

2002

# PAINTING SILENCE

CLUCAS, GRAHAM

<http://hdl.handle.net/10026.1/11102>

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.24382/4922>

University of Plymouth

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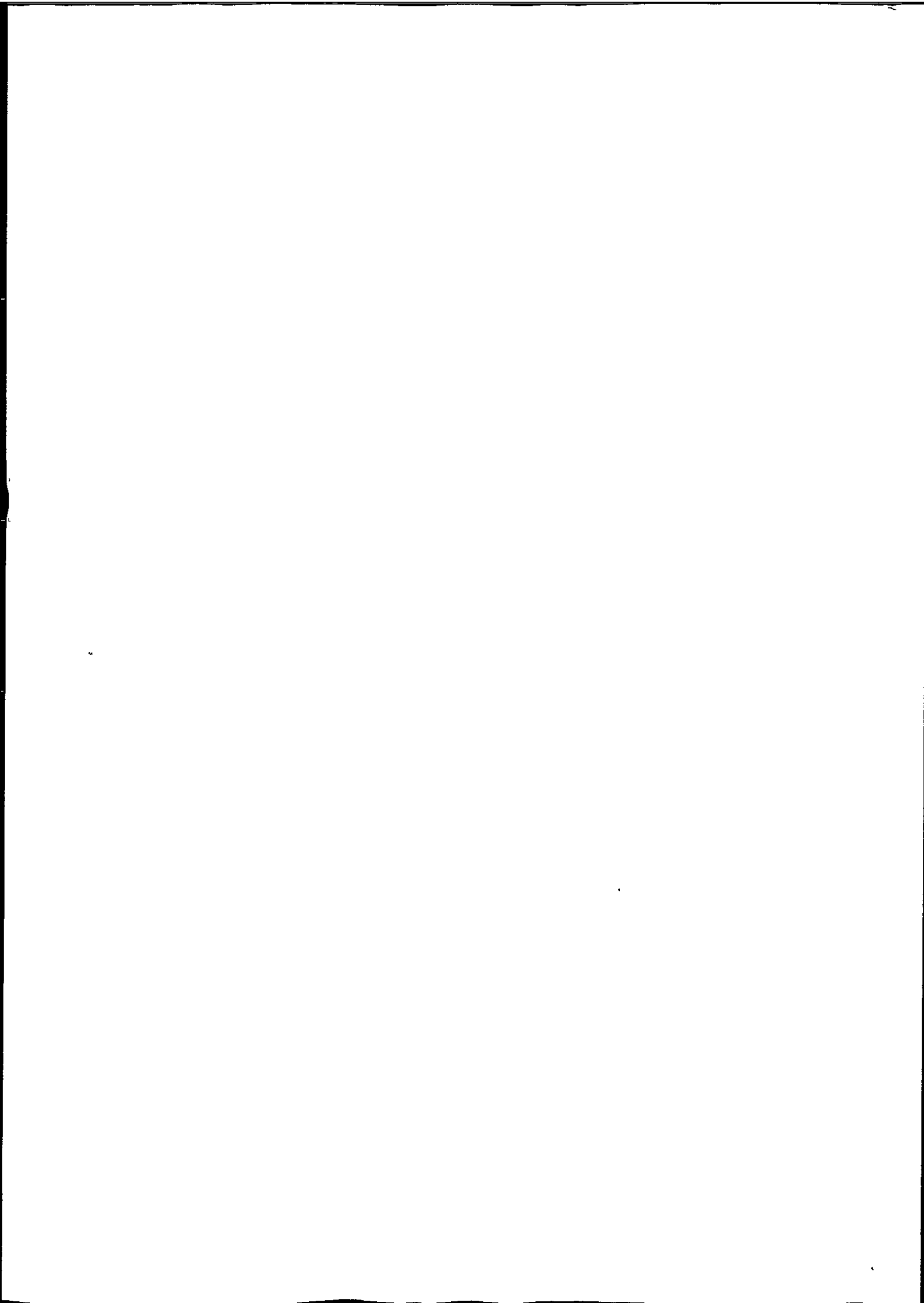
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PAINTING SILENCE

G. CLUCAS

PH. D.

