasons for their chosen medium's downfall, its abandonment by advanced theoretical discourse. It is not coincidental that "Painting: The Task of Mourning" is the title of Yve-Alain Bois's seminal 1986 essay (republished in his 1990 book *Painting as Model*), which remains the last ambitious attempt to outline a history of modern painting and its endgames.[1] For Bois, painting will doubtless survive beyond its postulated conclusions. But for the past several decades, we nevertheless seem to have been presented with only two possible outcomes: the unrelenting yet joyful endgame, a celebration of past painterly devices; and its complement, "bad painting," the cynical appropriation and parody of the medium's former claims (as when Andy Warhol, Albert Oehlen, and Merlin Carpenter employ avant-garde strategies of montage or monochrome as farce or pose).

But how was painting forced to relinquish its claim to the articulation of subjective and historical experience? And how could advanced art criticism declare painting dead (yet again) while the very philosophers and theorists it cited had frequently focused on the medium in their own writings?[2] Explanations that set discursive or conceptual tendencies against the marketability of painting as a format come up short, since no medium has been exempted from its star turn on the auction block. Today, it seems all the more urgent to scrutinize the expulsion of painting from the theory of the mid-'60s, to return to the crucial point at which the narrowing of the discourse took place—in the hope of opening up unexplored territories and placing our long-standing debates on contemporary painting within a new perspective. This uncharted terrain is what I would call painting's "hidden reserve": a remarkable period between, roughly, 1958 and 1965, in which artists explored possibilities that were subsequently largely suppressed, until recent practices reengaged them. These latent strategies would include an investigation of the dialectic between painterly substance and aesthetic transcendence, the use of the painted gestural mark beyond expressionism, and the semiotization of the mark itself.

WE MUST FIRST GO BACK TO 1958. With the international success of modernist painting and its rapidly increasing commercialization (the price of works even by living artists multiplied within a few months), the legacy of Abstract Expressionism became a pressing problem for a new generation.[3] Should gestural painting, now merely an emblem of prestige, be overthrown—or was rebellion itself a trite fashion? Around '58, the former option would seem to have taken hold: Jasper Johns, Yves Klein, Piero Manzoni, Robert Rauschenberg, and Cy Twombly mounted their first successful solo exhibitions; Allan Kaprow organized his first Happening; Frank Stella began his "Black Paintings"; groups such as the Situationist International and Gruppe Spur formed—the list could go on almost endlessly. And in the ensuing struggle for critical legitimacy in the early '60s, Minimal art soon became the point around which the entire discourse of modern art turned. But this tale of aesthetic succession, now something of an official history, is far too simple.

Leo Steinberg was the first to analyze this turning point in the aftermath of the original New York School. In 1957, in his introduction to the exhibition catalogue for "Artists of the New York School: Second Generation," which included the work of Grace Hartigan, Alfred Leslie, Joan Mitchell, Rauschenberg, and others, Steinberg saw painting as having reached a point of radical disenchantment: Indeed, even the need for revolt was not inspiration enough.[4] The following year, encountering a painting by Johns, Steinberg was assailed by the feeling of *literalness*, of "the end of illusion. . . . There is no more metamorphosis, no more magic of medium. It looked to me like the death of painting, a rude stop, the end of the track."[5] But Steinberg came to see the standstill of literalness as a beginning rather than an end. Indeed, throughout modernism, the shock of literalness (for example, the introduction of "regular" objects into Cubist collage) has been constantly accompanied by the search for new modes of aesthetic experience. According to Steinberg, what was fundamentally singular about the situation around 1958 was that this dialectic of the literal and the aesthetic had been laid bare: "[W]e are invited to stare into the gap and to experience the tension of irreconcilable poles."[6] This tension itself becomes the starting point of another formation of discourse. Beholding does not take place *either* in literalness *or* its transcendence, but rather as a

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constantly shifting series of events—during which different modes of perception and faculties of cognition collide but also form occasional connections. Any moments of a "leap of faith," according to Steinberg's emphatic formulation, are repeatedly referred back to the sheer materiality of their means. To paraphrase Steinberg, a specifically *aesthetic* consciousness is now constituted only in the discontinuous (de)stabilization of meaning—as opposed to the timeless and absolute truth of religious symbols. In this respect, Steinberg could assert that painting around 1958 had arrived at a point at which it "reveals something of the essential nature of art."[7]

