

MARIO DIACONO

Archetypes and Historicity

Painting and Other Radical Forms
1995-2007

SilvanaEditoriale

PREFACE

*The texts prior to 2002 translated from
the Italian by*
Marguerite Shore

Archetypes and Historicity includes a substantial number of the texts I have written to accompany the exhibitions held in my gallery in Boston from the end of 1994 to the end of 2007. It constitutes, with *Verso una Nuova Iconografia* (the texts written in 1977-1984 for my exhibitions in Bologna and Rome, Italy) and *Iconography and Archetypes* (the texts written in 1985-1994 for the shows I had in Boston and New York), a third and final survey I attempted—practically month by month, through artists I was reputing significant, often through a single, significant work of an artist—of the advanced painting being made in Europe and the United States. The circulation of the same lexicon among the three titles implies that they are close to be interchangeable and reflects a continuity I was constantly observing between the newest works and an older imaginary. The thread linking contemporary images to past icons was visible despite a reinventing or even an inventing of the media the artists were using to materialize their ideas, enacting unprecedented techniques, adhering to conceptual sophistications in contemporary thinking. If the novelty of media is always deliberate, however, the return of an image's archetypal structure may be instead mostly subconscious. The intertextuality, or *interfigurality*, between ancient and contemporary images in the last thirty or forty years points to the other (atmo)sphere of globalism, beside the spatial one that the cybermedia and the multi-national economy have generated on the planet. It's the *temporal* globality, one that encyclopedic museums, the philosophy of consciousness, art books, jet travel, an ever deepening knowledge of the past, the vast dissemination of information have construed in the modern mind—and that makes all art diachronic in facture but synchronic in meaning, a 35,000-year *continuum* of visual experience, from Lascaux's caves to Cy Twombly's, J.-M. Basquiat's, Ellen Gallagher's canvases. The strength of an artist's medium, intuition, intentionality, formal devices is, of course, irreducible

Cover by
Ellen Gallagher

to the presence of an interfigural; it is, in fact, the first, major level of iconography viewers encounter in an artwork, becoming therefore the main focus of any interpretation. But a painting often receives a higher validation from the depth it acquires from its (re)invention of an archetype.

I have included in the third section of the book, which discusses new mediologically/conceptually driven forms of sculpture, a text on James Turrell from 1985 and one on the Starn Twins from 1990, contradicting the dates indicated in the title. But *Roden Crater* is a megawork in progress quite far, still in 2011, from seeing its completion; and Doug and Mike Starn seem to be, in retrospect, among the very earliest practitioners of a mode of photography that addresses concerns proper of painting/sculpture and that only in the second half of the 1990s has come to be seen, rightly or wrongly, on a par with them. Further, if the essay on the Roden Crater was written not in the context of my exhibitions but for a portfolio of etchings by Turrell (*Deep Sky*) published by Peter Blum just before I started my Boston gallery, I have always considered it, however, a kind of opening statement for my activism in the US. As for the artists discussed in this volume, they are all American with the exception of Michael Craig Martin, Richard Patterson, Nicky Hoberman (at the time, I believe, respectively the oldest and youngest of the new British painters), and Jutta Koether, a German living and working in New York.

The date at the bottom of each text indicates the exhibitions' opening day.

Now the acknowledgments, which I am afraid will be far from being, as they should, exhaustive.

The support of the late Achille Maramotti and of his still much active son Luigi (which is witnessed today on wall after wall of the Maramotti Collection in Reggio Emilia) has kept for many years the doors of my gallery open (and therefore the ink of my writing fresh).

Bob Nickas has made me aware and taken me to the studios of some of the artists I showed in the 1990s and a good many of those I exhibited in the past decade. The book's last section is almost entirely the

result of our seamless interaction. He still hasn't finished to amaze me with his scavenging of the youngest, most talented artists of the latest generation.

Peter Halley first introduced me to the work of Ellen Gallagher; Charlene Engelhard and Anthony d'Offay helped me to sustain it.

Elmar Seibel for six years hosted my one-work exhibitions on a curved, free-standing wall of Ars Libri, in Boston; we converted our involvement with Futurist, Dadaist, and Surrealist first editions in a collaboration on *the examination round the factification for incamination of the art in progress*. At Ars Libri, Gabriele Ouellette, John Rutter, David Stang were also of unrelenting help and conversation.

Mari Spirito showed me first the slides of Nicky Hoberman and for most of the second half of the 1990s was my rightest hand in running the gallery.

Many dealers have facilitated my showing of the artists they represented: Stefano Basilico, Peter Blum, Mary Boone, Bill Brady of ATM, Karin Bravin and John Lee, Jim Cohan, John Connelly, Paula Cooper, Elizabeth Dee, Anthony d'Offay, Lance and Roberta Entwistle, Zach Feuer, José Freire, Arnold Glimcher, Carol Greene, Tanja Grunert and Klemens Gassert, Hudson of Feature, Lawrence Luhring and Roland Augustine, Paul Morris and Tom Healy, Stefan Stux.

Jonnie and Roger Greene have given me for decades a home in Manhattan; Tracey and Philip Riese have, afterwards, given often home not just to me but also to the art I was exhibiting.

Peter Blum's secret room up the seventy stairs of his Soho gallery has been in the last few years the nest I climbed to rest for the night during my monthly visits to New York.

Marguerite Shore has translated from the Italian the texts from 1985 to 2000, published as I have usually done as gallery brochures, and Jeanne Dillon has brilliantly edited the 2001-2007 ones, written in English.

Marina Dacci has expertly shepherded the book from manuscript to publication. Marco Muccetti has made quite less painful my transition from typewriter to computer. Alice De Gregorio has cybertyped the final text. Jessica Carlini at the Collezione Maramotti has perfected the cyberscript. Sara Piccinini, Fosca Ugoletti, Gianbattista Contini,

Leonardo Regano have variously helped with the research, assembling, and preparation of the illustrations.

Marjorie Jacobson has offered a unique support, helping my survival among the Brahmins, and John Anderson has kept my body able to fly to, and run through, America and Europe.

Boston, 20 September 2011

CONTENTS

Preface

I

ELLEN GALLAGHER

- 00 Crypto.graphing the History.sized Body 1994
- 00 Black Icons 1999

MATTHEW RITCHIE

- 00 *Pictural Ludus* : Painting the Game of Painting 1998
- 00 A Game (Theory) of Painting 2004

DAVID DUPUIS

- 00 Waiting for the Center 1992
- 00 Lines of Devotion and Dissension 1995

SCOTT GRODESKY

- 00 The Vanishing Gaze 1995

OPHRAH SHEMESH

- 00 Body's Politics 1995

MATTHEW ANTEZZO

- 00 When Attitudes Become Painting 1997

KARIN DAVIE

- 00 Painting and its Double 1996
- 00 Into the Golden Wave of Painting 2003

JACQUELINE HUMPHRIES

00 The Shape of Color, the Color of Space 1996

FABIAN MARCACCIO

00 Action Space 1998

II.

MICHAEL CRAIG MARTIN

00 Invention of the Common Displace 1997

RICHARD PATTERSON

00 Pictures from the Theater of War 1999

NICKY HOBERMAN

00 Portraiture as Post-Representation 1998

00 Painting the Future from Memory 2003

JUTTA KOETHER

00 Ghost Painting 2006

III.

JAMES TURRELL

00 Iconographia Coelestis 1985

DOUG & MIKE STARN

00 The Transference of the Aura 1990

TOM SACHS

00 reCycles of hiStories 1996

00 Ars Moriendi 1999

00 archiTexture 2002

BARRY X BALL

00 (re)Constructing (arche)Types 1997

00 A Suspended Subject(ivity) 2003

JESSICA STOCKHOLDER

00 A Landscape of Post-Sense 2005

JUSTEN LADDA

00 Glitzkrieg 2007

HUMA BHABHA

00 Sculpture as Rupture 2006

IV.

PEDRO BARBEITO

- 00 Post-Abstraction, Post-Representation, Post-Iconography:
Scenes from the Computer Imagination 2002

KEVIN ZUCKER

- 00 Surreductive Images 2002
- 00 Library of Unknowing 2004

LISA RUYTER

- 00 Reality Shadows Painting 2002

DONALD BAECHLER

- 00 de-Sign Language 2003

DAMIAN LOEB

- 00 Primary Scenes 2004
- 00 Inner Demons in a Landscape 2005

LALLA ESSAYDI

- 00 Re-Visioning *Orientalism* 2004

CHRISTOPHER LUCAS

- 00 Five Degrees of Im(and Ex)ploration 2003

STEVE DI BENEDETTO

- 00 Microcosmology 2005

CARL OSTENDARP

- 00 Against Blankness 2004

ANN CRAVEN

- 00 Painting as Re-Production 2004

CHLOE PIENE

- 00 The Reconstructed Body 2005

DAVID BOWES

- 00 Crashed Allegory 2006

ANDY CROSS

- 00 A Short History of the American Dream 2005
- 00 Betting on Painting 2007

JASON FOX

- 00 The Death of the Death of Art 2007

BENJAMIN DEGEN

- 00 Nude in a Mindscape 2007

ENOC PEREZ

- 00 Social Space: A Portrait 2006

DANIEL RICH

- 00 Arch.Icon 2006
- 00 An Art of (dis)Content 2007

V.

JAMES SIENA

- 00 Endless Rhythms of Ontical Abstraction 2002
- 00 The Meandering Mindbrush 2006

WAYNE GONZALES

- 00 The Politics of Painting 2003

JOHN TREMBLAY

- 00 Minimal Cosmologies 2005

DAN WALSH

- 00 Painting, Evoked and Devoked 2005

DANA SCHUTZ

- 00 Color Leading the Color 2004

MATTHEW DAY JACKSON

- 00 A Religion of Images 2006
- 00 Falling in a Humanscape 2007

JULES DE BALINCOURT

- 00 Abject Matter 2007

KENT HENRICKSEN

- 00 The Fabric of Images 2006

KELLEY WALKER

- 00 Building from the Top Down 2007

00 **Illustrated Works**

Appendix

- 00 List of illustrated works
- 00 Photo Credits
- 00 Chronology
- 00 Index

1.

ELLEN GALLAGHER

The greatest art produced in the second half of the twentieth century was also an art created at the end of the epoch of Humanism. It constitutes a consequential series of acts performed in the little space still left to the Imaginary, to the mind's excavations by the polarly opposite, yet symmetrical, abrogation of History. This slowly enters the cultures of both the Word and the Image, on the one hand because of a technology that outgrows the scope of its inventors; on the other hand as a result of the recurrent waves of engineered uprooting, in every continent, of hundreds of thousands of ethnic Citizens, displaced and left roaming the earth without goods or Gods. (At the same time, Art is now being produced in the West without the fundamental opposition that had marked its development for centuries when the widespread presence of the likeness of the gods in the representations of Greek-Roman and Christian societies was set against its equally pervasive absence in the visual creations of Judaic and Islamic societies.) The art/act of painting itself, which is predicated on that History on whose ruins the artist is precisely staging his/her final mental figures and figural abstractions, survives mainly through the incessant interrogation of its own end. In fact, it's the persistence today of the forms *oil on canvas*, *graphite/ink on paper* (or analogous media)—of the linguistic tools, in a word, which have allowed painting to move from Being to Becoming-its-Death without losing its vitality—that still endows art's self-questioning with a will to power of renewals. The entropy of art's ability to Signify is then related not to a hypothetical dissipation of artists' creative energy (their supposed "belatedness"), but rather to the diminished availability of societies to place in a Form or a Symbol the site of the representation and/or investigation of their own meaning. In the twentieth century, all efforts and desires to expand the range of visual representations by enlisting Technology as a further medium, from Marcel Duchamp to Vito Acconci, has consistently resulted in artworks where an incremental gap has eventually developed between their conceptual construction and the medium's social duration. This leads to their rapid archeologization as object, even if not to their dissi-

pation as art. Technology's inherent function, and its potential for subsistence, are strictly linked to its economic utility and its expected obsolescence: unfortunately, too many technologically advanced artworks will become an increasingly outdated product.

What initially looks like a reductionist modality in the pictorially restrained surfaces of Ellen Gallagher's works is, in fact, in the very etymological sense of the word, a *re-ductio*: the restoration of an initialness, the dis-covering of an originary mode of presentation. It's certainly not sensible to consider *minimalistic* her practice of a spare, most elemental inscription of the basic constituents of painting: canvas, oil pigment, paper, pencil. Painting itself appears in her pictures reduced to an inceptual role: that of recounting, in a sorrowful and deprived yet miraculously pure accent, a Memory as the absence of History. For Gallagher, history, which an artist descended from the long Western tradition might see as finishing, begins instead right now. For she is bound to re-cite memories that simply were not allowed to have a formal inscription of their own—the foundational instance from which a language is supposed to derive, out of which is constructed, upon which indeed Language is erected. This resetting to zero the memory of a Past transmitted by Western history, and the invention of an initial Sign system, at once anthropologically grounded and yet formally blending with radical aspects of American Modernism—Post-Modernism being a conceptual sleight-of-mind of post-Marxist ideologizing—are in evidence through the silently resounding dominance in her pictures of paper and pencil over the complementary canvas and oil. Gallagher's canvas, stretched over plywood, is first covered with sheets of paper laid on methodically if irregularly, as if alluding to traditional gold leafing processes in icon-making. This creates both a texture and a grid toward the application of pencil marks and also produces all the visual incidents a viewer needs in order to apprehend that this paper is not just support but grammar and speech. The sheets are taken either from children's penmanship copybooks (and therefore ready-made) or from copybooks but with some of the lines reworked by hand (then assistedly ready-made) or are printed directly by the artist with uneven, graffiti-like, dynamic yet childmade-looking lines (thus rendered illusorily ready-made).