2002

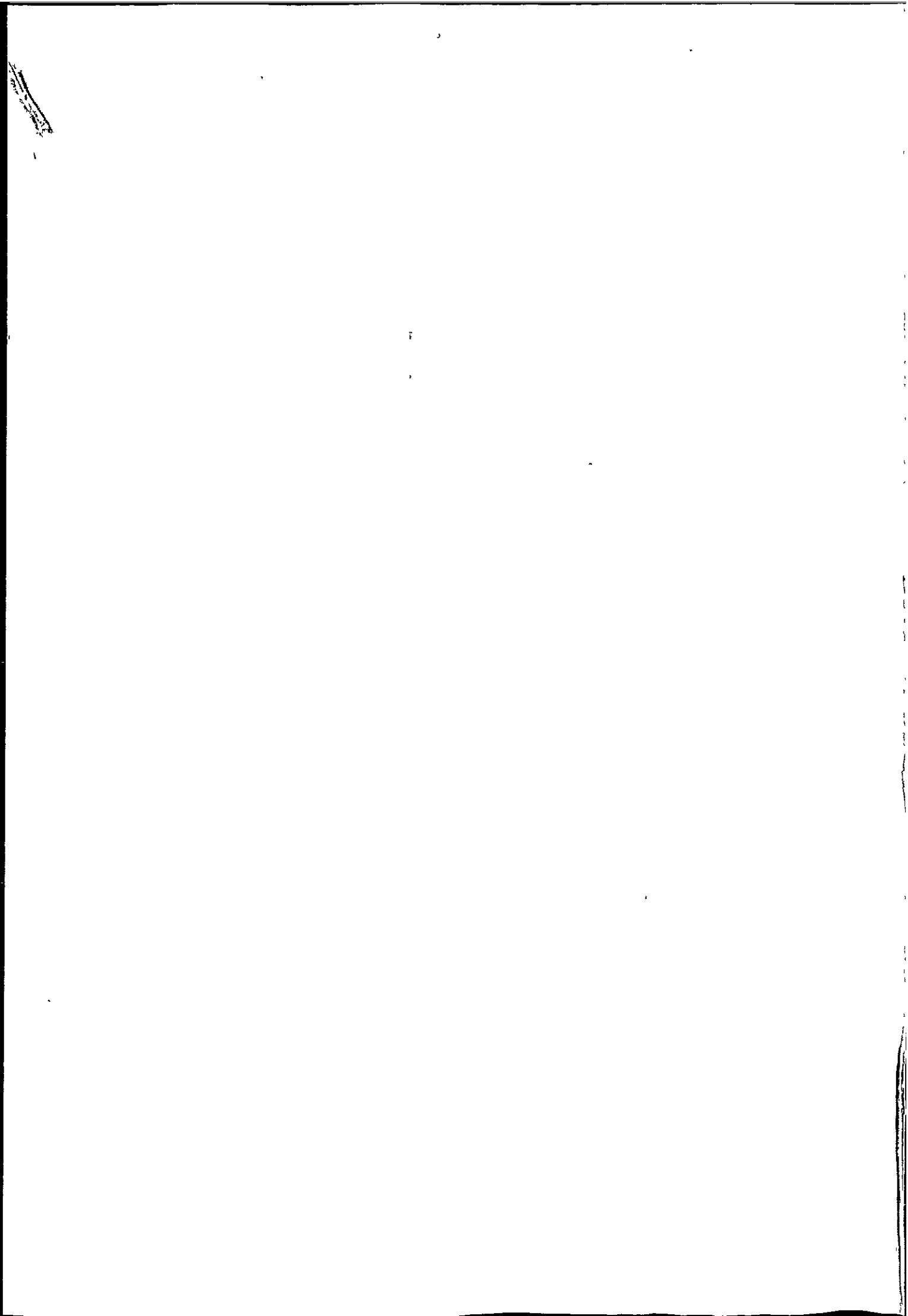


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**Title Page**

**PAINTING SILENCE**

**By**

**GRAHAM CLUCAS**

**A thesis submitted to the University of Plymouth  
in partial fulfilment for the degree of**

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

**Exeter School of Arts and Design  
Faculty of Arts and Education**

**January 2002**

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## Abstract

### Graham Clucas: Painting Silence

This research examines the history and theory of 'silent' painting to discover why particular paintings were called silent, what the term was meant to signify, and how the quality of silence was discernible in the paintings it described. The understanding thus gained is in turn the subject of further analysis through (documented) reflective practice, which recognises a broader context of contemporary theoretical and practical viewpoints. The purpose is to investigate, through practice, the characteristics and potentialities of silence.

From the emergence of 'silent' painting in America during the 1950s and 60s, the idea of silence is examined in terms of its associations with Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism. An initial assumption that 'silent painting' is simply another way of referring to monotonal painting is at first expanded to accommodate theories promoting the grid as an equally effective device for achieving silence, but then challenged. Questions arise concerning intention and the lack of it, degrees of silence, the nature of silence, the different ways in which silence can be read, the impossibility of silence, the feeling of silence, and the quality of silence aimed at in my own practice.

An overall concern of the research is the integration of theory and practice. The thesis presented here provides an historical and theoretical explication, guided and shaped by questions arising from practice. It includes a critique of the work produced.

The scientifically demonstrated argument that silence is impossible is countered by one founded on feeling. It is on the basis of feeling (not expression) that, in the later stages of the research, suitable strategies are devised for painting silence.

## List of Contents

Copyright Statement.....	I
Title Page .....	II
Abstract .....	III
List of Contents.....	IV
List of Illustrations .....	VI
Acknowledgement.....	XII
Author's Declaration .....	XIII
Introduction.....	1
Section One: Historical Models and Approaches.....	6
Chapter One: Silence and Monotone.....	7
Chapter Two: Monotonal Responses to Abstract Expressionism .....	15
Chapter Three: Monotone in a Minimalist Context .....	36
Chapter Four: The Grid – Theories .....	64
Chapter Five: The Grid – Practice.....	76
Chapter Six: Content and Meaning .....	89
Chapter Seven: A Review of Section One.....	124

Section Two: Practice .....	130
Chapter Eight: A Critique of the work.....	132
Chapter Nine: A Practical Response to History .....	163
Chapter Ten: A Review of Section Two .....	176
Section Three:.....	181
Chapter Eleven: An Overview of the Research.....	181
Appendix I: 'The Silent Art', article by Lucy Lippard from <i>Art in America</i> Vol. 55, Number One, January-February 1967. ....	202
Appendix II: A Letter from Robert Mangold to the author dated July 15 1998. ....	208
Appendix III: A note from Robert Mangold sent to the author in September 2001 in response to a question from the author. ....	211
Appendix IV: Exhibition of Work – Practical Component of PhD Submission.....	212
Appendix V: Prints made and exhibited during the period covered by this research.....	244
List of References .....	250