Michael Fried is, of course, the critic who drew the final line in the sand between literalism and transcendence, painterly substance and optical immateriality, objecthood and art. But it is seldom noticed that, at first, Fried recognized a broad spectrum of artistic positions in his early criticism—including those of John Chamberlain, Johns, Warhol, and even Donald Judd. Like Steinberg before him, around 1963 Fried took up the basis of a conflict that had been smoldering since the beginning of modernism, the friction *between* the brute literalness of artistic materials and their transcendence.[8] In Fried's conception, too, it is the neo-Dadaist artists of the "transition period," in particular Johns, who expose the contradictions and problems of Abstract Expressionism: "Johns's art becomes an exploiting, heightening, and showing off of the problem itself."[9] However, according to Fried, Johns leaves these contradictions open *instead* of bringing them into a new synthesis. Meanwhile, in the work of Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, and Stella, there arises a new formation, which leads to the clarification of neo-Dadaist "ambiguities." In his famous 1966 essay "Shape as Form," Fried goes one step further: He describes Stella's "Irregular Polygons" series as a Hegelian sublation, a dialectical inversion, of the conflict between optical illusion and literalness: "[T]he distinction between depicted and literal shape becomes nugatory. . . . Each, one might say, is implicated in the other's failure and strengthened by the other's success."[10] Fried argues that this dialectic will spur the birth of a "new art."[11] And now it is no longer neo-Dada but Minimal art that is dubbed the polemical adversary for such a new art. This shift is key. Unlike neo-Dada, Minimal art aligns itself undialectically with literalness and ignores the actual conflict: "[Minimalist] pieces cannot be said to acknowledge literalness; they simply *are literal*."[12]

In view of Minimal art's increasing prominence, Fried must have felt under duress. One year later, in "Art and Objecthood" (published in these pages), he launched a frontal attack against all literalizing tendencies in contemporary art.[13] A polarization ensued, with major consequences. Fried irrevocably gave up the idea of a *dialectic* between literalness and transcendence: Instead, painting now had to decide whether it wanted to be perceived as sheer object *or* as transcendent form. The sublation advocated in "Shape as Form" was disclaimed, and Fried decided unilaterally in favor of "optical illusionism." As is well known, in "Art and Objecthood" the entire destiny of painting hung in the balance: Nothing less than painting's survival as art depended on whether it was capable of negating and rejecting its own objecthood. With this essay, Fried consummated the separation of modernism from Minimal art, and all subsequent opposition to him has been automatically associated with a fundamental skepticism toward painting. By the late '60s, Rosalind Krauss, Douglas Crimp, and others would argue that painting could remain theoretically sustainable only if it adopted an antimodernist perspective, subjecting itself to the dictates of Minimal and Conceptual art. The baby, one might say, was thrown out with the bathwater: In answer to Fried, these critics isolated the literalist component from the original dialectic and established it as the determining criterion of painting.

In the mid-'60s, the options available to painting thus closed in—at least in the eyes of advanced criticism. Due to the dominance of this schism, alternative models and approaches were cast in shadow. Many artists were simply dropped from the new canon. The tone had changed so fundamentally that artists whose practices were rich with implication—from Martin Barré to Lee Bontecou, Öyvind Fahlström, Simon Hantaï, Alfred Jensen, Mitchell, Kimber Smith, and Twombly—were hardly noticed anymore, not to be rehabilitated until the '80s. An increasing gap between advanced criticism and contemporary painting had been set in motion, a split that essentially continues to this day.

This page: **Jasper Johns, *In Memory of My Feelings—Frank O'Hara*, 1961,** oil and mixed media on canvas, 40½ x 60". © Jasper Johns/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. Opposite page: **Simon Hantaï, *Cloak (M.A.J.)*, 1960,** oil on canvas, 108½ x 77½". Photo: Paul Rodgers/9W Gallery.