Whether printed, ready-made or hand-painted, however, the bluish lines name and inscribe the beginning of a language, with the entire subtext and structure of sheets, writing lines, and asymmetrical grids preparing and reinforcing the artist's project of telling a story which had been supposed to have no history. The imagery in the Gallagher's ideography drawn on the paper on canvas originates from the racially charged, popularized nineteenth century American reception of the African body [suggested reading by the artist on the subject: James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-coloured Man*, 1912.] Given the source of the imagery which is scattered in carefully improvised patterns on the pictures' surface, the viewer can easily grasp that, despite appearances, these works are in fact more closely related to those of Jean Michel Basquiat than say to those of Agnes Martin—even though there is no need for us to deny an instinctive impulse to aesthetically and emotionally link Gallagher's line drawing to some sort of unplanned, de-mondrianized and jazzified evolution or aggression via regression of Agnes Martin's seminally ascetic but areferential line paintings.

On top of the grid made up of sheets, and of the spatial structure established by orderly or disorderly lines which differs from work to work, the artist imprints and scatters in always changing configurational designs a limited vocabulary of cryptic, bodily and socially inferential pictograms, shorthand renderings of the lips and eyes of the African-American persona as presented in the pre-1960s popular and commercial iconography of Blacks (for an early, polemical summation of this consumer-genic stereotyping see *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, 1972, by Betye Saar, reproduced in Edward Lucie-Smith's *Race, Sex, and Gender in Contemporary Art*, Abrams, New York, 1994, page 26.) Even more intentionally, however, the social construct internalized by Gallagher's imagery is that of the blackface minstrel, since for her the beginning of Western consciousness of African humanness—not yet evolved in history—is located in the early nineteenth century's minstrel shows played in the U.S. in which white performers with blackened faces impersonated African-American singers and comedians. The equation of such incipient Western acknowledgement of a transplanted African—considered

sub—culture with the inception of her own historically affirmative language is the generative concept which structures Gallagher's ideography. She choreographs her founding imagery as if investing it with the sense of a *pictura rasa* upon which to implement the construction of a post-racial—in cultural terminology: post-historical—representation. But as much as the single pictograms—lips, eyes, sometimes dice (which name the link between minstrelsy and gambling)—refer to the socio-political making of America, so their patterned inscriptions archetypize an originating Africa. Their configurational order recalls, indeed, if not re-enacts, either the eye-like all-over marks covering the *bwami* sculptures of the Lega people (Congo/Zaire) which possibly signify the all-seeing power of divinities and ancestors and the role of divination in their culture; or, even more congenitally, the mnemonic patterns of beads on the memory boards (*lukasa*) of the Luba people (also Congo/Zaire) which “encode secret mythical, historical, genealogical, and medicinal knowledge”, and “remind initiates of kinglists, proverbs, and praise phrases” (*Secrecy. African Art that Conceals and Reveals*, by Mary H. Nooter, The Museum of African Art, New York, 1993, page 55.) Sometimes, as in *Oogaboogah*, the blackfaces appear drawn in black pencil on black lead squares that magnify the surrounding grid, and are almost invoked to perform in quasi-Tribal language, on the post-Minimalist stage/surface of the painting, what the artist would call “a ritual turned out into spectacle”, and that we could in turn perceive as an act of memory turned into an art of (new) history.

15 October 1994

BLACK ICONS

We might even look at the gold and black grounds in pictures as at two opposing conceptions of space and namings of the Imaginary, as the two bracketing inscriptions of existence with which the first millennium of Western painting opened and will close its run of symbols. The gold of early Byzantine icons, and the enamel black of a substantial group of canvases painted by Ellen Gallagher in 1998-1999, are both neither representational nor abstract (in the modernist sense) colors; they are the conceptual fields on which a purposely metaphysical or meta-social discourse is conducted. At both its beginning and its now long, long ending, painting was/is about Representation: an *idea*-gramming that encompasses all f/acts. All along its history, the diverse acts of painting would coalesce into an Idea (though not exactly the "Idea as Idea" of Ad Reinhardt or the "Idea as Idea as Idea" of Joseph Kosuth.) The Byzantines' gold and Gallagher's black cannot be thought of in terms of the Modernist monochrome; they are not *transcendental* colors, but are rather meant to transcend color and become meta-optical entities. It's not simply that Byzantine gold inscribes God and Gallagher's black inscribes Race or that the former supercedes history while the latter scrapes the bottom of history. Both that gold and this black, in their essence as meta-colors, allow painting a higher level of signification than simply an ideated narrative. As a collateral symptom of their terminal scraping at the bottom of Western art, Gallagher's "paintings at the end of painting" parallel even in their grounding the making of early icons. The many passages of uninflected black enamel paint, in her recent works, are indeed layered over rectangles of paper, all about eight inches high (for they reference copybooks' sheets) and collaged onto the canvas. The sheets' overlapping edges trace a grid, which becomes an uncanny recollection of the Byzantine gold leafing enacted over the icons' primed panel. However, such a mirroring—darkly—of the Byzantine gold's ushering in of Western painting, suggested by Gallagher's pictures of its announced ending, doesn't constitute anything resembling the closing of a circle or of a cycle. There is never a neat circular scheme or a negative symmetry at play in the

tragedies of art. But in retracting a quest for the golden picture, her black icons also avoid or erase a typology of artmaking that has long connoted the West's *Polis*, one of whose salient features had even been, until half a century ago, the willingness to suppress or obscure the Other's histories in order to unapologetically *supermanize* or *supremacyze* its own.

But Byzantine gold and Gallagher's enamel black are not yet the full story; rather, it is through them that an iconography can complete its primal diction. When it first appeared in 1992, Gallagher's grid of sheets collaged onto the canvas was characteristically marked by the rows of straight blue lines printed on school writing paper, since the sheets were lifted from children's penmanship copybooks. But, besides determining the painting's space in a ready-made, *primitive*, almost tribal way, the blue lines also functioned as framers of, and pointers to, a pictographic inscription of irregular rows of circles with a point at their center and/or of bean-like shapes crossed by a horizontal line. These two glyphs, together with an S-shaped thick swirl referencing a sticking-out tongue, were to constitute for a long while the basic ideographic grammar generating the works' iconographic stream of blackness. Together with a fourth and usually larger shape recalling a butterfly or a bow-tie, obtained from contrapuntally collaging another layer of cut paper to the one already laid on the canvas, these signs effect an abstractional inscription of the salient features of the Blackface stereotype: oversized, bean-shaped, blood-red lips; bulging white eyes; a Mulatto blonde's head; and a Mammy's apron, denoting's the black woman's supposed social subordination. Apart from its being an early, imaginative introduction to the current discourse on what Manthia Diawara has called "the location of the white racist ideology in the Blackface stereotype," Gallagher's ideogrammatic, almost graffitic scripture of Race over the surface and the tradition of Modernism (Agnes Martin I have already cited as a reference, though Gallagher's relation to her work is not dissimilar to that of, say, Jean-Michel Basquiat to Cy Twombly's) had an ulterior, signification theme in mind. The abstracted, synecdochic (precisely of Race) iconograms were meant, in fact, to associate the blackface stereotype with the historical type of the blackface Minstrel so that the metaphorical

superimposition of Black features to White culture—and intrusion of Black culture into White art features—created a complex interrogation of social identity, at the same time becoming an allegory for the artist’s questioning role in contemporary socio-cultural facture.

In *Mobb Dee*, the first of the six large black paintings exhibited by Gallagher this past year (all ten by eight feet; the other five are: *Eleganza* and *Untitled*, 1999; *Treeman Park*, *Narc*, and *Night Lamp*, 1999), the four figures that appear dancing along the middle of the canvas are, in fact, performing minstrels whose instruments have been erased from the picture leaving them suspended in the purest frenzy of their ecstatic body. These bodies are composed of Blackface eyes and tongues, as also is the first of two long stripes at the bottom of the picture. The other stripe, above it (the two together may suggest Pinocchio’s nose, a phallic shape, or a banjo), as also a curved band above the four minstrels, is instead made of eyes superimposed on bean-shaped lips, thus completing an orchestration of the full range of Blackface iconograms. While the abstracted, dis-figured dancing and playing of the minstrels inscribes a critical narrative of American-African sub- culture assumed as a paradigmatic symbol of the artist’s mis- or hyper-identity, the pictorial grammatization of round eyes, bean-shaped lips, and sticking-out tongues signifies the transformation of that mis- o hyper-identity’s into an indexical scription of the new history. The grafting of a dis-figured American-Minimalist abstraction onto the reconfiguring of the de-humanized features of African-American existence makes this historical inception coincide with an artistic ending (a Janusian condition to which no artist today would escape). Gallagher’s conceptual inversion or conversion of the Coon into the Icon parallels and somehow deconstructs Basquiat’s ironical/heroical displacement of the Class struggle into the Race skirmish (see his diptych *Hammer and Sickle*, 1982. Her *Treeman Park*, 1999, on the other hand, which configures the monumental head of an African warrior seen from behind as a constellation of Blackface iconograms, may serve as a post-Minimalist counterpoint to his neo-Expressionist invention.)

In an early, *Untitled* small black painting (24 × 24 inches, ill. 4 1995), the black on black image—a cluster of Blackface heads spi-

raling in the center of the picture—is thickly drawn in pencil over the oil paint that covers the paper on canvas ground. In two wood-stick paintings, *Pinocchio Theory* and *Love Parade* (respectively 1 × 72 inches, and 1 5/8 × 180 inches, made in 1996 and 1998), a row of blood-red Blackface lips is painted in oil below a row of pairs of white eyes. In the six black paintings of the past year, instead, not only do the Blackface iconograms become constituent cells of a proliferating ideography, but they are also inscribed in a variety of pictorial strategies that never cease being kind of negative concepts, an erasure or obscuration of the Western expressive modality (a more radical erasure, in a sense, than the hyper-Expressionist, though also non-Western, gesture enacted by Basquiat). Only two of these pictures, *Eleganza* and *Untitled* (both from 1999), announce their being a negative thinking by means of long, irregular rows and clusters of bean-shaped lips painted in brilliant white oil pigment over an opaque enamel ground. The other paintings, and partially *Eleganza* as well, present instead rigorously black on black images, formed by substituting the drawing or painting of the icons with shapes cut out either from rubber—for the lips, eyes, and sticking-out tongues—or from other sheets of paper—for the butterfly-like aprons. All these cut-out shapes are ill. 5 laid over the grid of paper sheets collaged on the canvas and are then painted in the same black enamel as the ground. While the cut paper of the aprons adds a constructivist, if almost invisible, further level of drawing and tonalities to the pictures, the shapes cut out from the rubber generate instead the images of solid eyes and lips and tongues through their sharp edges, as well as through the relief enacted by the rubber itself. Only in *Narc*, the strips of rubber are cut not in the shape of eyes, lips, and tongues but as an irregular net of segmented lines that weave and dance, mapping an imaginary choreography of expanding and contracting circles, as if to make visible the music withdrawn from *Mobb Deep*. In rendering silent, as it were, the color of painting, Gallagher tersely raises the stakes of art’s contentions of visibility, lowering a curtain of opaqueness to illuminate the decline of history with a revealing black light.

15 May 1999

MATTHEW RITCHIE

PICTORAL LUDUS: PAINTING THE GAME OF PAINTING

Just over a century ago, in the 1870s, the painting of a French Impressionist oil on canvas and the tracing of a cluster of American-Indian pictographs on a buffalo hide would have seemed radically distant practices, their related visual cultures—the avantgardist and the *primitive*—in no way compatible. Yet today they are viewed, synchronically, as equally necessary to understand the aesthetic horizon of a contemporary artist. In the making of images, there are now increasingly visible, similarly operative complementarities between the High, the experimentalism of advanced art, and the Low, the social immediacy of mass-produced, myth-adopting entertainment narratives (cartoons, comic books, video games). Of course, the Low and its formal components, no matter how much structurally relevant they may be to generate the meaning of a picture's image, always function in an artwork as a conceptualist device to secure the survival of the High and the abstractional foundations of any experimentation. Painting today can justify its intellectual r'existence only if, in any single instance, in each individual work, it dies to its future and is reborn to its past (or maybe the other way around?). Certainly, an event of "Painting is dead / long live Painting" has to constantly take place in a picture for us to be able to declare that it has a presentness as a work: that there is a *shekhinah* of form, an advent of art. Matthew Ritchie would have never arrived at the singular *factura* of his pictures without embracing the Cubists' dissection or atomization of space, Marden's reconstruction of the solidity of color and evenness of surface, and the spatial integrity of Quattrocento perspectival painting. But neither the impulse to his cosmogonical (or cosmocomic, Calvino might have said) enterprise would have taken its particular path without: first, the visionary linearity of American-Indian pictography on hide, buckskin, ledger books; second, alchemical imagery; and third, on the opposite side of the brow, the playful, high-tech storytelling of mysterialized odysseys undergone by cartoonish, videogamic superheroes in imaginary universes. If an underlying irony constitutes the distancing glue that grafts in his canvases the Low on

the High, it's because the Low always denotes, in his linguistic compound, a mass-mediated nostalgia for (and lament for the loss of) art's role as purveyor of meaning to society's self-representation.