## List of Illustrations

Figure 1: Barnett Newman - <i>Vir Heroicus Sublimis</i> , 1950-1951, Oil on canvas, 95 and 3/8"x 17feet 9/4"	16
Figure 2: Barnett Newman - <i>Dionysius</i> , 1949, Oil on canvas, 69x48"	17
Figure 3: Barnett Newman - <i>The Wild</i> , 1950, Oil on Canvas, 95and 3/4 x1and 5/8"	18
Figure 4: Barnett Newman - <i>Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue IV</i> , 1969-1970, Acrylic on canvas, 9 feet x19 feet 10"	19
Figure 5: Barnett Newman - <i>Onement 1</i> , 1948, Oil on canvas, 27x16"	20
Figure 6: Barnett Newman - <i>The Name II</i> , 1950, Oil and magna on canvas, 102x96"	22
Figure 7: Ad Reinhardt - <i>Abstract Painting Red 1952</i> , Oil on canvas, 50x20"	24
Figure 8: Ad Reinhardt - <i>Abstract Painting Red 1952</i> , Oil on canvas, 30x15"	25
Figure 9: Ad Reinhardt - <i>Abstract Painting 6 Blue</i> , 1952, Oil on canvas, 30x25"	26
Figure 10: Ad Reinhardt - <i>Abstract Painting</i> , 1960-1965, Oil on canvas, 60x60"	27
Figure 11: Agnes Martin - <i>Night Sea</i> , 1963, Oil and gold leaf on canvas, 72x72"	32
Figure 12: Agnes Martin - <i>Gray Stone II</i> , 1961, Oil and gold leaf on canvas, 74 <sup>3</sup> / <sub>4</sub> x73 <sup>3</sup> / <sub>4</sub> "	33
Figure 13: Agnes Martin - <i>Untitled # 16</i> , 1980, Gesso, acrylic and graphite on canvas, 72x72"	34
Figure 14: Agnes Martin - <i>Untitled # 11</i> , 1988, Acrylic and pencil on canvas, 72x72"	35
Figure 15: Robert Mangold - <i>Manila-Neutral Area</i> , 1966, Acrylic on masonite, 96x96"	37
Figure 16: Robert Mangold - <i>Red Wall</i> , 1965, Oil on masonite, 96x96"	38
Figure 17: Robert Mangold - <i>Warm Grey Area</i> , 1965-1966, Oil on masonite, 72x72", (2 panels).	39
Figure 18: Robert Mangold - <i>Cool Grey Area with Curved Diagonal</i> , 1966, Oil, black pencil on masonite, 24x24"	40
Figure 19: Robert Mangold - <i>1/6 Gray/Green Curved Area</i> , 1967, Oil on masonite, 48x36"	41
Figure 20: Robert Mangold - <i>1/2 Manila Curved Area</i> , 1967, Oil on masonite, 72x144"	42
Figure 21: Robert Mangold - <i>X Series Central Diagonal I (blue)</i> , 1968, Acrylic on masonite, 48x72"	42
Figure 22: Brice Marden - <i>Return I</i> , 1964-1965, Oil on canvas, 50x68"	44

Figure 23: Brice Marden - <i>Hydra I</i> , 1972, Oil and wax on canvas, 84x63", (2 panels).....	48
Figure 24: Brice Marden - <i>Red, Yellow, Blue I</i> , 1974, Oil and wax on canvas, 74x72", (3 Panels).....	52
Figure 25: Brice Marden - <i>Frieze II</i> , 1982, Oil on paper mounted on Shoji screens, 30x145".....	53
Figure 26: Brice Marden - <i>Window Study Green and Red</i> , 1984-1985, Oil on linen, 26x20".	53
Figure 27: Robert Ryman - <i>Untitled (Orange Painting)</i> , 1955 and 1959, Oil on canvas, 28 and 1/8 x 28 and 1/8".....	54
Figure 28: Robert Ryman - <i>Untitled</i> , 1957, Gouache on paper mounted on board and plywood, 7 and 7/8 x 8 and 1/8".....	55
Figure 29: Robert Ryman - <i>Untitled</i> , 1958, Oil on cotton canvas, 43x43".....	56
Figure 30: Robert Ryman - <i>Untitled</i> , 1958, Casein and graphite pencil on tan paper on grey-white matt board, 14 x 13 and 5/8".....	56
Figure 31: Robert Ryman - <i>Winsor 34</i> , 1966, Oil on linen canvas, 63x63".....	57
Figure 32: Robert Ryman - <i>Untitled</i> , 1965, Enamelac on linen canvas, 62½ x 62½".....	58
Figure 33: Robert Ryman - <i>Surface Veil</i> , 1970, Oil on fibreglass on Featherboard, 19 and 7/8 x 19 and 7/8".....	59
Figure 34: Robert Ryman - <i>Surface Veil</i> , 1970-1971, Oil on fibreglass, with wax paper frame and masking tape, 13 x 13".....	59
Figure 35: Robert Ryman - <i>Embassy I</i> , 1976, Oil on Elvacite on Plexiglass, black oxide fasteners and four-sided bolts, 63 x 63".....	60
Figure 36: Robert Ryman - <i>Expander</i> , 1985, Oil on aluminium with four black oxide steel bolts, 28 x 28".....	61
Figure 37: Robert Ryman - <i>Credential</i> , 1985, Oil on aluminium with four round-faced steel bolts, 62¾ x 22 x 2".....	61
Figure 38: Ad Reinhardt - <i>Abstract Painting</i> , 1950-51, Oil and acrylic on canvas, 78x24"....	76
Figure 39: Ad Reinhardt - <i>Abstract Painting Blue</i> , 1953, Oil on canvas, 30x30".....	77
Figure 40: Ad Reinhardt - <i>Red Painting</i> , 1953, Oil on canvas, 30x30".....	77
Figure 41: Agnes Martin - <i>Flower in the Wind</i> , 1963, Oil on canvas, 75x75".....	82
Figure 42: Robert Ryman - <i>Stretched Drawing</i> , 1963, Charcoal on unprimed, stretched cotton canvas, stapled to wood stretcher, 14 and ½ x 14 and 7/16".....	85
Figure 43: Robert Ryman - <i>Classico 5</i> , 1968, Acrylic on twelve sheets of handmade Classico paper, 92 and 1/8 x 88 and ¼".....	85