WHAT WERE SOME OF THESE forgotten avenues of painting? And what prospects might they hold for us now? To understand this hidden reserve in painting's recent history, we would do well to consider a shift in the meaning of the pictorial mark itself: In 1955, the purchase of Claude Monet's *Water Lilies*, ca. 1920, by the Museum of Modern Art led to a rediscovery of (Post-)Impressionism and, with it, the gestural mark.[14] For many artists made newly aware of this passage from art history, the mark was now stripped of its pathos and bravura; it was no longer simply the "natural" trace of the body of an angst-ridden Pollock or de Kooning. At first, this shift was accompanied by a loss of legitimacy; the brushstroke became a questionable device. However, a reevaluation of its possibilities occurred as well: The brushstroke was deflated, parodied, vulgarized, sexualized, narrativized. One consequence was the gender-specific analysis of gestural vocabulary that emerged at the time. In his "Ray Gun" project, Claes Oldenburg fetishized Abstract Expressionism and made explicit the phallic connotations of Pollock's drip technique. Twombly also sexualized the painterly gesture, alternating between toilet-stall graffiti and mythic tradition. And Bontecou, Eva Hesse, and Lee Lozano generated eccentric openings, hollows, folds, and curves, anticipating the "central core" imagery of feminist artists.

During this transition period, then, a number of painters devised a highly differentiated language of painterly gesture that went beyond the expressionist trace. In the work of Mitchell, for example, each brushstroke is individualized, an element to be observed or enjoyed for its own sake. Nevertheless, each stroke joins into relation with others; syntactic connections and mental images emerge, which eventually dissolve again in the chaos of lines, impelling the eye to begin searching anew. In 1957, Mitchell stated that the semiotic power of her paintings "came out of the picture material itself. This is what Mallarmé did with

words. He took several hundred words and then chose just those that would suggest the smell of a rose."[15] Mitchell's painting process seeks to reconstruct the intricate cognitive and physical procedures of memory (she speaks of "memory working"). Her project is far from any simplistic expressionist theory of the immediate transmission of emotion or intention: "I want to lose consciousness of myself. I want to be able to give to something outside of myself—and in this sense painting is outside of myself." Indeed, in its complex engagement with sensation and cognition, Mitchell's practice would seem to correspond closely to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's description of painting as an allegory of perception: "[T]he interrogation of painting in any case looks toward this secret and feverish genesis of things in our body."[16] In view of the parallels between Mitchell's painting and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception, it could be asked, in retrospect, why the philosopher's specific observations about painting were not deployed in the art criticism of the '60s. In contrast to the Minimalist reception of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, which emphasized physical experience and the perspective of Gestalt psychology, critics could have used the full breadth of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy to analyze the myriad entanglements of and transformations between bodily *and* mental faculties of perception—between corporeal experience, memory, and imagination—during the act of painting as well as the act of reception.

The question of emotion, cognition, and sensation—cast aside by most critics and artists by the mid-'60s—would persist in the context of postwar spectacle. An entire strain of practice sought to understand how subjective experience might survive the age of simulation. Early on, in the '50s, it was poet Frank O'Hara who posed these questions most provocatively, mediating between notions of "feeling" and cultural constructions of subjectivity.[17] His impact on Mitchell, Johns, Twombly, and others in his milieu led, I would argue, to a stunning inquiry into the semiotization of the painterly mark, and not just as a form of rhetorical appropriation. Johns and Twombly, for example, would act out the entire range of mark making and its conflicting implications: expressionistic outbursts, erasure, the mark as cliché, and so on. But these artists still held a *belief* in the narrative possibility of mark making—a possibility that numerous artists, as we shall see, are revisiting today.

The cleaving of gestural mark from expressionist trace thus spawned an expansive cache of possibilities that form part of our hidden reserve. In the diverse gestural vocabulary that developed in the second half of the '50s, one type of mark especially catches the eye: In paintings by Mitchell, Twombly, Johns, Norman Bluhm, and others, the brush is drawn horizontally across the surface so that the paint runs down in long rivulets; the device has belonged to the inventory of painterly tools ever since. Form is turned over to the natural gravity of its materiality, and the brushstroke therefore reflects its elapse in time. In contrast to period readings of Pollock's drip technique, for example, the downward-streaming paint does not seem to aim for an everlasting *now*, a perpetual present. This stroke identifies itself as a gesture that has already passed, the trace of an act whose origin is unknown. In this way, the downward-streaming paint constructs an elegiac temporal structure: The present is perceived in the mode of the past. Thus, Johns's aptly titled *In Memory of My Feelings—Frank O'Hara*, 1961, is an allegory for the loss of the subject, the moment of perception that has always already vanished. This elegiac mode was to be just one of the productive possibilities for painterly gesture; artists would seek to plumb its semiotic capabilities in other ways as well.

