

# The Egg and the Ashes

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Must I paint you a picture? Are you so stupid you don't understand words, and so only a picture will do? After all, everybody understands pictures, right? And not just any picture, like a photograph or video, but a painted picture? You're making me do work I shouldn't have to do. Painting's laborious, difficult, it's not just pressing a button and letting the technology do it. Painting's painting. Four elements of painting, then, according to the expression: 1) everybody understands pictures (they're a form of universal social education, if not revelation); 2) painting is the ur-picture (no picture is more a picture than a painting); 3) painting is manual labour (painting requires work); 4) painting doesn't have to use paint (it's not simply tied to its materials). Violent and paradoxical as it is, I'm sure you can at least understand what it is I'm trying to picture for you here. But what happens if I have to paint you a picture about the death of painting? Art can draw attention to its own means in many ways, even by struggling against them. To parody Paul de Man: the resistance to painting will never be overcome, because painting is itself this very resistance. You can show painting's death through painting itself, I guess. But then painting must be also living on, at least long enough to show you that it's dead. *The King is dead, long live the King?! as the great ancient principle of authoritarian political theology would have it. Or: I tell you that I am already dead?! as Edgar Allan Poe's Monsieur Valdemar almost says. God, painting's surely died a thousand deaths, and somehow still won't stop returning from its own self-dug grave. Or the shallow grave you've dug for it. I'll be back!* threatens painting every time you think you've finally put a stop to it, just like the ex-governor of California. Painting continues to continue art precisely by essaying to terminate it.

Despite everything that's been said and done to our lamentably deceased forefather Clement Greenberg — condemned, executed, exhumed, burnt, recomposed, buried again, cut into little pieces and scattered like those unfortunate figures from Greek myth before turning up again grinning like a loon in the innumerable animadversions of his sworn

adversaries — it still seems almost impossible not to remain Greenbergian when talking about painting. It may have been all about the all-over for the Greenberg, but it's not at all all over. Sure, the practice of painting is no longer able to be seriously considered in its unparalleled medium-specificity, as if painting was just forever renewing itself as an ever-more-pure-version-of-itself, for example in exploring the formal possibilities of its own essential flatness, in post-painterly abstraction or the all-over itself. But it is certainly linked to painting's transcendental singularity: only painting can ask why it's no longer art in *this* particular way, and show you that, in posing that very question, that only painting can do this, and that, in doing this, that it may well be art. Painting is not painting, art is not art, down with the Kings of Cultureburg! Painting becomes mourning for the impurities that it expelled in order to become painting — entirely itself, but only because it persists in being about what it isn't. Greenberg himself didn't like confusion, nor the sense of confusion: *it's all in the inferior viewer's mind!* he liked to exclaim, *good art is good art is good art!* You can't blame him for this, as everybody likes a little clarity. But about this he was indeed wrong, since the exertions of taste don't alone establish artistic order, as he said one day at the Power Institute in Sydney. To the contrary, painting still wants to be painting but it never quite is anymore, so nobody — painting, you, me, the October collective, Julian Schnabel, those crazy bad German painters — knows what it is. But that don't mean we don't know what it is neither. For we can still look at painting, and see something in *this* painting, maybe, that we can't see anywhere else. Not that we know what we're seeing, or even what we're knowing when we don't know what we see. Or what we're not seeing, since painting is also mourning for what's dead in itself, for what's buried there on the surface, the shallowest yet the ultimate grave that painting is and gives. Like the phoenix, that sole Arabian bird that bursts into flame and is reborn from its own ashes, painting kills itself repeatedly, as if it were caught between the egg and the ashes. *Ut pictura noesis* I'd say if that made sense, which it probably doesn't, but there you are. Time to go. *Quod pinxi pinxi.*