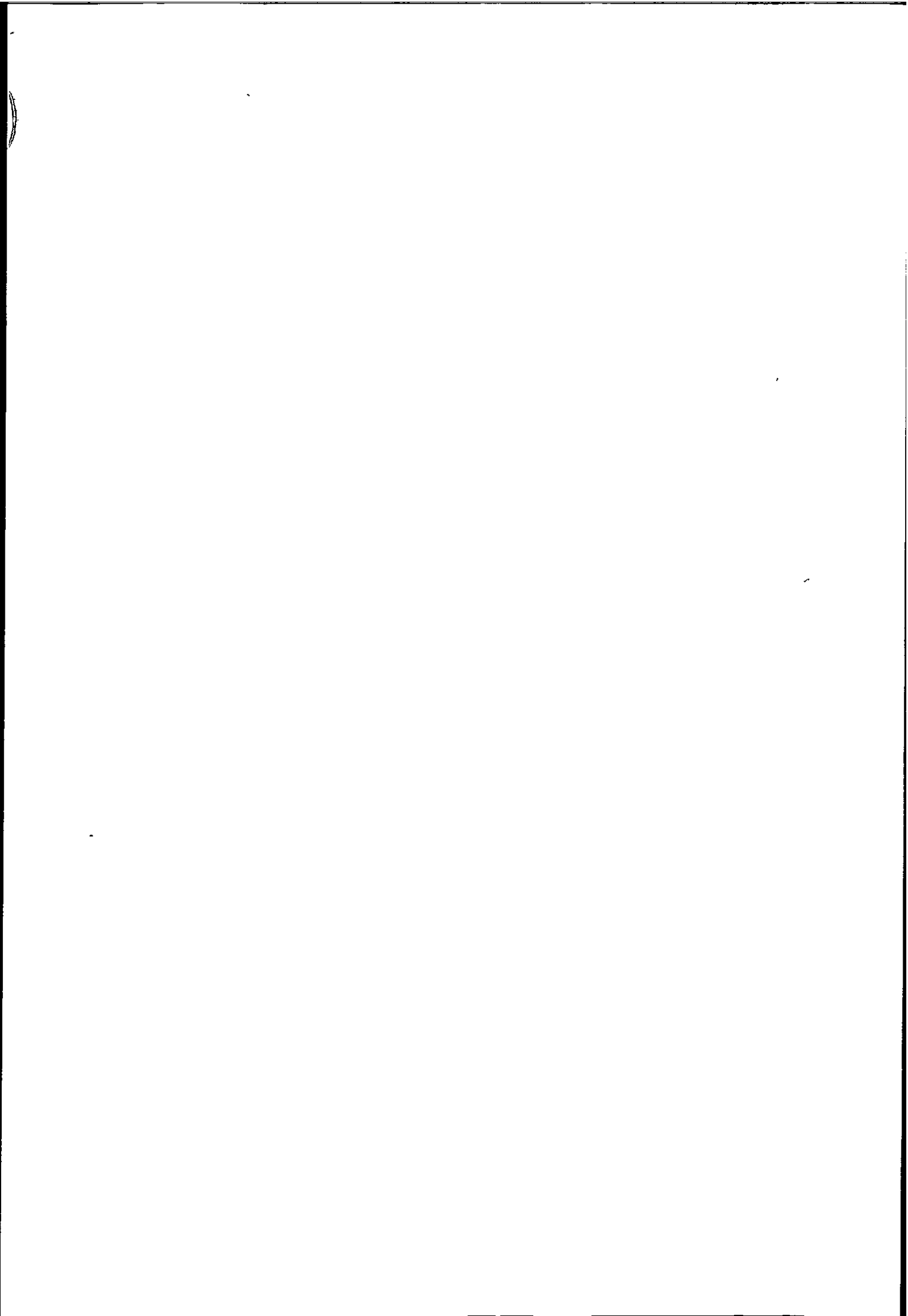
Figure 44: Robert Ryman – <i>Journal</i> , 1988, Lascaux acrylic on Lumasite and plastic with steel, 96x96”	86
Figure 45: Robert Ryman – <i>Mayco</i> , 1966, Oil on linen canvas, 75½x75½”	87
Figure 46: Barnett Newman – <i>Abraham</i> , 1949, Oil on canvas, 82¾x32½”	92
Figure 47: Barnett Newman – <i>The Voice</i> , 1950, Egg tempera and enamel on canvas, 96 and 1/8 x 105 and ½”	95
Figure 48: Barnett Newman – <i>Shining Forth (To George)</i> , 1961, Oil on raw canvas, 9’6”x 14’6”	97
Figure 49: Brice Marden – <i>Thira</i> , 1979-1980, Oil and wax on canvas, 96 x 180”, (18 panels)	111
Figure 50: <i>I</i> , October 1996-January 1997, Acrylic on canvas, 60x60”, (2 panels)	135
Figure 51: <i>II</i> , February 1997-April 1997, Acrylic on canvas, 60x60”, (2 panels)	137
Figure 52: <i>III</i> , May 1997-July 1997, Acrylic on canvas on board, 48x54”, (3 panels)	138
Figure 53: <i>IV</i> , September 1997, Acrylic on canvas, 28x36”	138
Figure 54: <i>V</i> , October 1997, Acrylic on canvas, 28x45”	139
Figure 55: <i>VI</i> , November 1997-January 1998, Acrylic on canvas on board, 48x48”, (2 panels)	139
Figure 56: <i>VII</i> , February 1998, Acrylic on canvas, 36x30”	139
Figure 57: <i>VIII</i> , September 1998, Acrylic on hardboard, 24x24”	141
Figure 58: <i>IX</i> , June 1999, Acrylic on canvas on board, 24x24”	142
Figure 59: <i>X</i> , June 1999, Acrylic on board, 24x24”	142
Figure 60: <i>XI</i> , June 1999, Acrylic on board, 24x24”	143
Figure 61: <i>XII</i> , September/October 1999, Acrylic on canvas, 30x30”	145
Figure 62: <i>XIII</i> , October/November 1999, Acrylic on canvas, 30x30”	145
Figure 63: <i>XIV</i> , November/December 1999, Acrylic on canvas, 30x30”	146
Figure 64: <i>XV</i> , December 1999/ January 2000, Acrylic on canvas, 30x30”	146
Figure 65: <i>XVI</i> , February 2000, Acrylic on canvas, 30x30”	147
Figure 66: <i>XVII</i> , March 2000, Acrylic on canvas, 30x30”	149
Figure 67: <i>XVIII</i> , July 2000, Acrylic on canvas, 12x12”	151
Figure 68: <i>XIX</i> , August 2000, Acrylic on canvas, 12x12”	152