The grafting of the Low onto the High invokes another crisis that's being negotiated in Ritchie's work, that of pure abstraction, and therefore that other crisis which less conspicuously yet fundamentally has marked the *advance* in the advanced painting of the past decade: the crisis of abstraction and representation. This shows once again how much the formalist inducement of a picture to bare its factual constituents of color, space, surface, and edge; namely, to simply acknowledge the physical absoluteness of its materiality and self-being: in a word, to keep going a Cold War abstraction—the Cold War that had started with Siqueiros' attempted assassination of Trotsky—is exhausted. The essential condition for a post-Cold War abstraction is that the iconographic push come to painting from concept rather than from mimesis. Ritchie's work subtly even *appears* to altogether skirt the abstraction vs. representation knot and get down to the business that reality interests him in art as art, myth, elegizing through a game structure. He has quoted as an enduring memory the invention of an all-encompassing game in Hermann Hesse's *The Glass Bead Game* (1943). A game that, begun as “a child's abacus [...] with several dozen wires on which could be strung glass beads of various sizes, shapes, and colors” to which are assigned “the time-values of the musical notes”, soon gradually evolves into “a language of symbols and formulas” that “has taken over partially the role of art, partially that of speculative philosophy” (translation from the German by Richard and Clara Winston). But if Ritchie seems to parlay his role of artist into the one of *Ludi Magister*, this is an unstated conceptual strategy to secure a novel lease on life for the painting-as-meaning project we have inherited from high modernism. On the one hand he devises a mathematical formula, derived from the periodic table, to create an abstract marquetry of non-Euclidean geometrical shapes whose range of colors is coded to reference the symbolic properties inherent in the hyperlogical characters and events of a cosmogonic narrative. (It is this type of narrative that dictates the proliferation of alchemical-symbols coded tesserae on his canvases' surface, a narrative visualized in ways that

denounce its secret aim: to confer a still viable currency to the multiplicity of expressive tools generated by Modernist painting, from Picasso to Abstract Expressionism to early Marden.) But then this modernist marquetry is quasi demoted by a sleight of pen to supporting cast by a fictional (however textually precise) science of didactic arabesques. The firm black lines of which, traced in a single stroke with a marker, move, as on a blackboard, from the iconic nerve-centers of the picture to the periphery or near-periphery of a faceted image, ending in circles or arrows inside or next to which algebraic formulas provide a (ma)thematical evidence for the truth of the fiction of art (and of science, too.)

Three works, *Day 1.1*, *Mr. Universe*, and *The Idea of Cities* (all ill. 8, 9, 10 from 1998), are part of a cycle titled *The Gamblers: It's Time to Play*. This cycle is distinguished from the previous one, *The Hard Way* (1996), by its more expansive and yet tauter aggregation of the pictorial marquetry which tends to overflow toward the canvas' edge as the plot of the inscriptions thickens. This mode seems to parallel the artist's stated belief in the universe as an “ever-expanding bubble” of time-space. In the *Gamblers* cycle, there are, as the artist himself has summarized in spelling out its underlying narrative structures, “seven characters who represent the fundamental particles of matter” (their names are Astoreth, Purson, Lucky, Abaddon, Stanley, Lilith, and Bubba) who “are playing a game that is like a combination of every possible game. By playing the game, they hope to create the right conditions to begin time. But at the moment they are just trapped in a loop, and that loop is precisely what these paintings represent.” Since “what these paintings represent” is essentially a formal evolution of what was presented in *The Hard Way* and, since that previous cycle iconographed “another heart, the eighth and last,” called Heled (created by seven demiurge-like beings named Azazel, Kashdejah, Shemjaza, Tamali, Kokabel, Penemue, and Mulciber—seven “cartoon superheroes tumbling in an endless void”), one may suppose that in Ritchie's pictures the players could and will always change, but the videognostic game will remain the same. The artist might also reasonably conceive what is substantiated on the canvas as the hypo-statization of an intellectual play, but to us it's clearly revealed as a visual dis-

course denoting the twists and turns of its own imagination. The title of *Day 1.1* corresponds somewhat to the Bible's *Genesis 1:1*; the seven gamblers appear in the picture as hands holding chips, dice, and cards, next to seven spheres which enfold as successive manifestations/expansions of the *Bereshit (In the Beginning)* of Ritchie's parallel universe. The shape of this Beginning is presented, on the picture's upper left, as a ring on which a seven-faceted stone is set—an atom made of seven colors which in Ritchie's cosmology encode the essential properties of any alternative world. This incrementally growing crystal protrudes from all the successive spheres incrementally expanding in time/space, while the flow charts' mathesis scribbles down the results so far of the game played by the seven-handed, seven-headed Masters of the Universe. Ritchie's seven colors/seven player scheme also appears to reference the mythical/mystical, archetypal, Philosophical Chemia according to which the physical world is made up of seven metals that are microcosmic correspondences to the seven planets in the macro-cosm.

The *Fiat*, the Big Bang connoting/representing the opening of the game (or vice versa?) is at the center of *Mr. Universe*, basically carried over from the seventh sphere in the lower right-hand side of *Day 1.1*, so that in a sense the painting fully coincides with the game's first round. Around the *Fiat* appears the red disc of Time, enveloped in turn by the golden ring of the periodic table which is itself surrounded by the bluish, anthropomorphic shape of Space that has the form of a gigantic, circuitous reclining figure. This roundabout Space constitutes then the universe proper to whose edges cling bits of the solid matter of the planets, the cosmos thus resulting from the cooling of Time and Space. The alternative universe somehow has, therefore, to emanate the hypostasis of a terrestrial planet, and it's indeed the process of life's evolution on a parallel earth that generates the iconography of the third picture, *The Idea of Cities*. At the center of this canvas is the image of plankton around which are depicted—scattered over the marquetry of solid, hard-edged, color-coded and uninflected tesserae of primordial space, which are obtained by laying down with a spatula the oil pigment mixed with alkyd—the basic forms of the unfolding evolution. They are enacted as symbols of a cultural inhabitation: a wall,

three walls perpendicularly joined to make a room, a pyramid, and a tower, the latter figured as the sixteenth of the major arcane of the Tarot, *La Maison-Dieu*. Above each of these building types, there hovers the seven-colored hand of the Builder(s), a thematic echo of the gamblers' hand of *Day 1.1*, that are however monochrome there, albeit each painted in a different color. At the canvas' bottom left, just off center, the gray-blue head of a Universal Ancestor or Master of the Universe—the *demiurgos* of Ritchie's cosmogony-cum-eschatology—somewhat recapitulates, next to a pictogram of the DNA or tree of life, the fundamental symbiosis of conceptual abstraction and symbolic figuration that structures his mythopoeic art. With a possibly further inference of a dualistic conflict of light and darkness in the pictorial process, Ritchie's art seems to be informed on the highbrow level by a Gnostic reading of the human condition, a reading soon after ironically corrected on the lowbrow level by a *fin de siècle* skepticism and techn- iconological relativism that can easily assimilate what happens inside the canvas' edges to a gameboard.

21 November 1998

A GAME (THEORY) OF PAINTING

About ten years ago, a few young artists emerged—Ellen Gallagher, Toba Khedoori, Matthew Ritchie among the most recognizable then—who were investing painting with pointed conceptual narratives, while experimentally still practicing some of the linguistic strategies of minimalist abstractionism. And this was not out of any aesthetic empathy for, or continuity with, Minimalism per se, but because that modality of form appeared suddenly functional to the inscription of an ideography or a visual thinking. It offered a ready-made, spatial ground zero to drawing, in ink or graphite, stories which, in order to advance an intellectual program, needed to break free of either formalist abstraction or modernist representation. Ritchie's complex approach to painting as problem, aspiration, project, and hyperlanguage was to start by devising a series of cosmological fables that would structure, or even step by step generate, the iconic making of the work. At the same time, he was lifting the material for his facture from both the high and the low ends of the media and of the cultural market which would, in the a process, acquire a new, pictorial purpose and also become an unlimited source of visual tools. There seemed to be for him a subtle equation between the invention of Gnostic-like creation myths about a parallel world and the enactment of a new iconography based on the conflation of sciences of the visible with theories on the invisible. Ritchie collapsed, in a word, a number of scientific, religious, occult descriptions of the universe into a single story line using a card-playing game, with its interaction of rules and chance, as a model for developing visual narratives. This cosmological conceit envisioned a metahistory based on forty-nine characters—each one connoting in turn multiple characteristics—arranged in groups of seven. The seven-by-seven grid appropriated the magic numbers recurring in the Bible, in other religious explanations of the world, in various retelling of physical and human events, but also provided a finite set of elements with which to build a procession of necessary images. The symbolic characters' progression through the game-like interplay of rules and chance, which made possible all their successive moves, especially embodied the

twenty-two Major Arcana of the Tarot, the only type of playing cards thought to subsume the make-up of this world. The first Arcanum, *The Magician*—a man sitting at a table over which are placed the signs of three suits of the Minor Arcana: a sword, a cup, and some coins while holding in his left hand a rod, sign of the fourth suit—is the creator of the game and therefore a figure of the artist. He wears a hat whose shape forms the sign ∞ (for infinity) which is also an attribute of Abraxas, the self-destructing demonic angel adumbrated in *The Two-Way Shot*. The original Italian name of the Arcanum, *Il Bagatto*, derives, according to some lexicographers, from Baghdad, the site of a peculiar brand of magic (now you see a weapon of mass destruction, now you don't).

The earlier are Ritchie's works, the more explicit appears in them the impulse to create paintings generated by the artist's cosmological construct. Everything in the pictures is coded: the shape of things, the imaged characters, the colors used. The universe's various stages of development assume the figure of hard-edged geometric forms, of maps laid with a spatula in solid, brilliant hues on a gray ground (a technique reminiscent of Brice Marden's waxed surfaces) and counterpointed by directional lines, scientific formulas, images of pre- or proto-human beings, all scripted with a black marker, as if on an expository board. This grafting of an ideography, with a marker's black ink, onto the oil-painted, color-coded surface of the canvas, that connotes both a tension and an interaction between the discursive/scientific and the pictorial/symbolic inscriptions, has so far remained constant in Ritchie's work. But his black drawing/writing has also started to extend conspicuously out of the canvas proper and onto the wall, stressing its distinctively dialectical role, denotative of matter's abstract energies in flux, while at the same time exalting the primary, iconographic function of the painting as a self-constructing universe of figures in an incessant making and remaking. The *cosmonoir* narratives generating a work's figural pattern have become in the process simplified, recently focusing on a few, play-generated events that the evolution of this or that character or characteristic stands to produce and which may even constitute some sort of projection of existential instances on a mytho(a)logical plane.

This will always be, in fact, the question popping up in the mind/eyes of the viewer—what’s the iconic relation between the artist’s concept (the cosmofictional events) and the actual figural discourse of the pictures? The answer should be that, as these two are indeed parallel languages, Ritchie asserts the right to be an artist in both: the verbal language that constructs a story and its meaning in abstract configurations (narratives smartly assembled rummaging through the archives of today’s scientific and yesterday’s occultist knowledge); and the visual language he has forged evolving his initial mode of coding all the shapes and colors he uses without necessarily providing us at each and every step/picture the key to their decodification. A principal understanding comes then from the placing of these two languages in the context of today’s reshaping of painting: Ritchie enacts it by contaminating the invention of a physical (pictorial) lexicon with the intervention of a well-thought (conceptual) mythmaking. As his pictures have moved further and further away from the tight, map-like, geometric organization of the early *Working Model* series and into the controlled chaos of the recent *Proposition Player* group, the story of his forms has also become less about the interdependence of the verbal and visual constructs and more, instead, about the metaphors of rising, flowing, colliding, and decaying primal energies in the time/space continuum.

