

Love in the Mourning

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We cannot speak innocently of abandonment without claiming to possess a general and theoretical definition of what is abandoned. Such a claim is vain, however, not only because, obviously, the craft of the painter has changed throughout history but also because, at any given moment of this history, this craft has been its own definition incarnated in the concrete and subjective practice of those who have exercised it.

(Thierry de Duve)

This is the internal structure of the ‘death of painting’ cycle that inscribed and reinscribed itself throughout modernism: a proclamation of painting’s death, that it may in turn be revived by a new innovation – solved, that it may at some point be declared dead again. Modernism (and post-modernism) never really worked through this. Not that this constitutes a failure; for it seems that it was the *feeling* of working through that was important, more than an actual resolution. This is a point that ought to be taken as given: painting does not need to be solved, it will go and has gone off on tangents that establish their own orbits, and a recognition of this dispersal of interests holds its own possibilities.

The shifts that occur in ideas of painting have often emerged in a curious meeting ground between frustration at the limitations of the medium and what it stands for, and a desire to achieve accomplishments within it: the common narrative of the artist who rebels against painting by coming up with a new solution for it, and in so doing joins the avant-garde, and so receives affirmation (as a part of painting’s problem). Being told he was not a ‘good painter’ was a crucial moment in Duchamp’s artistic development. Painting has for a long time been set up as something to be fought with, struggled against; this is part of what it means to be a painter. Perhaps it is something like the Resistance Exercise Devices that astronauts use in space – having something to push against prevents atrophy and encourages flow. The notion of ‘genius’ rears its tedious head at this juncture (Kant has a lot to answer for on this point) but it seems like a choice these days as to whether you let that get in the way. Painting as device, then – an extension of the idea that de Duve outlines in relation to Duchamp: “The ‘abandonment’ of painting is the passage by which its name is detached from the specific craft that legitimated it.”¹ Even Kant, when he spoke of painting, included landscape gardening in his idea of it, so indeed it has long employed the option of being thought free of the material specificity of pigment on ground. Kant’s conception of painting was still very conservative, however (‘catholic’, as Fiona Hughes would have it), the only expansive aspect of his thinking it being confined to terms of structural aesthetic control, as though that were the fact and the essence of painting. Structural aesthetic control is there, certainly, though this does not account for process, gesture, enduring subjectivity or neurosis, to name a few (was painting already neurotic in Kant’s time? I would argue yes).

Recently, David Joselit wrote in *Painting beside itself* of painting as belonging to a network, an idea elaborated from a comment of Kippenberger’s. I am not as yet wholly convinced of the

¹ Thierry de Duve, *Pictorial Nominalism*, 1991, p. 18

notion, but that is largely because it has a whiff of striving contemporaneity about it that seems cringeworthy, as with Joselit's recent adumbration of *bare painting* from Agamben's *bare life*. That said though, Joselit's proposition of a shift from medium to *format* is fascinating and useful, and an important part of what I am discussing here, as is his interest in painting as something that points outside itself, that understands itself as a locus which leads the viewer's mind ever out into the painting's context, its surroundings, its world (which is our world).

This brings me to Duchamp's concept of *passage*, and when one begins to think of all the notions of passage that can be construed in the set of relations around painting, one can start to see it as a series of steps and slides, from one point to the next and outwards, back, together, through and outwards again: a dance, if you please; the glass-slow pass within the two-dimensional surface to the depiction of three-dimensional forms; the lithe slide back from the vanishing-point grid to the post-neo-classicism of Agnes Martin's *moirés*, bringing it back through the other way; Duchamp's down-the-middle-and-up splitting of diagram from concept by evacuating his compositions of external referents; the latter-day passage from modern painting's holding-pattern of rupture to something towards a holistic approach, or at any rate an attempt to establish approaches to painting that are not concerned so much with a defence of a medium as a re-figuring of structures.

Joselit conceptually extends the *moire* of Martin's inverse grid to figure it as painting pushing the viewer away from its own field and, in turn, out into the world. This argument could be seen as having its genesis in what Michael Fried terms 'absorption', the development in post-Rococo French painting of the self-absorbed subject, painters sending the message that no longer will their subjects fawn and seek to capture and please the viewer, they are doing their own thing now, reclaiming some shame. What, to me, is missing from Joselit's end of the theory is the social register; it need not be representational (but whatever). To my mind, though, in terms of connectedness it is not sufficient for the work simply to push the viewer's attentions away from itself; what is it compelling them towards, or sending them back to? One question to be asked of painting at this point is along the lines of 'how can we think painting as a complex system, of which 'medium' is only an aspect?' Another is, 'how can this way of thinking painting in turn be put to use in the making of meaning, to talk about the way things function in a broader sense?' The latter is not, in my view, answered adequately by simply directing the viewer's attentions outwards, the outward turn a straightforward move but something too much like a solution. Joselit sets up a distinction between a now outdated notion of the specific medium against the idea of 'formatting' as infinite ways of resituating information, being of course a mode that becomes ever more fundamental to our means of managing and apprehending the information that surrounds us. I like the idea that painting can be itself without being itself in a way that moves beyond a restrictive, purely materialist notion of what painting can mean, and engages other mechanisms: the indicators, tropes, quandaries and stoppages.