Figure 69: <i>XX</i> , September 2000, Acrylic on canvas, 12x12”.....	152
Figure 70: <i>XXI</i> , January 2001, Acrylic on canvas, 12x12”.....	152
Figure 71: <i>XXII</i> , February 2001, Acrylic and oil paint on canvas, 12x12”.....	153
Figure 72: <i>XXIII</i> , April 2001, Acrylic and oil paint on canvas, 12x12”.....	154
Figure 73: <i>XXIV</i> , May 2001, Acrylic and oil paint on canvas, 12x12”.....	154
Figure 74: <i>XXV</i> , May 2000, Acrylic on canvas, 12x12”.....	155
Figure 75: <i>XXVI</i> , June 2000, Acrylic on canvas, 12x12”.....	155
Figure 76: <i>XXVII</i> , March 2001, Acrylic on canvas, 12x12”.....	156
Figure 77: <i>XXVIII</i> , September 2001, Acrylic on canvas, 48x48”.....	156
Figure 78: <i>XXIX</i> , September 2001, Oil and Household Gloss on Board, 24x24”.....	159
Figure 79: Detail of <i>XXIX</i> (above).....	160
Figure 80: Exhibition Plan.....	212
Figure 81: The Exhibition: No. 1 (Foreground).....	213
Figure 82: The Exhibition: No.s 6–15, (Top Left to Bottom Right).....	214
Figure 83: The Exhibition: No.s 21,20 and 6–15, (Left to Right).....	214
Figure 84: The Exhibition: No.s 23–28, (Left to Right).....	215
Figure 85: The Exhibition: No.s 2, 21, 20, 6 and 7, (Left to Right).....	215
Figure 86: The Exhibition: No.s 4, 18, 17, 16, (Left to Right).....	216
Figure 87: The Exhibition: No.s 30, 31, 32, 33, (Left to Right).....	216
Figure 88: The Exhibition: No.s 5 and 3, (Left to Right).....	217
Figure 89: The Exhibition: No.s 32, 33, 23,24,25, (Left to Right).....	217
Figure 90: The Exhibition: No.s 14 and 15, 19, (Left to Right).....	218
Figure 91: The Exhibition: No.s 21, 20, (Left to Right).....	218
Figure 92: The Exhibition: 1, October 1996-January 1997, Acrylic on canvas, 60x 60” (2 panels).....	219
Figure 93: The Exhibition: 2, November 1997-January 1998 Acrylic on canvas on board 48x 48” (2 panels).....	220
Figure 94: The Exhibition: 3, September/October 1999 Acrylic on canvas 30x 30”.....	221

Figure 95: The Exhibition: 4, December 1999/January 2000 Acrylic on canvas 30x 30".....	221
Figure 96: The Exhibition: 5, February 2000 Acrylic on canvas 30x 30".....	222
Figure 97: The Exhibition: 6, May 2000 Acrylic on canvas 12x12".....	223
Figure 98: The Exhibition: 7, June 2000 Acrylic on canvas 12x12.....	224
Figure 99: The Exhibition: 8, January 2001 Acrylic on canvas 12x12".....	224
Figure 100: The Exhibition: 9, July 2000 Acrylic on canvas 12x12".....	225
Figure 101: The Exhibition: 10, August 2000 Acrylic on canvas 12x12".....	226
Figure 102: The Exhibition: 11, September 2000 Acrylic on canvas 12x12".....	226
Figure 103: The Exhibition: 12, February 2001 Acrylic on canvas 12x12".....	227
Figure 104: The Exhibition: 13, April 2001 Acrylic and oil on canvas 12x12".....	227
Figure 105: The Exhibition: 14, May 2001 Acrylic and oil on canvas 12x12".....	228
Figure 106: The Exhibition: 15, March 2001 Acrylic on canvas 12x12".....	228
Figure 107: The Exhibition: 16, September 2001 Oil and household gloss on plywood 24x24".....	229
Figure 108: The Exhibition: 17, September 2001 Acrylic and household gloss on plywood 24x24".....	230
Figure 109: The Exhibition: 18, October 2001 Acrylic on plywood 24x 24".....	231
Figure 110: The Exhibition: 19, September 2001 Acrylic and oil on plywood 24x 24".....	231
Figure 111: The Exhibition: 20, October 2001 Acrylic on MDF 24x 24".....	232
Figure 112: The Exhibition: 21, November 2001 Acrylic on cotton duck 24x 24".....	232
Figure 113: The Exhibition: Detail of 21.....	233
Figure 114: The Exhibition: 22, November 2001 Acrylic on linen 24x 24".....	233
Figure 115: The Exhibition: Detail of 22.....	234
Figure 116: The Exhibition: 23, November 2001 Acrylic on linen 24x 24".....	234
Figure 117: The Exhibition: 24, December 2001 Acrylic on linen 24x 24".....	235
Figure 118: The Exhibition: Detail of 24.....	235
Figure 119: The Exhibition: 25, December 2001 Acrylic on linen 24x 24".....	236
Figure 120: The Exhibition: 26, December 2001 Acrylic on MDF 24x 24".....	236