A kind of epilogue to *Proposition Player* is constituted by *The Two-Way Shot*, a composite, hybrid work made of a painted canvas whose image extends into a wall drawing. (The title refers to a type of shot in pool games that will make it impossible for the next player to sink the ball in any given pocket.) This piece may represent a first instance in which the drawing is not a temporary feature inscribing a series of lines or images on the walls of an exhibition space, standing as a site-specific, autonomous visual thought, but becomes instead an integral, permanent part—in this case with a canvas—of a larger, single work. (An archetypal practice in this direction may have been that of Giulio Paolini.) The painting in *The Two-Way Shot* compound sits on the top-left corner of a tangle of streaming, looping, ribbon-like black lines which at times continue and conclude the contrastingly tubular, serpentine rays of coded color surging out of a primal, massive bundle on

the canvas’ center. Ritchie has called the doodle-like stream of lines interspersed with numbers and letters that connote elementary particles and scientific formulas—and which become purely abstract shapes once scaled up—an “endless drawing”, meant to describe the body of Abraxas, the demon of infinity. The drawing’s part in *The Two-Way Shot* is to represent the particle trails erupting out of Abraxas’ body whose *sparagmos* is depicted in the canvas. Somewhere in the left-hand half of its surface, in fact, is hidden his skull, with the eyes atomically ejected from their sockets, forever falling in the painting’s universe—a forest of color-coded branches, a tangled mass of brown and blue tentacles agitating, floating along amorphous, yellow and green masses over a mute, uninflected celestial ground. The four colors stand for “the four forces underlying the universe’s physical structure”: the blue for the electromagnetic force; the brown for the weak force, radiation; the yellow for the strong force; the green for the gravitational force. This web of forces is sparsely dotted with bull’s-eye small globes, atoms/eyes connected or emphasized by swirling or straight lines firmly traced with a marker—Ritchie’s signature scientific-fictional scription of the narrator/author’s mental travels over the physicality of a pictorial world in the making.

3 December 2004

DAVID DUPUIS

WAITING FOR THE CENTER

Since the end of the 1950s, it's being predicted with periodic anxiety (or glee) that painting is certainly close to reaching an historical dead end. Painting is, indeed, overwhelmed incessantly by methodical doubts about the necessity of its permanence, doubts which are provoked by the intrinsic weakness of its relation to society at large; and, at the same time, it deeply feels the pressure coming from Reality's clamor for a representation of existence's meaning that art alone seems not capable of satisfying. Thus, under the threat of being considered *dead* and with a need to show that, on the contrary, it is moving toward meaningful *ends* even while caught in the middle of an identity crisis, Painting falls, reflexively, back on itself, its critical dimension forced to prevail over the expected expressive intentions. Alternate constructions have, since the 1960s, accompanied this implosion of the Signs of painting, constructions that have been, at various times, photographic, videographic, sculptural, objectal, actional, environmental, conceptual, or any combination of these. But the success of these alternative media has consistently depended on their precisely acting as presentational surrogates in the aesthetic mandate originated from painting. In the cultural tradition that has formed from late medieval Christianity till now, the cognitive discourse of art and on art has, in fact, fundamentally developed from the form and the role of painting, just as, in contrast, the evolution of forms in the Greco-Roman tradition was centered essentially on the role of sculpture. (It's this opposition, or at least this distinction, that has informed the historical narrative of Western art and has functioned as our intellectual parameter since the Renaissance.) It seems therefore congruous that in the United States the debate on the new art of the 1980s, when collectively considered—or phobically berated—as a belated or conservative *return to painting*, would remain substantially episodic, limited to the critical pronouncements of the writers heuristically following or empathetically close to the artists; while an impermeable, ideological closure would develop instead toward their work in the post-structuralist, post-Marxist academic culture, where the discourse on contemporary art had come to hinge solely on the postulate of a

deconstructive interaction between photography and painting originating with Pop Art and on an act of faith in the desubjectivization of the artwork practiced by Minimalism. The reformulation of the image as iconographic Otherness, articulated by the new *mere* (if conceptually minded) painters, was being denied any dialectical value or function.

At the beginning of the end of the twentieth century, painting continues to be questioned about the authenticity and the necessity of its being, of its subsistence: Because the old minimalist tenets about the end of subjectivity are being revived as the supposed new task of an artwork's political proficiency—the practice of the canvas (or its equivalents) being always indirectly equated to an inscription of subjectivity, painting is confirmed in an alleged status of sub-existence if its program is not one of an automatic self-negation. And because its background story, which is the story of art in the 1980s, has already been pre-conceived as a phenomenology of simulations of the history of Modernism rather than as a projection and a project of dialectical, innovative constructs. Constantly motivated by the urgency of an updated representation of the Social and of a fluid inscription of History, by the challenge that non-traditional media increasingly provide through their informing of works confronting the status quo of the viewer's reception and of his fruition of visual information, painting progressively, generationally transforms its modes of setting the expressive discourse into motion. In unexpected and contradictory ways, every generation of artists enacts a different synthesis of the multiple demands that culture and visuality place upon them, a synthesis that finally emanates from the type of critique and from the pertinence of the revisionism directed by art making toward its own past, immediate or ancestral. A picture that furthers art's intensity doesn't simply tactically respond to the conceptual evolutions of its medium, but inherently entails pointing to new directions. In the last forty years, the Duchampian paradigm has repeatedly legitimated the remaking of the notion of painting on the part of one or another radical artist (Rauschenberg, Johns, Klein, Manzoni, Kounellis, for instance), yet without contradicting the emergence of others capable of articulating strong intentions of a post-avant-garde, figural picture-making (starting with Bacon and Guston). Just as Duchamp's attitude had informed many of the important works produced after Abstract

Expressionism, so in the past twenty years a Beuysian paradigm has similarly solidified the art thinking of many painters, for both the Duchampian and Beuysian strategies of pluri-media-based attitudes do encourage the investment of symbolically and conceptually charged materials with hyper-iconographic, hyper-expressive, intellectual, or existential meanings. Because of Beuys and Duchamp, the locus of meaning constantly moves today in and out of the canvas (or its equivalents), in and out of a flat geometric surface where a figural micro-cosm can translate the collective unconscious into an advanced language, since it's the mobility of the act of signification that painters must now inscribe in their visual discourse.

With reasoned obsessiveness, the canvases of David Dupuis repeat and design the various patterns of recognizable abstractions, figures of the movements of the subconscious hand in which the explorations of the mind become trapped. His non-objective but decipherable images are of mazes, labyrinths, unending staircases in irregular or impossible arrangements, the mapping of an archeology of the spirit that has remained unchallenged since the legendary and exemplary times of Daedalus and Theseus. Daedalus was the initial and initiated artist who constructed a labyrinth—the proliferating, forbidden architecture of which he became himself prisoner. Theseus is the warrior who succeeded in deciphering the labyrinth, thus creating an archetypal journey out of an obscurity of paths. Dupuis builds up and moves about in the horizontal and vertical labyrinths of his canvases as both a Daedalus and a Theseus. According to Greek mythology, the labyrinth was the first architecture devised by man and so it stands as a metaphor for the work of the artist in its initial hypostasis. But only those who labor through the work, arriving from Athens, can retell its facture and its destiny. Dupuis' rectangled labyrinths also constitute the re-inscription of the first, original grid which as such secretly structures Mondrian's paintings since as early as 1913 and afterward all the other grids which, with similar or diverse spatial functions, have defined the visual construct of a picture. Attempting perhaps to close a hermeneutic circle of form, Dupuis extends and restores the grid's constructive/architectural value, transcribing the sense of its original function as a labyrinthine flow. In this way, he also interrogates certain stations of Modernism beyond the foun-

dational, spatial hypostasis of Mondrian: its internalization and expansion by the psychical/gestural writing evoked by Pollock's drippings; the primary configurations turning into iconography the univocal stripes of Frank Stella's *Black Paintings*; the quasi-prehistoric pictography invoked by the irregular patterns of parallel strokes (almost like imprints of a hand's fingers) in the crosshatch paintings of Jasper Johns. The archetypalization and re-iconographing of the morphologies structuring the Euclidian, organic, or psychic geometries of earlier, historical abstractionisms are something that runs through the many strands of the new abstract painting; it emerged, for instance, around the mid-1980s in the works of Ross Bleckner, Peter Halley, Philip Taaffe. Dupuis somewhat adheres to this movement, but referencing more the story of the Self than the history of art and shying further away from the programmatic flatness and the ideological geometrism of Minimalist tenets.

In order to distance his images from a flat literality and a rigid geometricity, he layers the picture with a palimpsestic accumulation of paint brushing and textured configurations. Usually rising from the bottom of the canvas, the clusters of maze- and stair-like patterns either jut out of the ground or recede deeply into the plane of the work's sections which are merely painted, like traces of an absented structure. This dialectic of positive and negative textures is obtained first by collaging onto the canvas' surface the rectilinear segments of the mazes/labyrinths, made of strips of thick paper of various widths and lengths set in arrangements where planning and improvisation freely alternate; then by detaching from one or more sections of the picture the parts of the mazing and labyrinthing that to the artist may appear redundant, so that their design remains visible but just as a faded trace of the uncovered foundations of archaic buildings. Initially, the canvas' surface is painted in white or red acrylic, sometimes with irregular lines of dripped black pigment winding down like chance paths in an uncharted territory, or instead with smudges and smears of color paint randomly disseminated (which recall, and not by chance, the graffiti-like scattering of minimal gestures and strokes of color in Cy Twombly's paintings from the late 1950s and early 1960s which seemed to evoke the stage of an elementary existence.) The strips of printing paper, instead, cut from large sheets, are painted before being glued to the canvas; in the finished

work, glossy sections alternate with matte ones, the glossiness being conferred by the glue used to collage the paper strips onto the ground, whereas the matte parts are those where no paper has been collaged or from which the strips have been removed, leaving on the white or red surface the marks of the labyrinthic designs which will then be painted over without however disappearing.

The artist thus uses the palimpsestic feature and the glue's sheen as the positive and negative residues of the work's facture, as almost immaterial elements that antiphrastically contribute to the painting's physicality. This physicality is advertised by the picture's constructive method, while the image is exalted by its almost sculptural relief. As in Philip Taaffe's works, the image also delegates the components of its design to forms and materials that are pre-fabricated and collaged onto the canvas, de-emphasizing the manual, gestural act of painting and stressing instead its conceptual aspects. At the same time, physicality is methodologically downplayed because of the indeterminacy of the representation, an indeterminacy that the multilayered image pursues as its central motif.

The content of Dupuis' pictures essentially proceeds in a syntactical rather than morphological order. Each work differentiates itself from the others by reinventing the configuration of the clusters of mazes and stairs, which are positioned on the canvas "according to number, weight, and measure," without any fundamental break in their iconographic continuity. In the paintings from 1992, the images' shape clearly strives toward a greater complexity, with the palimpsestic superimposition of textured icons of stairs on faded icons of labyrinths, and a tighter juxtaposition of the strips of paper constructing the interlocking sub-icons which results in a greater geometric clarity. Color also assumes a stronger role in the modulation of the syntactical variations, with *Nowhere* III, 13, 14 *Fast* and *Scarlet Stairmaster* completely drenched in red while *Stairmaster* and *Tumbling Stair* are instead intensely white, except for a multicolor insurgence on the lower-left corner of *Tumbling Stair* and for a shade of darkness rising instead from the bottom of *Stairmaster*, again on the left side—and with *Up the Downside* startlingly variegated with thirty different colors. But even with the mazing of the stairs and the heightened color modulation of the images, the principal intention of the

work, and the iconographic continuity among the different works, rests with the obsessiveness of the repetition of a central, itinerant motif. What sustains this obsessiveness is a basic drive to inscribe the *conditions* of Painting's being rather than its figures—the form/content's repetition from one picture to another connotes the impossibility of a representational uniqueness in each piece. The consistently asymmetrical accumulation of labyrinthic and/or stair-like patterns emphasizes their pervasive spatial mobility that leads, through a ceaseless meandering, to the persistent ubiquity or errant absence of a Center. It provokes a dispersed, unstable, uncertain stance of the viewer's gaze, of the viewer's internal vision, with a corollary dissemination, proliferation, indefiniteness, and constant shifting of the locus and focus of attention—of the identification that is of the beholder with what is beheld.

Dupuis often points to his strong affection for the work of Eva Hesse, which may well be explained if we think of works by Hesse like *Ishtar* (1965): an abstract, monumental relief of twenty symmetrical hemispheres textured by cords concentrically bound over each of its multiple breast-like shapes, with a thicker black, plastic rope protruding/falling from the center of the spiraled hemispheres like umbilical cords coming out from the breasts of a fertility goddess. This sense of affinity with Hesse's art clearly originates from his obsession with repetition; he would probably agree with Hesse's appropriation, in her diary of 1967, of Lucy Lippard's insight (quoted by Maurice Berger in *Objects of Liberation*): "endless repetition can be considered erotic", with the qualification that a mark of eroticism is that it can never succeed in its quest for fulfillment. Dupuis' mazes and stairs, in never reaching a way out or a way into the center of Permanence or the permanence of a Center, show the artist's obsessive retreading of geometrized, meandering paths as always leading to a closure as the representation of a condition of art marked by a presumed, debated "impotence of abstraction." The resolution of the contradiction between today's inevitable practice of painting and the claims of art's "social impotence" inscribed in the very act of giving form to it, precisely lies in the artist's summoning of the voice that could spell in essential Signs the negated essentiality of his/her task.