THE RADICAL CONSEQUENCE that resulted from the dialectic formulated in 1958 between literalness and transcendence was the attack on painting from both without and within. Kaprow, Yayoi Kusama, Gustav Metzger, Oldenburg, and Jean Tinguely sought to outperform modern painting as a whole, in order to move from "art" into "life." At the same time, the status of the image was questioned from within, when it was structurally adapted to conform to the banal commodities of everyday life. Numerous young artists exposed the components of the painting process as mere things: Johns presented the bronze casting of a coffee can with brushes; Klein built a sculpture out of paint rollers; Giulio Paolini leaned the brush and bare support against the wall; Hélio Oiticica exhibited jars of pure pigment. Strategies both of exiting painting altogether and of evacuating it of meaning were thus designed with constant reference to painting and its zero degree. These gambits extended to performative endeavors as well as to concepts of expanded sculpture. Topoi developed from process-oriented painting are plainly evident in the post-Minimalist works of Barry Le Va, Robert Morris, Richard Serra, and Robert Smithson. It is as if, ever since its putative end was declared, painting displaced its discourse into other fields. The implications of painting would be seen in the unlikeliest places.

The cleaving of gestural mark from expressionist trace in the late 1950s spawned a cache of possibilities that form part of painting's hidden reserve.

One of these secret wellsprings was the work of John Cage. Without a doubt, the discussion of the dissolution of medium specificity in the late '50s centers on Cage. His influence is most often restricted to the *defeat* of painting, of subjective expression, and of transcendence—associated with the development of the Happening, Fluxus, and so on. Nevertheless, Cage developed his aesthetic in a productive engagement with gestural abstraction. For example, when he characterized the tonal structure of his compositions as "actions," as he did until the early '60s, he was overtly drawing a parallel to the working methods of the Abstract Expressionists.

Indeed, a polemical opposition between Cage and gestural abstraction was postulated in art criticism only from the mid-'60s onward. In the late '50s, however, various forms of desubjectivized gestural painting had actually developed under the influence of Cage's aesthetic (indebted to O'Hara's), some better known than others. This is evidenced not only in the early works and writings of George Brecht and Kaprow but also in the statements of artists such as Twombly and Jack Tworkov. If Kaprow famously spoke of the "Zen quality of Pollock's personality,"[18] it could be said that a central concern of painting around 1958 consisted of looking at Pollock through the lens of Cage. By doing so, gestural painting might free itself from its transcendental and expressionist moorings. Even artists who were not directly involved with Cage made a similar

move: Klein in his weather pictures, Toti Scialoja in his imprints, Bernard Aubertin in his textures, and Hantaï in his foldings.

These reinterpretations of gestural abstraction ran parallel to Cage's conception of indeterminacy. In direct response to Cage, in the period after 1958 Johns, Rauschenberg, Twombly, and even Kaprow all became preoccupied with attempting a kind of semiotic "narration of indeterminacy," a dynamization of the picture plane as a dispersed field of signs. Twombly's practice in the years following '58 is striking in this regard. In suites of drawings such as *Poems to the Sea*, 1959, he establishes an arsenal of symbolic, iconic, and indexical signs, which set in motion a madcap vocabulary of marks, an uncontrollable reading process beset by varied associations, glosses, disruptions, indifference. Suggestive titles give these elements an even greater charge: *Triumph of Galatea*, *Empire of Flora*, *Ferragosto*. In these narrations of indeterminacy, the simultaneity of competing perspectives and signs confers the act of composition on the viewer, repeatedly urging him or her to form unstable structures of signification. The result is a vacillation of textual and visual meaning, an undirected movement between the poles of disintegration and imaginative flight. In between, spaces open for paradoxical figures, vague connections, and contradictory and ironic gestures, which Georges Didi-Huberman has described as the "phantasms" of painting.[19]

The painters of the transition period I am charting clearly perceived the threat to their field of action in the face of Minimalism's rise. As if in self-defense, large-format, programmatic "history paintings," in which the semiotic riches of process-oriented painting are arrayed, appeared in the early '60s. Helen Frankenthaler, Hantaï, Johns, Klein, Mitchell, and Rauschenberg all made imposing tableaux displaying the potential diversity of gestural painting, its elastic grammar and vocabulary. Expansive pictures such as Mitchell's *Grandes Carrières*, 1961–62, and Twombly's *Triumph of Galatea*, 1961, release painterly pyrotechnics: The triumphal action of these images calls to mind the grandiosity of Baroque ceiling frescoes—though at the same time, their senseless scrawls of color on canvas, swarming with genitalia and bodily fluids, cause the entire pompous history of Western painting, from the Renaissance to Abstract Expressionism, to cave in on itself. In these pictures, there emerges what Roland Barthes called the "real semiotic power" of art: "to *play* the signs rather than to destroy them . . . to bring them into a machinery of language that has burst its deadbolts and safety latches, in short, to generate even in the lap of servile language a true heteronomy of things."[20]