Figure 121: The Exhibition: 27, October 2001 Acrylic on MDF 24x 24"	237
Figure 122: The Exhibition: Detail of 27	237
Figure 123: The Exhibition: 28, December 2001 Acrylic on MDF 24x 24"	238
Figure 124: The Exhibition: Detail of 28	238
Figure 125: The Exhibition: 29, January 2002 Acrylic on linen 24x 24"	239
Figure 126: The Exhibition: 30, January 2002 Acrylic on canvas 48x 48"	240
Figure 127: The Exhibition: Detail of 30	240
Figure 128: The Exhibition: 31, September 2001 Acrylic on canvas 48x 48"	241
Figure 129: The Exhibition: 32, January 2002 Acrylic on canvas 48x 48"	242
Figure 130: The Exhibition: 33, January 2002 Acrylic on linen 48x 48"	243
Figure 131: The Exhibition: Detail of 33	243
Figure 132: <i>Silent Print 3</i> , 1998, Lithograph, 8x8"(image), 11¼x11¼" (paper)	244
Figure 133: <i>Silent Print 4</i> , 1998, Lithograph, 8x8"(image), 11¼x11¼"(paper)	244
Figure 134: <i>Quiescence</i> , 1999, Lithograph, 3x3"(paper), 9x9"(image)	244
Figure 135 <i>Two Squares 6</i> , 1999, Lithograph, 3x3"(paper), 9x9"(image)	245
Figure 136: <i>Vertical Silence</i> , 1999, Lithograph, 11 and 3/4x11/16ths"(image), 16x7"(paper)	245
Figure 137: <i>Two Squares 2</i> , 1999, Lithograph, 3x3"(paper), 9x9"(image)	246
Figure 138: <i>Silent Square 2</i> , 2000, Lithograph, 4x4"(image), 7x7"(paper)	246
Figure 139: <i>Silent Square 3</i> , 2000, Lithograph, 4x4"(image), 7x7"(paper)	246
Figure 140: <i>Blue Grid</i> , 2000, Lithograph, 4x4"(image), 7x7"(paper)	247
Figure 141: <i>Retreat</i> , 2000, Lithograph, 18x18"(image), 22½x22½"(paper)	247
Figure 142: <i>Silent Square 1</i> , 2000, Lithograph, 4x4"(image), 7x7"(paper)	247
Figure 143: <i>Brush-mark Series- 1</i> , 2000, Lithograph, 4x4"(image), 7x7"(paper)	248
Figure 144: <i>Brush-mark Series- 2</i> , 2000, Lithograph, 4x4"(image), 7x7"(paper)	248
Figure 145: <i>Brush-mark Series- 3</i> , 2000, Lithograph, 4x4"(image), 7x7"(paper)	248
Figure 146: <i>Brush-mark Series- 4</i> , 2000, Lithograph, 4x4"(image), 7x7"(paper)	249
Figure 147: <i>Untitled</i> , 2000, Lithograph, 4x4"(image), 7x7"(paper)	249



## Acknowledgement

I have received advice, encouragement and support from a number of people throughout the time it has taken to complete this research.

I thank Dr. Sam Smiles for making the whole thing possible and for his profound, perceptive and remarkably patient supervision. Thanks also to Katy Macleod for her careful, diligent supervision and encouragement; to Peter Pay for sharing his experience, and to all the members of the Art History seminar group here at the University of Plymouth who have, over the years, asked some difficult questions but consistently offered support. I am also grateful for the support of the University of Plymouth.

I am indebted to Robert Mangold for taking the time to reply to my questions helpfully and also to Marcia Hafif for sending me her catalogues and expressing interest in this research.

I thank Martin Brooks, Douglas Fitch, Jonathan Thompson and Tony Hunt for their invaluable help with the exhibition, and wish to acknowledge the assistance I received from staff at the Exeter Campus Library, and from Rosemary Hatch and Karen Somerfield.

Finally, it is customary to end acknowledgements by thanking one's family— now I know why. I thank them all, especially Tom who has been far more of an inspiration than he knows.

## Author's Declaration

At no time during the registration for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy has the author been registered for any other University award.

### Creative Practice: Exhibitions of Work

*Traces*, Thelma Hulbert Gallery, Honiton, July 1999.

*On and Off the Wall*, Art Haven, Exeter, September 1999.

*Relativities*, 4<sup>th</sup> International Miniature Print Exhibition,  
Bankside Gallery, London, 27<sup>th</sup> January-20<sup>th</sup> February 2000.

Touring-

The City Gallery, Leicester, 2<sup>nd</sup> March-8<sup>th</sup> April 2000.

Aberystwyth Arts Centre, 21<sup>st</sup> May-16<sup>th</sup> July 2000.

St Barbe Museum, Lymington, 22<sup>nd</sup> July-19<sup>th</sup> August 2000.

Oriel Myrddin Carmarthen, 30<sup>th</sup> September-11<sup>th</sup> November 2000.

Loughborough University School of Art and Design January/February 2001.