26 September 1992

LINES OF DEVOTION AND DISSENSION

A current of *spiritual* abstraction has insistently run through or underneath painting throughout the entire twentieth century, keeping visible—probably for the last time—the desires and intimations of sentiment, of transcendence within the horizon of art. The startling starting point for this undercurrent of metavisuality can be located not so much in specifically archetypal or strongly influential works of art as rather in the *spiritualist* color illustrations that enrich the 1905 book *Thought-Forms* by Annie Besant (the leading exponent of the Theosophical Society after the death of Helena Blavatsky in 1891) and Charles Leadbeater. Mondrian's and Kandinsky's intellectual relations with Theosophy have been widely recounted, and Kandinsky is known to have owned a copy of the German translation of *Thought-Forms* (*Gedankenformen*), published in 1908 and containing the same illustrations as the original English edition. Also, a remarkable affinity between a number of verbo-visual drawings by Rudolph Steiner—who was at the helm of the Theosophical Society in Germany during the first decade of the twentieth century, before initiating his Anthroposophical Society in 1913—and the formal role of writing in the work of Beuys and Kiefer has recently come to light. What gave those premonitions of Abstractionism their *spiritual* accent was the clear sense on the part of the viewer that such images neither intended nor could exhaust their gestures, colors, or geometries in a mere self-referentiality, for they were meant to evoke higher possibilities of existence, hermetically deposited in the meaning of their figures. Since that kind of hyper-referentiality could not be attached to a recognizable subject matter, to the depiction of a specific, either found or newly invented religious iconography—such as the Crucifixion or similarly connoted configurations—the intimate, subtle connection between the words and concepts of *spiritual* and *abstraction* becomes then all the more historically intelligible. Now, "concerning the spiritual in painting": the fact that the new ordering of lines, colors, and planes toward the redefinition of picture-making by Mondrian, or the gestural *improvisation* of shapes and spaces toward a synaesthetic rendition

of the iconic impulse by Kandinsky, may have been intended to inscribe Theosophy rather than Revolutionary Socialism is certainly less relevant than the result that some further forms of existence could be inferred from abstract images.

A distinct echo of the spiritual's intercourse with abstraction, and such that painting becomes precisely the *with*, resonates in David Dupuis' work whose non-objective imagery has consisted in the last few years in an obsessive delineation of phantasmic circuits inscribing something that the early twentieth-century Occultists might have called the Higher Psyche. Dupuis' pictorial grammar somewhat connects with the last, wholly American paintings by Mondrian, where line and color finally blend and unify, becoming one single concept-form. It's a grammar that completely identifies with the process of the Dutch painter's canvases in which the line/color is originally tested by plotting the work's composition with colored tape, as in the two unfinished *New York City* paintings. It is precisely to these unfinished works by Mondrian that the strips of paper—only white early on, then painted over or laid ready-colored—with which Dupuis has constructed his labyrinthine (in 1993-1994 pyramidal) images are connected. It's only in his most recent paintings where mazes and pyramids have evolved in colorful, undulating, quasi geological stratifications of bands that the lines are traced directly with the brush on the canvas—and *pour cause*, given the difficulty of imaging such undulating stratifications with strips of paper. (Here Mondrian meets, as it were, the supreme—Dutch—master of the curved line, Jan Toorop.)

However, while the utopian quest of Mondrian and of other seminal Masters between the two World Wars tended to an art linguistically purified of the symbolist or expressionist moods marking their own early work or that of the artists of their generation—and, beyond that, to an art free of the nineteenth-century positivistic celebration, or damnation, of good or evil social objects, or of the Bourgeois interior and psyche—, Dupuis, like many significant painters who have emerged in the last ten years, re-searches instead the site of Abstraction in existence, in history, in the social space, deconstructing or re-constructing a visual discourse substantiated with analytical archetypes. The first of these archetypes was for Dupuis the labyrinth,

inscribed as a modular and model cell multiplied in the picture by incessant variations, raised to a highly textural level—thus implying a post-painterly facticity—by their being built with bands of paper collaged onto the canvas and then emotionalized by paint. Later, the inward movements and the planar convolutions of the labyrinthic image were simplified, linearized, and verticalized in the pyramidal constructions where the progression toward a Center, instead of occurring through the descent toward an enclosure, is obtained through a mental climbing to a summit where what once appeared as the rectangular, concentric, shrinking coils of a multi-spiral now becomes a series of steps gradually narrowing as they proceed to the top. In its most recent morphism, the pyramid has flattened into a massive pile of undulating strata of colors, beginning at the bottom as a series of parallel lines (this brings to the picture a perfectly bilateral symmetry), curve but with two angular vertices that appear as an opening up of the arms of the labyrinth. These, proceeding upward, become progressively rounder, until they take on the configuration of a double-crested wave. Instead of being closed series, the labyrinth and pyramid pictures seemed then to essentially constitute two stable and repeatable iconographic stations, since Dupuis' two new works, *The Red Treatment* and *Bloodthirsty*, revive the labyrinthic figura- iii. 15

The same semantic thread runs through the collaged, maze-like paper bands of *The Red Treatment* and *Bloodthirsty*—two pictures oversaturated with an organic red that, moving from the canvas' top to bottom, increasingly darkens into an almost pure black; flows through the collaged paper strips that make up the multicoloured triangle ascending against the inflamed blue sky of *Where No Miracles Can Hurt Me*; and rises in the painted stripes of *The Swell* and *Different Colors Made of Fear* which recall, with their tight jux- iii. 16

taposition of brilliant colors, the jazzy chromaticism of *Victory Boogie Woogie*, and drive their pattern and movement of primal waves, like some upheaval of geological strata, toward an antediluvian blue in flight from the earth. This thread consists of an archetypally religious line that draws and paints, that shapes and symbolizes, that colors and signifies. The thematic, symptomatic language of the line

intensely inhabits all Dupuis paintings as a kind of collective soul—it's a line that has its origins in both the metageometry of Mondrian and the metaornamentation of Liberty; but that, beyond the symbolist pathos and the neoplasticist absoluteness, also seeks the secret iconography of a silent inscription of the Self. The spiritual and the ritual that ferment and foment his discursive abstraction connote a devotion to the existence and resistance of painting as an event that impresses on the canvas a cosmEthics of surfaces saturated with the hyperpresence of a fetish, a cosmosis of signs that never cease alluding to a dissenting absence.

14 October 1995

SCOTT GRODESKY

THE VANISHING GAZE

In the beginning of the Western artistic gospel—the Quattrocento—was the perspective, and the perspective was with painting, and the perspective *was* painting. An intellectual principle of composition or construction of the image (a “symbolic form,” in Panofsky’s words) was subordinating to an originating Model the Christian iconography that still informed almost all representations in art. It’s not just the story of the Divine, then, that in this hypothetical beginning informed painting (or the sculptural painting of Donatello and Ghiberti); at a deeper level, it was indeed art that was ordering myth and religion within its historical design of a hyperlanguage. Conversely, during the last century and a half, instead, the forming of Modernity has practically coincided with a deliberate moving away from Renaissance perspective. The Greenbergian affirmation of total flatness in the pictorial (re)presentation further aimed, contextually, at a parallel expulsion of the symbol from the (sur)face of painting. The modality of inscription of even an absolute flatness could, of course, carry in itself a symbol, an iconography, as the work of Newman, Reinhardt, Marden, Ryman, or Halley has clearly shown; but Greenberg was probably unaware of this and, in any case, he didn’t seem to care. On the other hand, the nationalist fervor of Classicist painting that was marking the creation and consumption of art in paleobourgeois Europe, from Napoleon Bonaparte to Napoleon III, had motivated an academic persistence of perspective at first as the prescient resistance, then as a deliberate reaction, to the conditions of a fast—synthetic—look imposed on vision by photography, but also demanded by the modes of representation of a nascent mass culture. The questioning or abrogation of classic perspective enacted by Picasso and Duchamp or by Malevich and Mondrian became, therefore, the necessary foundation of any advanced art. In constructivist Russia, without waiting for Greenberg, moved by their own ideological assumptions, artists proceeded in the 1920s to the contextual elimination of both perspective and symbol, regarded by them as a reprehensible construct of a capitalist society. This was an intensely utopian, post-aesthetic position according to which the true

artist had to become a *producer*—if we were to give him/her a name today, we might call him/her STATLIN: someone who succeeded in creating a State art, proletarian in nature as dictated by Stalin and avant-gardist as practiced by Tatlin. The producer, that is, passionately advocated by the Marxist, post-Marxist, and pseudo-Marxist cultural criticism during the 1970s and 1980s.

It is significant, then, that at the end of Modernism, if not of Modernity, which many feel they are experiencing today, Scott Grodesky takes up again perspective as a quintessentially symbolic form. Yet he does so not in order to revive a dormant, repressed, or deceased way of pictorial presentation, but to further derealize art’s attempts to a critical figuration. In Grodesky’s reverse-perspective paintings, the vanishing point is conceptually located not at the back of a two-dimensional representation but right in the viewer’s gaze, as if the real agents of vision were now standing on the opposite side of the picture plane. A mathematically based principle of progressive reduction seems to govern in these works the proportional relations of figures and objects; therefore, not only their appearance is geometrically distorted, but the distortion ultimately seems to settle in the viewer’s eye. As we perceive that this distortion affects not just the pictured image but our existential gazing at it as well, the artist’s statement that his pictures are a reiterated “cipher of the world” may invite us to project a cosmological paradigm into the reading of the works. In his most recent series of thus implicit cosmograms, a group of small canvases depicting lower or upper body parts sets up a dialogue with five larger pieces where two figures repeatedly face or confront each other: in front of a car, in an interior with a big table, in a macrospace in which not enough room is left around the figures for the environment to be made readable to us.

All the icons of Grodesky’s rigidly structured dereality are originally lifted from the media so their belonging to a decidedly contemporary sociality and visuality—which is declared by the shape of a pair of shoes, a hair style, the type of belt on the trousers, the plastic jug on a table, the door-handles or rear-view mirror of a car, the suits and dresses of men and women however generic or generalized they are—contributes to the *truth*, no matter how much analytically excessive or fig-

urally transgressive they may look, of the scene in which they are inscribed. The reverse-perspective representation might cause ill. 17, 18 the male/female figures in front of a car to appear as if surging in the air or sent high up by an explosion; might let the side and the front of such car line up and then fold at a right angle around the couple, imprisoning them in a technological hyperspace. Or it might produce a composition where a male figure stands in the foreground with his left leg lifted and foreshortened while his right leg grows out of the canvas' edge so that its foot is cut out and, while another male across from him, on the opposite side of a trapezoidal table, grows so much in volume that both his head and his lower legs have to be cropped out of the image. Or it might force the heads of a man and a woman who are next to each other to be so out of proportion that the man's head is absorbed into the face of the woman. All these figures are clearly, nonetheless, our creatural neighbors, staring at us with an oversized interrogation.

Grodesky's radical reverse perspective—the strategic weapon he fires at Art-without-Quality which is promoted by the mass media today—is an excessive, extreme attempt to revitalize the viewer's inquiring gaze at the very moment of its historical vanishing. In this conceptual process, Grodesky tends to eliminate from the painting's (sur)face most of its tradition of sensuousness and fleshiness, to strip from its text(ure) all non-essential signs, from gestural brushwork to color-as-form, from painterly juiciness to local tonality, focusing instead on the constructive roles of the drawing (which is done either in pencil or charcoal) and of a color almost used as stain, laid with a flatness that recalls the lightness of lithographic ink. Texture is built here mainly by collaging different types of mesh onto the canvas which gives it a kind of industrial look, functional to its anti-or post-painterly project. The drawing's lines may go from the precisionism of architectural tracings to a Schiele-esque glowing of the sensitive, nervous outlining, but they steadily keep a subtle balance between the descriptive and the expressive (never crossing into the decidedly expressionistic). The perspectival images progress incrementally, starting from a center point (which is often located in the ear of the smallest figure), their three-dimensionality activated by the strongly geometric draw-

ing (especially of an anchoring object, usually a table) yet inherently counteracted by the flatness of the color field it encloses. Hands, shoes, faces are the icons benefiting the most from the constructive, expressive, forceful drawing even if they never connote the description of an individuality and rather encode the presence of a creatural archetype. The aim of this post-humanistic yet symbolic perspective, of this post-painting project, seems to be that of collapsing the primal energy released by the ending of Western art, ideologically suppressed as Art in the contemporary media-oriented visual productions, into a futuristic, neo-cosmological model where the imaging impulse may transcend the myth of psychological personality/individuality we have exhausted and point instead to a transformation of the anthropological paradigm on which our aesthetic vision has been predicated.