ALTHOUGH THE ART OF THIS TRANSITION PERIOD was largely stifled by advanced criticism and the breakthrough of Minimalism beginning in the mid-'60s, it has continued to function as a font of possibilities for painters since. In a return of the repressed, stylistic devices and motifs resurface, subject to further manipulations: the renewed exploration of gesture, semiotization, and the dialectic between literalness and transcendence. In fact, it is remarkable just how vehemently painters in the years immediately following sought to evade the polemical opposition of Minimal art versus modernism.[21]

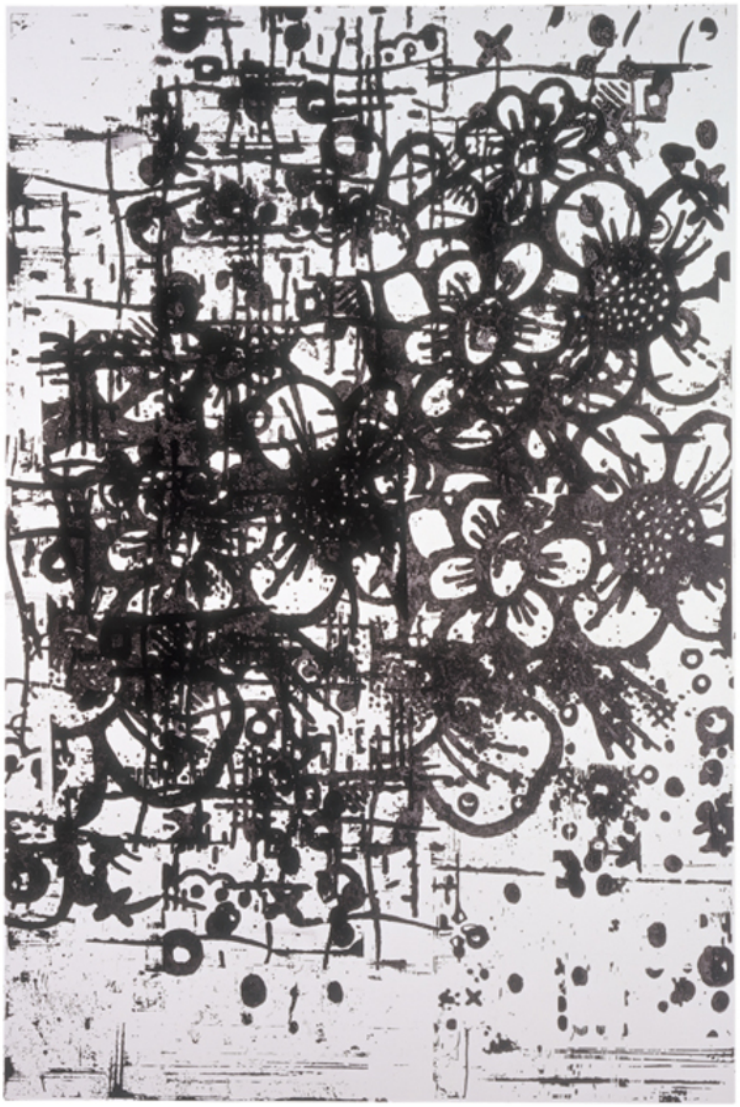
This phenomenon is nowhere more evident than in the work of Joan Snyder. As a student, Snyder engaged with the formal language of Pop art, before beginning her series of "Stroke Paintings" in 1969 in reaction to the process pieces of her teacher, Morris. Simple, mostly horizontal brushstrokes are distributed across the canvas with varying configuration, color, density, and mode of execution. At first glance, it seems as if Snyder were merely translating the operations of process art into painting. But in fact, the opposite was the case: The artist was systematically working her way back to the point at which painting was left behind in the mid-'60s. THE ILLUSION THE REALITY THE STROKE, she writes on the drawing *Paint the House* in 1971, thus alluding to the inescapable play between literal materiality and transcendence. She characterizes her horizontal marks as "story lines"[22] that display the "anatomy of a stroke."[23] This dialectical examination would extend to her feminist reevaluation of modernist painting—an engagement elucidated in the fragments of handwriting she inserts, for example, into the triptych *Small Symphony for Women*, 1974: IF THERE IS A FEMALE SENSIBILITY, LANGUAGE, ART / EMERGING HOW CAN AN ALL MALE FACULTY AT DOUGLASS CHOOSE SELECT JUDGE / WOMEN ARTISTS WHO APPLY? THEY / CAN'T THEY DIDN'T . . . On the same panel, there is a list of colors and materials utilized; in between are words such as FLESH, LANDSCAPE, WOMEN HUNGER, and WOUNDS. Snyder connects gendered expressivity to writerly gesture, painterly materials to linguistic meaning. In the '70s, however, art criticism had shied so far from the development of painting that Snyder's project of feminist re-evaluation was misunderstood as naive neo-expressionism.[24]