Gracefield Arts Centre, Dumfries, Spring, 2001.

Bonhoga Gallery and Bristol City Museum and Art Gallery, December 2001- January 2002.

20<sup>th</sup> Mini Print International, Cadaqués, Spain,

July 1<sup>st</sup> - September 15<sup>th</sup>, 2000.

Touring- Wingfield Arts and Music Festival, England,

Canet de Mar, Barcelona, Galerie L'Etang d'Art, Bages, France,

*Relative Unfoldings*, Cultural Centre, Abu Dhabi, U.A.E., March, 2001.

21<sup>st</sup> Mini Print International, Cadaqués, Spain,

Taller Galeria Fort, Cadaqués, Girona, July 1<sup>st</sup> - September 15<sup>th</sup>, 2001.

Touring -

Wingfield Arts and Music Festival, England, May 26<sup>th</sup> - August 12<sup>th</sup>, 2001.

(See Appendix IV)

Signed... *Graham Lucas* .....

Date... *January 2002* .....

*To the memory of my brother.*

## Introduction

The purpose of this research is to investigate the notion of silence in painting. My examination of the term and its implications sprang from two sources, the awareness of an ineluctable development within my painting towards emptiness and quietness, and knowledge that the concept of silence had, if only occasionally, been applied and briefly discussed in relation to painting during, and since the 1960s. I felt that somewhere within the imprecision and elusiveness of the word's meanings and connotations in relation to painting, there was a strong connection to be made with the kind of work I was striving for. Finding the connection would necessitate a much more precise understanding of the meaning than I had so far formulated in relation to my practice or been able to grasp from examples of the word being applied to the work of others. Clarification was essential for the development of my work.

One particularly obstinate problem arose from the apparent absurdity of launching a theoretical investigation into two-dimensional images of silence, since silent paintings are purely visual experiences and therefore, wordless. For this reason, I decided that the research should begin with the aim of discovering the origin of the term, its semantic value, and the nature of the work to which it had been applied— why had particular works been included in the category, what qualities did they share, how did they differ from other 'retinal' abstract paintings, in what did their silence consist?

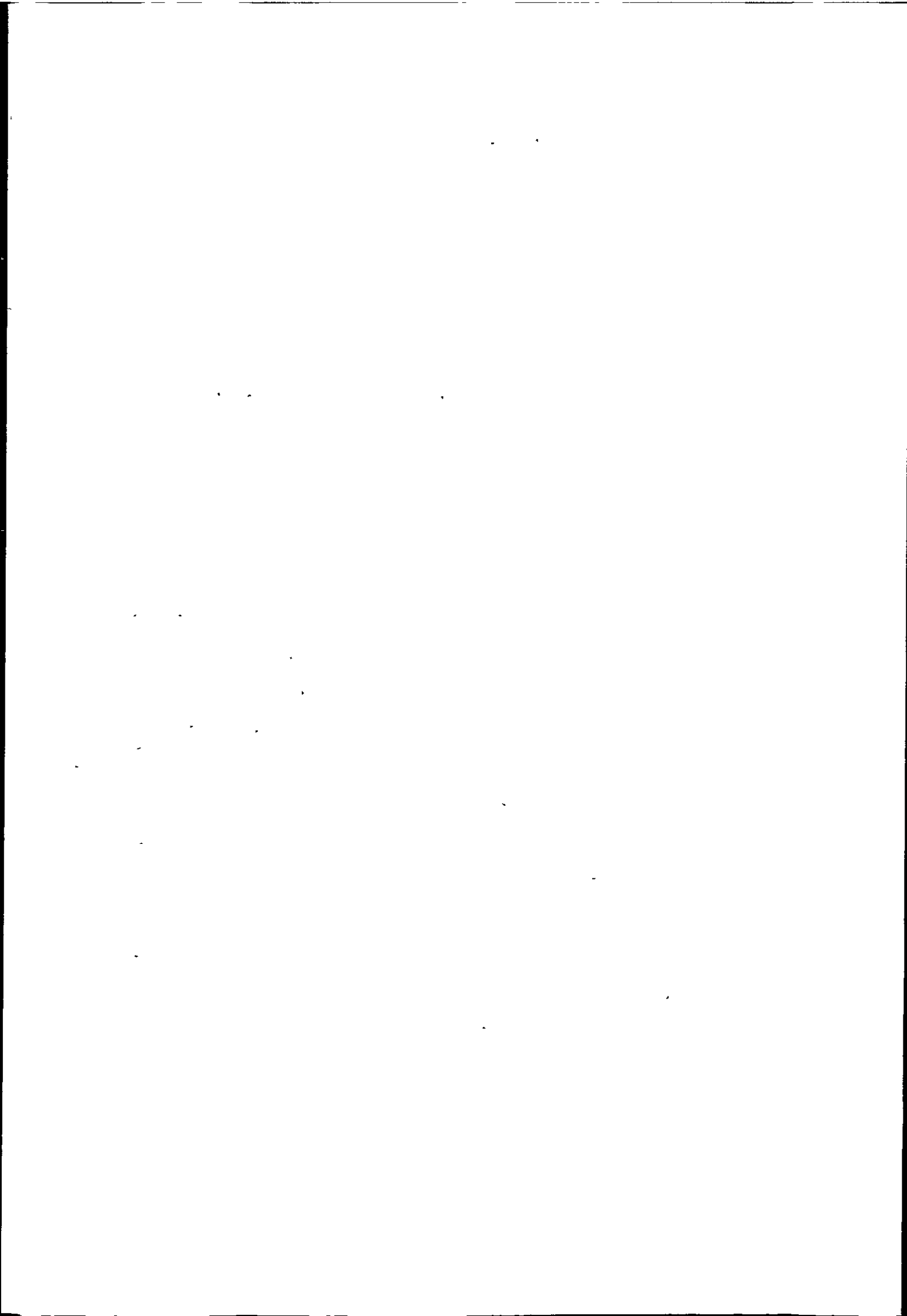
The theoretical principles, eventually assembled, could provide an initial basis for practice. They would be examined for their effectiveness in relation to 'content' and for their current relevance, undergoing acceptance, rejection, and modification to comply with the specific personal concerns of my own developing practice. This process of subjecting historical precedents to practical and theoretical investigation, mediated by the requirements of current attitudes, would provide a basis for personal exploration and understanding of the concept of silence achievable only through practice. The outcome would be a practical exposition of

silent painting supported and informed by the documentation of its development in the context of theoretical study.