21 January 1995

OPHRAH SHEMESH

BODY'S POLITICS

The culturally *visible* object is often looked at, in today's art, purely as the sign of an experiential system, unable to outlive the duration of its informational potential. And no object or method has ever arisen in the field of artmaking that had not been made *visible* by a cultural awareness. On the other hand, the task of the artist seems to have essentially remained, so far, that of keeping in place some fragment of the umbilical cord that ties the increasing latitude of his or her formal resources to a social complexity. This has become, however, so fluid and unstable that it appears all but ungraspable by any *totalizing* reflection whatsoever. Instead of investigating newer expressionist or constructionist modalities, an artist may try then to determine on which grounds (if there are any left) he or she can tentatively engage society in a dialogue. Or simply just in the acknowledgement of art's right to a future existence, since every society can keep indefinitely shuffling the objects presently amassed in its museums in order to satisfy its people's aesthetic needs, as has been happening lately with Music and Literature now that we have declared the end of their History. The most successful scenario so far, to this end, seems to consist in injecting into artmaking the spirit of fastness proper to industrial and graphic design which results in process-originated and performance-oriented containers of literalist, low- metaphor reproductions of reality. A reality which then appears so intensely real in its production of hyper-reality that it must undoubtedly deliver its expected value of entertainer or alienational punch. In painting, by definition, a fundamentally phantasmatic regime and a highly metaphorical density should prevail so that its capacities of *signification* of the social may be inversely proportional to any possible intentions of (re)production of the real. The symbolic mode of pictorial representation always implies a flexible, if necessary, internal resistance to the constant demands of either entertainment or alienation that are posited by the perceptual regime of advanced technology. Thus painting appears strategically weakened, as a defining medium, by the culture of the literal that not long ago was also a longing for the *litteral*. When this type of weakness occurs, it's

not simply a matter of historical destiny, it's instead a sign of culture's temporary lack of inscription of that essential revisionism of the Self that always underlies art's nature of being a step ahead of history. And it has been in painting's nature, since the inception of its current form of practice in the thirteenth century, to construct visual discourses according to which both the visible and the invisible world have to be interpreted and considered.

More than any other technique for the creation of forms, painting finds itself in the position of orienting art or at least what, since Dante, Western culture has for several hundred years defined as art. It is in the thinking of itself as striving to move in the direction of art that painting incessantly looks inward for a specific revisionism of the Self, even if this might involve either painting's own epochal suspension or an effacing of itself in favor of more originary practices, of post-pictorial strategies that point to a predicated historical completion. Plainly contrary to such strategic retreats or advances, Ophrah Shemesh's pictures turn to a tortured romanticism, bringing representation as psychologically close as possible to an affirmation of the human body's supremacy. The bodies claimed, proclaimed in Shemesh's canvases are neither mediated by photography, lifted from the media, nor appropriated from the history of art; nor are they mere phantasms projected by the imaginary, archetypal bodies, as it were, that dissolve in a long stream of successive formal types. Even if never presented in full length, they are portrait-bodies, transferred life-size into the pictures directly from specific physical appearances; not to recount, however, fragments of experience—*tranches de vie* chronicling daily events—but to literally em-body an idea of existence. This art of the idea as existence traced into an image is most strongly explicit in the heads that climax the communion of bodies taking place on the canvas. Whatever happens to and in these bodies, it's manifested less by their stance or movements than by the tension suggested in their strongly drawn faces—in the fullness of being to which they are brought. Compared to that fullness of faces and heads, through which a mental temperature is measured, the torsos—either dressed and in a prelude to erotic engagement (in *Hands Together*) or naked and in a postlude to sexual congregation (in *At First* and in *Into One*)—though anatomically, even genitally

iii. 19

determined, are presented obsessively as a fading androgynous assembly of desiring flesh melting into an abstract or metaphysical space. This general androgyny, which inhabits the faces of the bodies congregated in the enigmatic micro-society of the three canvases just mentioned, pushes the figures to the critical limit of an idea without throwing them into an aimless idealism.

A single subject matter exists and insists in Shemesh's canvases: the eroticized and heroicized male and female body, androgynized and organized in a quasi-religious, ecstatic Order. The bodies are stretched out, embracing or leaning on one another, cropped to the chest, to the waist, or to the thighs; often also the heads (in *At First* and *Into One*, for instance) are cropped as to exclude from the picture anything which isn't the tight space that runs between flesh and flesh. This rhetorical cropping is especially radical in the most recent pictures, compared to the earlier and larger ones, like *Hands Together*, where only the head on the canvas' left side is prominently placed—if partly cut—at the edge of the image (and where four out of five figures are still clothed, whereas the bodies congregated in the later works are unabashedly naked). If we were to search out a pictorial lineage for these figures, for the dry texture and tortured surface with which the artist greets the appearance on her canvases of a community of men and women invested with the fervor of a *Vir Eroticus Sublimis*, we would probably find it in the ravaged group portraits of Oskar Kokoschka, in pictures like *The Exiles* (1917) and *The Friends* (1918) where a tumultuous brushwork doesn't stop to desire the formation of a morally defined place, of a socially grounded visual reality. In positing an erotic communion that declines any purely sexual narrative, Shemesh's bodies seem to instinctively participate in the "unavowable community" (*la communauté inavouable*) evoked by Maurice Blanchot in 1983 ("The community, a community of equals, that puts them to the test of an unknown inequality, is such that it does not subordinate them to one another, and makes them instead accessible to what is inaccessible in this new relationship of responsibility: of sovereignty.") Displaced by overpressuring economic realities in the pure indeterminacy of "beings (...) going to the extreme of being" (as George Bataille had envisioned it), Shemesh's figures

engage indeed in political acts of sovereignty of the body, performing rituals of inclusion where the vicinity of sexes and an illuminism of the flesh appear to create society's only title to representation—its only conduit to the reality of painting.

16 September 1995

MATTHEW ANTEZZO

WHEN ATTITUDES BECOME PAINTING

“The only large aesthetic distinction remaining is that between art and life,” Scott Burton remarked in one introductory text (on pink paper) to the catalogue (on white paper) of the exhibition *When Attitudes Become Form* (Bern, March 1969). Burton was hypothesizing (sizing the hypothesis) that the *Attitudes* exhibition itself (one of the most epochal events in the sequence of international contemporary-art exhibitions after 1945) was “revealing how that distinction *was* fading.” As a document that such fading still exists mostly in the Romantic imagination, or in any case that it was prematurely declared, the paintings of Matthew Antezzo could not be more decisive, considering that it’s exactly the *revolutionary* spirit pervading that exhibition which informs the content and the imagery of his work. That spirit was later crystallized, in the 1972 *Dokumenta*, by Beuys’ poster iconographing the full-size Portrait of the Artist in (and as) the Long March toward the extinction of the distinction, an epochal self-portrait itself, emphatically inscribed with the declaration “La Rivoluzione siamo noi.” The significance of Antezzo’s pictures, of course, doesn’t lie in any polemical project whatsoever with regard to the creative utopias of the late 1960s: even the images unrelated to conceptual art and artists (those of Pier Paolo Pasolini, Steve Paxton, Michael Snow, for instance) refer to those years as an archetypal, mythical source of quasi-religious experiences. Nor do these pictures pretend to declare a kind of closure on the Age of the Non-Object Art, Live in Your Head, and delivered to impermanent Form—a time of Temporary Gods, existing only for the brief duration of their awe-inspiring epiphany.

In fact, the 1960s’ time/space-based, immaterial, or bodily-sited art—which critically pushed to the limit the 1950s’ angst-charged, existentialist meditation on the displacement of Man from the Eden of a *telos*-oriented History—and the 1980s’ quest for a metaphysically grounded, hyperexpressive painting collide and interact in Antezzo’s project. Or they simply face off in order to test, in their reciprocal dead-endedness, and yet phenomenal/phenomenological necessity, the r’existence of Art. Lately, the artist’s images have moved away from

their initial thrust: of replicating in black and white oil-painted canvases—painterly enough to avoid any distracting perception of photorealism—the black and white photos, lifted from the relevant art magazines and catalogues of the period, which may constitute the only physical evidence remaining of some capital art events and actions from the late 1960s and early 1970s, explicatory captions giving title, time, and place of the event included. He has started to replay in similar terms similar images evoking the same aesthetic Apocalypse. Yet all these canvases do not amount to just the pictorial rematerialization of a dematerialized artifact: they are portraits of portraits or portraits of movie stills. The essential collision/dialogue taking place on Antezzo’s canvases is indeed a culture-laden one: it’s between the photograph as a history picture that provides us with a social iconography and a painting that re-pictures the photograph as a social strategy for iconographing a history which appears dead in its tracks (something quite different from Richter’s project of the mid-1960s of de-historicizing images in order to de-mythologize Painting.)

At the core of Antezzo’s work there is then a sort of interrogative triangulation between Conceptualism as a history-sized endgame of art, Photography as a generative machine for visual archetypes, and Painting as a chief producer, still, of symbolic images where the subjective mood or mode of the artist can meet the collective conscious. The connoting mark of his no-style attitude is that all three of those modes of *signification* are given equal weight, given that his approach to imaging is strictly conceptualist, his appropriation of iconic photographs is not reduced to a pictorial footnote (as in Gerhard Richter) or made into the full and only text (as in Sherrie Levine) but plainly declared as productive of meaning, and that his minimalist treatment of color and brushwork is not meant to deprive painting of an expressivist aim. A corollary of the interaction of modalities governing Antezzo’s pictures is then that a politics of art must underlie any personal (ad)venture the artist may want to undertake in the field of image-making. One way to negotiate the complexity arising from the interlocking of three separate streams of visual consciousness has been, for him, to build two different panels for each of his canvases. In one of them, the black and white photographs are translated into images rendered in a wide range

of grays; in the other, placed below, above, or next to the first one, depending on the position the caption has in the page containing the photo, the caption's text—a sub-image functioning as a direct conceptual sign and as an obvious underpinning of the prefabricated history inscribed in the pictures's chain of meanings—is lettered quite faithfully, if expressively, in black on white. The juxtaposition of verbal and visual icons might neutralize the intrusion of a pictorial subjectivity if, in fact, the text didn't end up manifesting its own autonomous, evocative power, becoming literally the site of a lost (in the photo) and regained (through the painting) artistic paradise.

Of the works by Matthew Antezzo considered here, all from 1997, only one, referencing the magazine *Avalanche* (showing the image of a dancer—Steve Paxton?—executing a leap while another dancer is typing at a tiny desk, with a caption below stating: *Some Notes on Performance*), replicates the recording of an actual event of which the photograph is the only (presumably) surviving trace: a dancer performing a step of flying in a gallery-like space while a man at a typewriter pretends to write some notes on his performance. A picture referencing a page from the magazine *Artforum*, re-presents a still from a movie by Michael Snow, *Wavelength* (considered at the time a masterpiece of minimalist cinema). Three canvases are instead re-portraits, two of them of artists, from the 1969 catalogue *When Attitudes Become Form*—the Italian Pino Pascali, who had died a year earlier at age 33 in a motorcycle accident and since then has entered the legend; and the American Joseph Kosuth, regarded as the quintessential conceptual artist and leading proponent of the conceptualist practices. The third one, lifted from the magazine *Out*, is instead of a filmmaker, the writer Pier Paolo Pasolini, who by the late 1960s had become an acclaimed director for allying in his films a strong visuality to a sharp ideology. Antezzo's intention had not been of using this group of works to create a small pantheon of cultural heroes of the 1960s radical art thinking; he has, rather, attempted once again to convert an absence into a presence—to formulate an image as the rite of passage from Event to History. He has sought to further a project of painting meant to invent a post-utopian, figural/conceptual space which could function as the intermediary between a critique of

the object—considered as a an ideological residue rather than a vessel for the epiphany of art—and a renewal of the painting-object: an object-ive painting that asserts its archetypal role as a symbolic mode of discourse, a vehicle for the interiority of the artist. (Interiority means today not just a system of personal motivations but also a flow of consciousness grounded on a subjective interpretation of history.)

In these canvases, the project of trans-picturing an image from an historical document into an instance of history painting is the evident sign of an irrepressible inscription of subjectivity/interiority. Other visible signs are: the scale of the picture; the decision to convey only the generic sense of an originating black and white photograph, with its caption, by avoiding both a strategic cropping or editing and any attempt to exact reproduction; and declaring the work's *paintingness* by evidencing the brushwork and the surface's texture. Last but not least, there is the iconographic desire presiding over the choice of images for the purpose of pictorial intensity. Pascali is sitting in front of his 1968 piece *Cavalletto*; Pasolini stands behind a movie camera marked *Grace*; there is no sight of objects or props around Kosuth since he has defined his work as “art as idea as idea”; Paxton's concept dance is visualized in his partner's writing about the performance; and Snow's cinematic minimalism is conveyed through a still in which the panes of two windows framing a desk seem to mimic strips of film frames. (On the piece of wall between the windows, among other clippings appears a photograph of the waves that will become the focus of the movie's lengthy camera work.) Painting is invoked by Antezzo as a metaphorical *camera obscura* in which the art that was absented by the documenting photograph returns with a vengeance as a new image in concept and white/black.