As if in self-defense, large-format, programmatic "history paintings," in which the semiotic riches of process-oriented painting are arrayed, appeared in the early 1960s.

With the enormous commercial success of actual neo-expressionism in the '80s, gestural painting was raked through the mud once again. In this instance, painting returned in a postmodern guise, as a ghost that believed it could continue the discourse on painting only with cynical exaggeration, empty pathos, and simulated rhetoric: transcendence as a tired joke, the evacuation of painting as a party that never ends. Advanced criticism, of course, deemed these strategies to be amnesiac naïveté, uncritical affirmation, even politically reactionary. How might a serious engagement with painting persist in the shadow of such opprobrium?

One course of action was plotted by Jutta Koether. In the early '80s, Koether distanced herself from the painting of strong poses and empty gestures. At the same time, she became preoccupied with institutional critique and feminist theory but also developed a healthy skepticism toward these tendencies. Consequently, Koether has since fashioned an intentionally conflict-laden painting practice—one that is only constituted through exchange and interaction

Opposite page: **Cy Twombly, *Poems to the Sea XV*, 1959**, oil, graphite, wax crayon on paper, approx. 13 x 12 ¼". From the twenty-four-part suite *Poems to the Sea*, 1959.
This page: **Joan Snyder, *First Anniversary*, 1970**, oil, acrylic, spray enamel on canvas, 72 x 96".



This page: **Christopher Wool, *East Broadway Run Down*, 1999**, enamel on aluminum, 108 x 72".
Opposite page: **Jutta Koether, *Volume 13*, 2001–2002**, acrylic and metallic pen on canvas, 48 x 60".

with other activities. She works in equal measure as musician, theorist, performer, and writer, proposing to "play out painting against a 'ground,' in order to visualize painting's possible connections to the other, and to open up its impossible ones . . . so painting became a flyer, theatrical prop, site of historical debris, musical/painting score, a door, a feeling enhancer, a word game . . . or just a support for thoughts and feelings and body weight."[25]

In this regard, Koether has entered the discourse of painting's transition period—not in order to forget or conquer painting, but to make the fault lines and boundaries of its historical polemic productive. "Kissing the canvas" is what she calls the moment "when the boxer goes down, but isn't KO'd yet." This is "an expression of deliberate ambiguity as a directive for the artist who's a painter"[26]: Koether pairs existential involvement with an unconditional surrender to cliché and commodity. She cites Barnett Newman's creed "[E]xpressionist fluidity is freedom" but in the same breath demands that artists represent what is "unbearable" in consumer society—"the purest kind of Pop Art there is."[27] In the words of artist John Miller, Koether's artistic practice can be characterized as "process expressionism."[28] Here, "expression" is intended neither to resuscitate nor to parody the previous conception of an autonomously imagined subject. Instead, Koether generates a confrontational encounter between disparate fragments of meaning—an experience that is divided between alienation and authenticity, a fractured mode of subjectivity that nods to the aesthetics of O'Hara.

Christopher Wool has also worked with the various postwar traditions of process and gesture, albeit in an extremely reduced fashion. His works concentrate on familiar and coded expressive devices: splatters, abstract lines, smears, stenciled writing, decorative patterns, dripping paint, overpainting. Although he applies the resources of painting with the greatest possible directness, Wool is able to muster a diverse wealth of references and discursive formations. Indeed, the very concision with which Wool locates the reputed dead ends, oppositions, and inner contradictions of painting's history allows these to become points of departure for pictorial discovery. His works draw myriad connections between painterly surfaces and graffiti, street vulgarity, and subcultural language forms, between the individual mark and mass-media reproduction. In this respect, there are surprising links between Wool and painters of the transition period, not only Michael Goldberg and Leslie but also Johns and Twombly. Wool seems interested in precisely this historical moment, when gestural abstraction was no longer self-evident or "natural," but belief in some of its devices and effects still existed. He similarly endeavors to mediate between subjective and historical experience. I would go so far as to suggest that Wool aims to unearth suppressed or displaced ties between Pollock and Warhol, rendering the affinities between, say, Pollock's use of house paint and the glam grit of street culture.

Wool's use of decorative and floral patterns investigates the age-old topos of painting as wallpaper, as mere living-room adornment. Some of these works produce an inexorably claustrophobic allover, conveying a sense of the uncanny that often escalates into *horror vacui*. In contrast to these monstrous growths, other pieces form delicate garlands, which in their unpretentious loveliness make the dispute between high art and decoration, between avant-garde and kitsch, seem nothing more than philistine trifling. In Wool's photographs of these works as installed in museums and living rooms alike, he demonstrates that his paintings reflect their integration into display. These patterned paintings can be described as "parergonal": Although stand-alone works, they are conceived in their relation to the world as accessory, as frame.[29] They depend on their surrounding context, which endows them with meaning—they are alternately "hidden" as wallpaper and foregrounded as painting. The works' vacillation between ornament and sublime pushes the age-old dialectic between the literal and the pictorial to the point where the status of the picture is constantly caught between marginalia and autonomy.

Everywhere the possibilities of the hidden reserve seem renewed rather than expired: Painting in recent years has applied itself to the very problems that the polemics of the '60s declared dead. Amy Sillman concentrates on affective charge, on embarrassment and fear, in order to foreground the question of how feelings might enter into painting—how they might be stored in the artwork as a "bloc of sensation" (in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's formulation) and become accessible to aesthetic experience.[30] Josh Smith extends Steinberg's notion of the "flatbed picture plane," combining expansive painterly gestures, splashes of color, and various printing and collage techniques with tactics drawn from appropriation art and institutional critique. Social and material conditions of production here become integral components of an expanded field of painting. Hence, the base layer for a new series of the artist's collages is made of coasters from the Belgian brewery Duvel that Smith designed for the Lyon Biennial in 2007. They form a patterned ground that visually binds the collages together in an allover formation, yet at the same time they reflect the process of their own institutionalization. The cachet of biennial participation literally forms the support for a subsequent set of works. Or, for example, Smith's paintings of the fragmented letters of his own name are at once acts of self-assurance and a strategy of self-promotion. It is as though the process of artistic production, in all of its entangled institutional limitations and aesthetic utopias, has come into representation.

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Painting has reached a point, it seems, at which it has made visible the polarizations and polemics of the '60s. The repressed paradoxes and contingencies of painting's history—its phantasms—become the preconditions for the development of new images. When one is faced with a work by Koether, Wool, Sillman, or Smith, the question of the end of painting becomes obsolete, since these artists have integrated the very implications and consequences of doomsday scenarios into a more comprehensive concept of the image. □

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Translated from German by Elizabeth Tucker.

For notes, see page 215.

HOCHDÖRFER/PAINTING continued from page 159

NOTES

1. Yve-Alain Bois, "Painting: The Task of Mourning," in *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 229–44.

2. So, for example, Cubism is at the center of Theodor W. Adorno's conception of art; Maurice Merleau-Ponty focuses on Paul Cézanne; Martin Heidegger engages Vincent van Gogh; Jacques Lacan develops his theory of the gaze in constant reference to painting; in his autobiography, Roland Barthes discusses Cy Twombly; Gilles Deleuze writes on Francis Bacon; Jacques Derrida devotes a book to the topic.

3. "Has the Situation Changed the Content?" was the suggestive title of an event at the beginning of January 1958 at the Artists' Club in New York, to which Harold Rosenberg, Thomas Hess, publisher of *Art News*, and Alfred Barr, director of the Museum of Modern Art, were invited. Barr urged the painters present to rid themselves of their fixation with Abstract Expressionism: "Should there have been a rebellion by 1958? I looked forward to it, but I don't see it. Am I blind or does it not exist? Are painters continuing a style when they should be bucking it?" Michael Goldberg, Paul Brach, Nicholas Marsicano, Sidney Gordin, and Allan Kaprow later spoke, and it can be assumed that Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, whose *Target with Four Faces*, 1955, was depicted on the cover of the current issue of *Art News*, were also present. Transcript of "Has the Situation Changed the Content?," January 1958; Irving Sandler Papers, Getty Research Institute, Research Library, box 46, folder 8.