8 March 1997

KARIN DAVIE

PAINTING AND ITS DOUBLE

What we used to call abstract painting has been acquiring a new, peculiar life and vitality in the United States since the mid-1980s. Between 1975 and 1985, the type of painting commonly labeled *neo-expressionist* was marked, in both Europe and America, by cultural impulses and visual elements that were responding in a similar vein to somewhat similar developments inside Western form, from Pop to Body Art. This probably accounts for the easy transplant to America of the young European art and artists that we witnessed in that decade. The new abstractionism to which we are referring—that ranges from the paintings of Peter Halley to those of Ellen Gallagher, including works by artists we may not necessarily think of as strictly abstract, such as Ross Bleckner—enacts instead a pictorial course that appears to be specifically American. Rather than producing or proposing a general or generic idea of art as one more radical or conceptual frontier, the new abstractionism envisions and embraces painting as a medium rendered absolute by its own history, its metaphysical legacy, and by the social response validating its aesthetic and perceptual performance. In the same breath, abstract painting has abandoned the strict non-referentiality—with its accompanying dogma of uncompromising flatness—that it had pursued up to the generation of Stella, Ryman, and Agnes Martin. Now, a hybridization of non-objective modes of pictorialism with visual constructs that denote fragments or systems of the social, historical or art-historical, psychical or mythical imagination informs advanced American abstractionism, and it appears grounded in the pursuit of the same Retinal Sublime that is present, though with quite different objectives, in the best Abstract Expressionist and Minimalist pieces. The goal of this fertile hybridization seems to be of consistently imbuing any kind of pictorial sublimation with individualized, subjectivized, socialized, even politicized icons symptomatic of a discursive concern.

Geometry and gesture, which had been the two main constructive strategies in the making of historical abstractionism, however, still have a function, a linguistic importance in the non-representational

discoursiveness. With the caveat that geometry and gesture, now, are not simply denotations of their own literal being, though with transcendental connotations, but have instead become inscriptions of *Something*, of *Something Like This* and *Something Like That*. Since these three *something* coincide precisely (by sheer luck?) with the titles of three new paintings by Karin Davie, then it's not by chance that her work stands as a full participant in the denotative mode of abstraction that connotes the activity of a surprisingly cohesive group of new artists. In historical non-objective painting, the loss of the world of objects had indeed resulted in a gain (melancholic, or tragic, or subliming) of art's heightened self-awareness. To be a picture of the world and to be just a picture had, in fact, constituted one and the same thing in the lineage of ideas that Modernity had inherited and that it seemed anxious to repress at the beginning of the industrial twentieth century. To discover the memory of a symbolic mapping of the world that had been alternately transmitted and forgotten in the millennial sequence of pictures, created by generations of visionaries and now stored in every artist's mind (and in the social, collective subconscious), appears the common denominator that is shared by all the canvases of the last ten years in which the language of abstraction has been articulated with an essentially representational vocabulary. The key to this iconographic modality of abstraction lies in the conceptual nexus world/symbol. The era of representation of the world as nature—with whatever cultural and social determination *nature* may have been charged in the past—has been definitely terminated by the revolution of the Information system that technology has been able to extract (and abstract) from nature and to (re)produce through the media.

Each configuration that can be perceived as an image (an *eikon*) structuring an abstract pictorial field necessarily belongs to, and is constituted in a symbolic function. In the three *Something* pictures by Karin Davie, a first degree of iconographic abstraction is effected architectonically through the repetition of a truncated, pyramid-shaped, canvas in double-panel works where the panels, placed six inches apart at the bottom, carry images that practically mirror one another, a further repetition that plays the old philosophical theme of Identity and

Difference. The second degree is effected figurally, through the content of this inner repetition: a sequence of stripes loosely painted that alternate their two or three colors, that grow, or better expand/enlarge, then disintegrate as they descend toward the canvas' lower edge—swollen by an imaginary wind into a symbolic pregnancy then bursting or imploding during the descent, burning and fraying in a red and white fire. The canvases' quasi-pyramidal form, that contrasts in its shape with the flowing down of the stripes, renders almost more physical the stripes' swelling at the bottom, conflating literalism and virtuality in an optically charged, illusionistic materiality (with each canvas measuring 90" in height the stretcher widens from a top of 46 1/4" to a bottom of 76"). This animation (or even animalization) of an abstract image appears to infer an indirect inscription of the body in its shape, resulting in the possible quotation of the macromastic frontality of a primordial representation of the human figure (the so-called prehistoric Venus). The bilateral symmetry presiding in every panel over the works' composition is further restated by the symmetry's doubling enacted by the diptych, made of two canvases of identical dimension and quasi-identical images hung next to each other.

As pointed out by Moshe Barasch, symmetry and frontality are the defining compositional elements in the early Christian iconography: "The most obvious distinguishing shape of frontality is the perfect symmetry, the full equality of the two halves composing the face [of Christ and the Virgin]", (*Imago Hominis*, New York University Press, 1994, page 26). In Karin Davie's *Something* pictures, the bilateral symmetry created by *a*) the stripes within each canvas, *b*) the double panels and *c*) the repetition of the image in the canvases forming the diptych, does away with the tradition of centrality—of a single central axis—that has connoted painting until now. At the same time, it emphasizes the basic tenet of right and left (with their symbolic import) experienced by the body's standing in the world. "The idea that the world has a right and a left seems to have been current since the dawn of history [. . .] Greek philosophy had been acquainted with a distinction, attributed to Pythagoreans, between left and right in cosmic space," writes Barasch (*op. cit.*, pages 12-13). In the theologized world of antiquity, "the right was nobler than the left: hence the

Synagogue is placed on the left, the Church on the right;” whereas in the ideologized world of modernity, their symbolic connotations become inverted, the left indicating progress(ism), Good, and the right reaction(arism), Evil. In the post-ideological, hyper-technological world inscribed by Karin Davie, right canvas and left canvas claim a pure relationship of spatial and sexual specular-ity, a con-fusion of identity and difference, the construction, in a word, of a hyperspatial surface, warped and monumental.

“Stripe *1a*: a line or long narrow section of something differing in color or texture from the parts adjoining *b(1)*: a [...] design consisting of vertical or horizontal lines or bands [...] created by various weaving, printing, or finishing processes 3: a distinct shade or variety (as of character, opinion, or partisan affiliation: artists of every stripe) 7: stripes *pl*: a prisoner’s distinctive horizontally striped uniform” (*Webster’s International Dictionary of the English Language*, 1967). In the beginning of Karin Davie’s work is the undulating horizontal stripe, or rather stripes: bands of different, garish colors tightly following the same waving movement; of course, the undulating line archetypally conveys a representation or symbolization of the Feminine (not yet of the Feminist). In later pictures, quasi-white vertical stripes alternate with colored ones, following them like a morning shadow or countershadow. The changing patterns of stripes in all the different series, with variations that have not altered the basic figural model since 1993, can be considered as equivalents of the gestural situations in classic representational art. The fact that Davie’s stripes writhe in a warped space may be another index of the abandonment of the dogma of un-referentiality in much recent advanced painting—almost a correction of perceived limitations in the post-Abstract Expressionist modernism. The shouting presence of the stripes’ unrestrained gestural phrasing, in Davie’s recent work, significantly points to a journey possibly moving back from the conceptual model of Bleckner, Halley, and Taaffe to the original condition of Action-Painting, toward newly exiled waters of Signification.

20 January 1996

INTO THE GOLDEN WAVE OF PAINTING

After 100 years of *tableaux mourants*, of pictures that defy the theoretical impossibility of their happening, that survive their flowing into the uncharted territory of critiquing art’s history for its ideas on the meaning of things’ representation, painting still strives to extract from its medium a chance to give a shape to human inner-scapes, to prospect a metavisual language. Twentieth century art kept telling us not to ask how reality changed painting but rather how painting shaped society. No object or person or event has ever dictated the form in which an artist conceptualizes and visualizes experience; it’s the artist who decides *how* experience is communicated and iconographed. It’s obvious that further technological advances and new political and economic structures have provoked, through the facts they have informed, a constant change in the thinking about and making of pictures. In the last 150 years, our perception of space/time has been changed by the appearance of cars, trains, airplanes, spaceships; our recollection or (re)presentation of time/space has been subverted by photography, cinema, television, and now computer software. Western modes of power and culture (including *Modern Art*) have achieved a global expansion by producing an obsolescence or demise (if not an outright destruction, as it happened to the Mayans, Aztecs, and Incas in the sixteenth century) of other civilizations—in Asia, Africa, the Near East, the Pacific Islands. In these two centuries, the acceleration of technology and the spread of Western forms of government (democratic or fascist) have entailed first a transition from feudal to capitalist or statist modes of production, then a prevailing of market economy over planned economy. Contemporary painting is not only at the entropic end point of the models enacted by Cubism, Expressionism, Dadaism, or Malevich, Mondrian, Duchamp of how and why a Modern picture should come into existence; it is also in the midst of a melting pot that the crossbreeding of once distant linguistic, ethnic, historical, and media types of signs and narratives keeps generating as the means and styles of production and consumption become planetarily uniform.

In the intervening economic and technologic homogenization of the world's material cultures, superseding any diversity of political and social structures between nations, painting has probably lost any possibility of constructing the formally cohesive discourse, inter-generational and inter-national discourse, capable of setting a visual agenda with global reverberations. *Movements* and *-isms* were cultural phenomena specific to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, somehow parallel to the cultural conflicts that marked the development of industrial societies, now struggling to devise new forms of social contract after the demise of the post-feudal regimes. Every artist today appears eager or pressured to present a singular, insular discourse. Having full access to all kinds of historical art practices and to very many technical means of visual enunciation, most painters basically work with piles of art-history books on their tables and use computer software to set up the composition of their pictures. The measure of their having overcome the factual obsolescence of the pictorial medium, of their being indeed *advanced*, *radical*, *relevant*, lies in how much they were able to effect an inspired critique of their predecessors and in the same breath an uncanny, unsettling reenactment of visual archetypes. With its factual, iconopoietic roots, with its range of referential modes of representation and symbolization extending deeply into history, to Lascaux and Altamira, painting can still project its exiled meaning into the future, striving to enact sharper, newer ideographies of being and existence, of the post-magic, image-forming consciousness.

Karin Davie's series of thirteen *Pushed, Pulled, Depleted & Duplicated*-titled paintings, iconographing an abstractly shaped, counter-geometrical, wavy figure of imaginal energy appears to strike an imbalance between a desire of picturing how the mind conceptualizes an inscription of the physical reality beyond the two-dimensional mimesis—one aim of Cubism's, Futurism's, Kandinsky's diverse dissections/recompositions of figural images—and the need felt of having to push Action Painting's automatist encryption of the existential will to paint. Davie's icon is a simple and at the same time complex articulation: A large unbroken, viscous, multilayered, multicolored, tsunamic swath of paint driven across the canvas—either vertically or horizontally—as a single, hypertrophic brush

stroke, manifold bent and compressed, forced to fit into and crowding the picture's frame, as if squeezed straight from a gigantic, metaphysical tube of paint, cropped at both ends, waiting to be named. The flowing of paint usually forms three bends on one side, and two full two incomplete bends on the opposite side, the tightness of their curves depending on the dimensions of the canvas, the cut bends denoting an imaginal beginning and end of the ideogrammatic stroke. The *pushed*, *pulled*, *depleted* and *duplicated* paint's waves have an alternating core color—red in the vertical, yellow in the horizontal canvases—running in the middle of the gestural stream-of-consciousness. Inside these surging waves also appear—bound with the two coded red and yellow iconic hues—black, green, blue streaks of complementary under- or sidepaint, which in the illusionistically tridimensional movement of the pictures' waves become a changing, dominant, contrasting shadow. The symbolic code of vertical canvases with horizontal red waves, and horizontal canvases with vertical yellow waves, doesn't necessarily reference some kind of art-historical archetypes: namely, of figure-as-culture and landscape-as-nature; of standing man as inscribing power, reclining woman as evoking maternity; of maleness of earth and rocks, femaleness of water and clouds; of red is from Mars, yellow is from Venus. Yet it creates its inner dialectical meanings. *Pushed, Pulled, Depleted & Duplicated # 13*, Davie's most recent and possibly last work in the series is a yellow-coded picture—a striped, horizontal image with tightly pressed, swelling vertical waves of striated tides of paint. The uninterrupted single drive with which the rising and falling of the primal, oversized brush stroke has designed an event of controlled explosion of pictorial magma, is meant to iterate an abstract-looking yet hyperfigural icon of Painting's vital presence. The stroke's rising and falling moves, so dense and vast that make the brush's gesture coincide with space, look as barely contained by the canvas' edges, since almost all the crest of the paint's swaths is virtually cut out of the picture. The waves' optical instability defies and defeats not only Euclidean geometry (and Minimalist hard-edgeness) but also the vertical/horizontal, masculine/ feminine statics; the left-leaning curves surging upward and the downward curves leaning weightily to the right also make the gesture into an image of flowing visual ambiguity.

Since the swelling and shrinking of the imaged stroke mimics with its folds the movement of the wrist in laying down a brush heavy with a rainbow of colors—primarily bright yellow and dark brown—, each of the five moves of paint squeezed into the picture shows a different ratio of hues: a bundle of mostly dark brown, but also black, blue, orange, white, and red striae, juxtaposed to the dominant golden yellow, and also changing in size, density, symbolic charge as the hand lays down its impulse to inscribe—to choreography—the essentiality of painting.

5 September 2003

JACQUELINE HUMPRIES

THE SHAPE OF COLOR, THE COLOR OF SPACE

are the constants that play a primary role, and constitute a primal interrogation, in Jacqueline Humphries' canvases. The color's and the space's proliferations, in her work, rethink and question the reason why the ambitions and aspirations of painting in the twentieth century have run traumatic risks, and have risked blind alleys of an abstract discourse in the search for more and advanced aesthetic myths. The motivations underlying the first abstractionist moves, and the secret contents of abstraction, emerge, in fact, from at first a fateful encounter, then a persistent clash, between radical painting and history: when the history of painting started to feel encumbered—repressed, suppressed, and oppressed—by the strategies of new technological realities and the rules of bourgeois visuality. The expressionist or geometricized abstractions of Kandinsky and Malevich/Mondrian had taken the fractured language of Expressionism and Cubism way beyond the realm of certified Mimesis; yet this was not meaning that Abstractionism would become just another “ism” in the shifting battlefronts of the *avante-garde*, which were always furthered fronts in the battle not against the past but against the use of the past to banalize the future. The dialectic presences of Duchamp and Beckmann, of Surrealism and *Neue Sachlichkeit*, of Bacon and Beuys, of a transnational Neo-Expressionism, in the 1980s, and plural incarnations of American Neo-Geometricism—this constant return of contrasting figurative and non-figurative modes in twentieth-century art is symptomatic of the fact that Abstraction cannot be simply identified with just a phase of Modernism. The present history of Art/Forms is still, and promises to keep being, a raging dialogue or dialectical alternance between the post-Duchampian model and the post-Picassian model which are enacting, to a certain (political) degree, a sort of imperfect two-party(ing) system in the democracy (ailing under the Sign of an unchecked Capitalism) of today's art making.

This doesn't mean denying that both the non-pictorial impulse intrinsic to the Duchampian conceptual mode, and the search for a Retinal Sublime still motivating the constructions of pictorial abstractionism, may decidedly be at a sunset, a setting of the sun of art destined to a sus-

tained yet unpredictable duration. A thought that can in some way throw an empathic light on Jacqueline Humphries' new project: to associate the long celebration of figural purity effected by Modernism—by way of the privileged use of the primary colors, red, yellow, and blue (from Mondrian and Newman on)—with the psycho-social image of the Sunset. The End is the known historical locus where, according to Spengler and other recent nihilist thinkers, the Western artist has been in residence since the rise of Technology. Humphries' sunset project, *Sunset: Blue*, *Sunset: Yellow*, *Sunset: Red* methodically plays the sentiment of a III. 26, 27 distanced nature against a deliberately emotional facture of the painting. In the post-naturalist practice that has led to abstraction, the dichotomy Nature/Culture having become obsolete, a repression of nature equals the internalization on the artist's part of the abolishing power of Technology (in this sense to what extent is Duchamp more conceptual than Mondrian?).

Humphries' sentiment of a waning Light deeply informs the shapes of color and the colors of space of her recent sun-setting works. The cascading of paint from both the top and the bottom of her canvases takes the form of a seismographic rhythm, of the icono-grafted inscription of Time on a stream of unpatterned abstractions. Her working method consists of the vertical, script-like enacting of an un-composition (though sometimes she might present her pictures horizontally), emphasizing through a specific, tight juxtaposition and superimposition of sequential acts of color a left-to-right narrative reading of the visual text and texture. The hidden presence of a language/writing code (and thus of syntactical relations of color and shape) in the pictures might seem to be aimed at correcting the apparent randomness of the laying and layering and scrubbing and modulating of the pigments, but it declares the artist's aspiration to generate a trans-subjective, trans-historical meaning. Space then becomes time, color evolves into concealed structure, the gestural activity leading to the picture's image is rendered legible by the contours registering the brush's movements on the canvas' surface—which is made, in fact, into a layering of surfaces. The work's iconography becomes then mostly defined by the continuum of the pictorial method from one canvas to another, what in the past might have been perhaps called style; its meaning transpires in the molecules of history that appear embedded in

its facture, in the degree of intensity that the action generating the picture deposits as its mark, so that an observer can glean the time, the place, the idea of the work and the beginning of art impressed in its making.

In the three *Sunset* paintings, times and modes of the pictorial activity on the canvas perform their chromatic variations as a vertical stream of body language. In Barnett Newman's expanses, a sudden presence, a vertical band, was an index of the absent figure (that this figure could allude to Adam/Abraham or to the Kabbalistic *Ein Sof* doesn't change the terms of its existential standing). For Jacqueline Humphries' stalagtitic formations, the categoric verticality of the streaming flesh of paint is the virtual skeleton that supports the carnal existence of the picture. The painting may begin with a straight red, yellow, or blue band, something located between Newman's zip and Bleckner's stripe but which will be, however, immediately fractured or broken up into a massive pouring of various streams of paint's consciousness that could be, in turn, overlaid by one or more dense or washed-out or narrower, thinner pourings. The artist may also temporarily reverse the canvas and pour (or brush or lay down) the paint in the opposite direction, creating internal checks and balances, so that the color's movement appears like falling back on itself. In her earlier works, each band or pouring was clearly legible, even when stopped in its tracks so as to become almost a patch, or on the contrary was dissolved in an endless sequence of tactical drippings. The pouring or the brushing of the bands could start either at the top or in the middle of the canvas, at times at three-quarters up or down its length, in a harshly painterly yet quite musical scoring of the surface. In the three *Sunset* pictures, instead, the entire surface is saturated with layers of bands and pourings, with a thick juxtaposition or superimposition of vertical notations. These are sometimes running the full height of the square (always—*et pour cause*) canvas, sometimes are starting half-way, or one third up or down, with each individual notation clamoring for attention, each color springing to intention, even mimicking at times Morris Louis' veils, yet insistently avoiding any color-field indulgence or gratification. Each *Sunset* painting aspires to attain its own temperament, a fluid state in which the chromatic temperature of the paint metamorphoses into the spiritual mood of a compositional astonishment.

9 March 1996

FABIAN MARCACCIO

ACTION SPACE

Une seule question nous rend dignes, ô Hiram,
de nos grands douleurs: *Où est l'Espace?* [...]
Le Roi murmure: Où est l'espace? et sa cécité
lui repond: l'espace est en moi, dans mes
ténèbres sans commencement ni sans fin.*

Masonic Ritual

There is not much *abstractness* left in today's advanced abstract painting, except perhaps for the historical lineage ("roots", Fabian Marcaccio would say) from which it descends and from which it takes its name, that evokes both a constructive method and a type of space. It's a lineage of *iconoclast* non-objectivism, in which Abstraction—whether Gestural, Geometric, or Minimalist—was really and purely just itself before conceptualist, sociocultural, or art-historical issues started to inform it in the 1980s, the decade that from Kiefer to Koons became figural par excellence. During this decade, in order to keep pace with—or even anticipate—history, Abstraction in (and as) painting was to be driven by *content*, had to become itself figural and iconographic, so that one had a sense that the new Abstr'ationism was trying to preempt the need for a further representational art. Abstract painting in the 1990s, as practised for instance by Fabian Marcaccio, seems all too eager to become *the* new subject-matter driven art—if one can assume that, historically, visual representations were inherently dictated by the cultural (spiritual and economic) aspirations or needs consuming a society rather than by a raw instinct to record with graphic exactness an eventful yet ephemeral physical world. A desire by painting to specifically record an event appears to have been a distinct by-product of the rise, around the middle of the nineteenth century, of both photography and a consumer society. For the entire twentieth century, Abstraction and Representation have fought not so

* A single question makes us worthy, oh Hiram, of our great suffering: *Where is Space?* [...] The King murmurs: Where is Space? and his blindness answers him: Space is in me, is in my darkness which has no beginning or end.

much over the presence of Figure as essentially over the intent, definition, and function of pictorial Space. The artist's anxiety in facing the opposing, ideologically determined values of spatial flatness and depth had colored the existential condition of painting since Impressionism; only now, at the end of the twentieth century, and under the urgency of the desire for multiple social inscriptions, is this manichaeian dualism vanishing, together with the either/or of figure and sign.

The encounter with the modernist conflict between figure and sign, between flatness and depth, has become for Fabian Marcaccio the site of a battle for their integration. It is a battle that, of course, has Space as its protagonist. Space is engaged, in his work, on both the external front of framing, stretching, hanging, architectural tuning, and the internal front of figure/sign, reality/hyperreality, construction/deconstruction, printing/painting relationships; it cannot therefore help but to be underlain by a thinly veiled socio-political subtext. Everything conveys a self-referencing of the painting process, in Marcaccio's *paintant compounds*, but also everything is an allusion to painting's *signification* of the social process. The word *compound* immediately announces that a picture's overall image will be formed by accretion of discontinuous parts/icons—a process that conceptually advances the avant-garde's strategy of collage: a synchronicity of spatially/temporally short-circuited fragments of human activities. The created noun *paintant* loudly conflates the term 'painting' with those of *actant* and *mutant*: the first semiotically denotes the role of all the individual components of the work as characters in a visual narrative; the second describes with a biological metaphor the type of accretive process that takes place in both the compound and the artist's own conceptual project. The main spatial agencies compounded in Marcaccio's pictorial fields are *a*) those referencing the very materiality of the picture (the weave of the canvas' support, the mark of the artist's brushstroke); *b*) those commenting on the hyperactive surface or the gestural markings of historical Abstractionisms. The paintings' mutant actants graft on to one another, proliferating their referential displays over the bumpy tent-like planes structuring the work's surface. These actants include: 1) simulated (by screenprinting) brushstrokes—waving, rising, falling, and usually crashing onto excerpts of woven canvas (both canvas and strokes elevat-

ed to an iconographic status of self-immolating or self-celebrating synecdoches for an exalted or critiqued art, for the practice of painting); 2) debated and debased, yet always conflated, political emblems—the Bolshevik star, the hammer and sickle, the swastika, the hippies' peace sign (which on a social level mirror the synecdochical function, mutagenic activity, and conceptual spin impressed on the picture by the weave/brushstroke simulational compound; 3) intimations of dense urban upheaval—slum-quoting brickwalls, crowds, political rallies; 4) large, purely abstracted areas of roughed-up color that subliminally infer archetypal images of earth's crust, sea waters, cloudy skies, bubbly organic or volcanic matter—all in a state of initial conflation with the fundamental elements of painting.

Just as some Minimalist artists were credited for shifting the role of support from the wall to the floor, Marcaccio appears to have in his recent works inversely assigned to the wall a function that, with regard to their structures, once pertained to the floor. The metaphor this new work conveys is that a painting can be thought of as a portable or ephemeral abode, that it indexes the terms of both painting's historical completion and its projected dispersion into society. The support on which the picture is painted is a light but heavy duty-proof banner canvas, not the hempen or linen one traditionally used by painters, flexible enough to be easily adapted onto a collapsible metal stretcher that may recall the structures supporting nomads' tents, but without their predictable symmetry. It's a structural stretcher that, on the one hand, keeps the highly convexed canvas' surface close enough to the wall to function as a pointed subversion of the standardized wooden stretcher. On the other hand, it makes that surface so sculpturally uneven and unpredictable that it amounts to a deliberate, ideological rejection of the flatness—with its implied social aloofness—of modernist abstract painting. And just as a tent is held fast by ropes attached to pegs hammered into the ground, Marcaccio's pictures are hung by being fastened to the wall with multicolored nylon ropes that radiate irregularly, with low-tech precision, from the rectangular or square canvases. The tent's metaphor is further enhanced by the fact that the ropes pulling the canvas at bottom are sometimes attached to screws nailed into the floor. The underlying, bulging metal structure is,

for its part, made up of pieces of copper tubing irregularly welded together so that the canvas stretched over it variously advances and recedes, making literally physical a depth that might not, otherwise, be inscribed in the simulational compound of mutating signs/images. The tubing stretcher may be totally invisible to a viewer standing in front of the work or may instead be revealed, either by appearing on the picture's sides or corners as both naked stretcher and framing device, or by declaring its supporting presence through openings cut in the canvas' surface. In the latter case, the stretcher becomes an added linear element to the compound and therefore one more component of the image.

The resulting open areas generate then an imaged space, for space is really the main actant and the major mutant in Marcaccio's compounds. More than the individual *paintant* energy of any single icon, space is the agent of the abrupt, seismic-like confluences exploding the painting's charged surface, as if with an act and an action of primordial creation. Creation here is, however, only the hidden face of artefaction. Just as space consistently constructs and deconstructs (by short-circuiting any univocity of meaning) the work's conceptual narratives, so the act of painting dwells on its confessed equivocity. It starts as a laying down of areas of water-based paint which then receive the screenprinting of some defining images (the canvas' weave and the brushstroke, for instance). These are subsequently modified or complemented (sometimes with strongly illusionistic distortions) by a hyperrealistic hand-painting, in oil-based color, of strident extensions of their content. By constantly exchanging their role, so that an image may look completely printed while it's instead carefully painted, and vice versa, screenprinting (iconized as a declaration of the artificiality of painting) and hyperrealist hand-painting (enacted as an affirmation of the authenticity of art) tend to locate meaning at the end of a labyrinth. In building the text and the texture (the hypertext) of the work as an interlacing of screenprinting, painting, and again screenprinting, Marcaccio weaves the material surface of the work first with a simulacral deconstruction then with a metaphorical reconstruction, thus declaring forever unfinished the completion of art.

2 May 1998