4. Leo Steinberg, introduction to *Artists of the New York School: Second Generation*, exh. cat. (New York: The Jewish Museum, 1957), 7.

5. Leo Steinberg, "Contemporary Art and the Plight of Its Public" (1962), in *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 13.

6. Steinberg, introduction to *Artists of the New York School*, 6.

7. Steinberg, "Jasper Johns: The First Seven Years of his Art" (1962), in *Other Criteria*, 23.

8. Fried writes that the conflict between optical illusion and literalism has "been among the issues of Modernism from its beginning." Cf. Michael Fried, "Shape as Form: Frank Stella's Irregular Polygons" (1966), in *Art and Objecthood* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 87–88.

9. Fried, "New York Letter: Johns" (1963), ibid., 291.

10. Fried, "Shape as Form" (1966), ibid., 90.

11. Ibid., 88.

12. Ibid., 88.

13. Fried, "Art and Objecthood" (1967), ibid., 148–72.

14. This belated reception of Monet's late work, while at first glance a fleeting fad, proved a momentous shift in perspective on the development of modern painting among critics and artists alike. Cf. Louis Finkelstein, "New Look: Abstract-Impressionism," in *Art News* 56 (March 1956), 36–39; Clement Greenberg, "Impress of Impressionism: Review of *Impressionism* by Jean Leymarie" (1956), in *The Collected Essays and Criticism: 1950–1956*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 257–58; "The Later Monet" (1957), in *The Collected Essays and Criticism: 1957–1969*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1993), 3–11.

15. This and all subsequent quotations of Joan Mitchell are from Irving Sandler's conversation notes from the year 1957 and can be found in the Irving Sandler Papers, box 22, folder 14. On the linguistic constitution of Mitchell's vocabulary of brushstrokes, also cf. Helen Molesworth, "Joan Mitchell," in *Joan Mitchell: Leaving America: New York to Paris: 1958–1964* (Göttingen: Steidl Hauser & Wirth, 2007).

16. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind" (1961), in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, trans. Michael Smith (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 128.

17. In his writings of the time, O'Hara astonishingly reflected on the pop cultural implications of Abstract Expressionism—revealing associations between "authentic" expression, consumption, and mass media. Cf. Lytle Shaw, *Frank O'Hara: The Poetics of Coterie* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2006); *In Memory of My Feelings: Frank O'Hara and American Art*, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1999).

18. Allan Kaprow, "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock" (1958), in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 7.

19. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Die leibhaftige Malerei* ([1985)] (Munich: Fink, 2002), 89ff. Each pictorial event, according to Didi-Huberman, is at once thing and fetish, material and flesh. A "gem" is his term for a picture in which the "undecidedness between optical and haptic space" becomes apparent, in which the surprising effect of "discovery, of finding and finding again, in the order of the visible" occurs.

20. Roland Barthes, *Leçon/Lektion: Antritt-svorlesung am Collège de France* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1980), 41.

21. Only recently, the exhibition "High Times, Hard Times," curated by Katy Siegel with David Reed for Independent Curators International in 2007, impressively called attention to the multifaceted painting discourse of this period between 1967 and 1975.

22. Joan Snyder, quoted in Hayden Herrera, "Joan Snyder: Speaking with Paint," in *Joan Snyder*, exh. cat. (New York: The Jewish Museum, 2005), 25.

23. Snyder, quoted in ibid., 29.

24. Snyder recalls, "At the height of the Pop and Minimal movements, we were making other art—art that was personal, autobiographical, expressionistic, narrative, and political. . . . They called it neo-expressionist. Except it wasn't neo to us." Snyder, quoted in ibid., 38.

25. "*Große Erwartungen: Jutta Koether im Gespräch mit Sam Lewitt und Eileen Quinlan*," *Jutta Koether*, exh. cat. (Cologne: DuMont, 2006), 149.

26. Jutta Koether, "Kissing the Canvas," *Texte zur Kunst* 1 (Fall 1990), 41.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.

29. Cf. Jacques Derrida, "The Parergon," in *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 37–82.

30. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Birchill (New York: Verso, 1994), 164. Cf. Amy Sillman and Gregg Bordowitz, *Between Artists* (New York: A.R.T. Press, 2007).