The research is in three sections; Section One comprises seven chapters focusing on the historical precedents and models as defined theoretically and practically. Chapter One introduces and analyses the original theoretical source (an essay by Lucy Lippard) extracting its main ideas and identifying ways in which they can be developed: it was in this text that silence was first identified and discussed as the inherent quality of monotonal painting.<sup>1</sup> The chapter ends with a very brief introduction to six artists, cited as most clearly representative of silent painting, whose work constitutes the basis for investigations throughout the rest of Section One. Chapters Two and Three expand the initial questions and hypotheses through the investigation and analysis of quite different and individual approaches to reductivist work by each of the six artists. The ideas, intentions and methods of each artist are compared and examined along with relevant critical commentaries. Chapter Four examines texts by Rosalind Krauss; it centres on theories concerning the role and significance of the grid, linking it firmly to the promotion of silence. Chapter Five, once again expands the discussion, this time in relation to ways in which the grid is deployed in the work of three of the six selected artists. Chapter Six looks again at the work of all six artists focusing on content and meaning. Chapter Seven concludes Section One by sifting the assembled evidence for common characteristics and qualities consistent within the range and diversity of working methods, intentions and solutions manifested in the paintings. Those inconsistencies and differences, stemming from the individual intellects and sensibilities of each artist, are assessed for their potential to provide a broader understanding, and for their possible connections with, and contributions to, my own practice.

---

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this thesis I use the words *monotone* and *monochrome* synonymously. This is because both words appear in the various quotations I have included. Whilst it might be possible to draw a distinction between the two words, the text by Lucy Lippard, which provides the original theoretical source, uses the word *monotone* to refer to canvases of an overall colour but most certainly not in reference to canvases comprising contrasting colours of the same tonal value.





Section Two centres on my creative practice, documenting the evolution of understanding resulting from the symbiotic nature of theory and practice. The development of my painting entails a reappraisal of historical models of silence, their theoretical principles, and the extended possibilities suggested by varying individual approaches. The emphasis changes from recognized models, concentrating instead on finding a relevant, personal solution, which acknowledges the forces, demands, constraints and influences of a new and different cultural context. The focus moves onto problems and ideas generated by a freer, more personal form of practice together with further examinations of some seemingly less important but considerably more awkward points raised in Section One, for example those concerning intention, feeling, degrees of silence, and the impossibility of silence.

The investigations seek to discover effective uses of colour, tone, contrast, surface, application of paint, scale, size and weight, and to determine the nature of restrictions that might be necessary to ensure the exclusion of qualities inimical to silence. The work is guided by attempts to answer specific questions. Are some colours more conducive to silence than others; are pure colours to be avoided in favour of blacks, whites, greys and atmospheric mixtures and is a cadmium red monochrome for example, less silent than a white one? In those paintings called near-monotones, at what point does the difference between colour/tonal areas reach the level of contrast capable of breaking the silence? What are the effects of different tonal values? How free can brushwork be before it is read as expressive; at what point does restrained personal expression, discernible only in slight traces in the facture of a painting, succumb to the noise of expressionism?

Chapter Eight provides a critique of the practice documenting its development in relation to the ideas and methods examined in Section One. The aims, approaches and results are discussed as the work evolves. I begin by simply testing strategies borrowed from history until it becomes necessary to acknowledge the assertion that there is no such thing as silence. To negotiate this problem I follow the counter argument that things are silent if they feel silent. This necessarily introduces feeling as a criterion not only for recognising silence but also for

judging its nature and quality. Thus the work moves from the incidental silence evident in many of the 1960s paintings, to an intentional silence as decisions about tonal values, brush marks, sizes, colours etc. are evaluated through feeling, though always constrained and ordered by theoretical principles selected from the historical models. This process records and maps my emotional responses as much as it presents silence, but that is perhaps inevitable since the silence I am pursuing is essentially personal; were it otherwise it would be incidental and inadvertent. I discuss the progress of the work in relation to particular strategies, recording my responses and indicating where some directions have been abandoned and others followed. The latter part of the critique describes the strategies I have arrived at as a result of my evaluation of the work up to the point of writing Chapter Eight. The strategies are not, and cannot be a conclusion; there is no absolute solution. They are however, aspects of a personal approach distilled from the research as a whole; they achieve the kind of silence I have pursued and are sufficiently open to allow practice to continue, as it will, well beyond the completion of this writing.

Chapter Nine reflects on the theoretical and practical contributions of history noting the continued relevance of some ideas but also acknowledging that the passage of time has rendered others inappropriate. The discussion begins with a critique of the original theories of silent painting from which my individual position is explained. Following this, theories of silence in the arts during the 1960s are examined in relation to the ideas that have directed and supported my practice. More recent examples of practice and theory are used to identify the particular character of my work within its related field of contemporary practice.

The progression of work and ideas described in Chapters Eight and Nine is summarised in Chapter Ten, where the main points of the argument are reiterated and where necessary amplified and more fully explained.

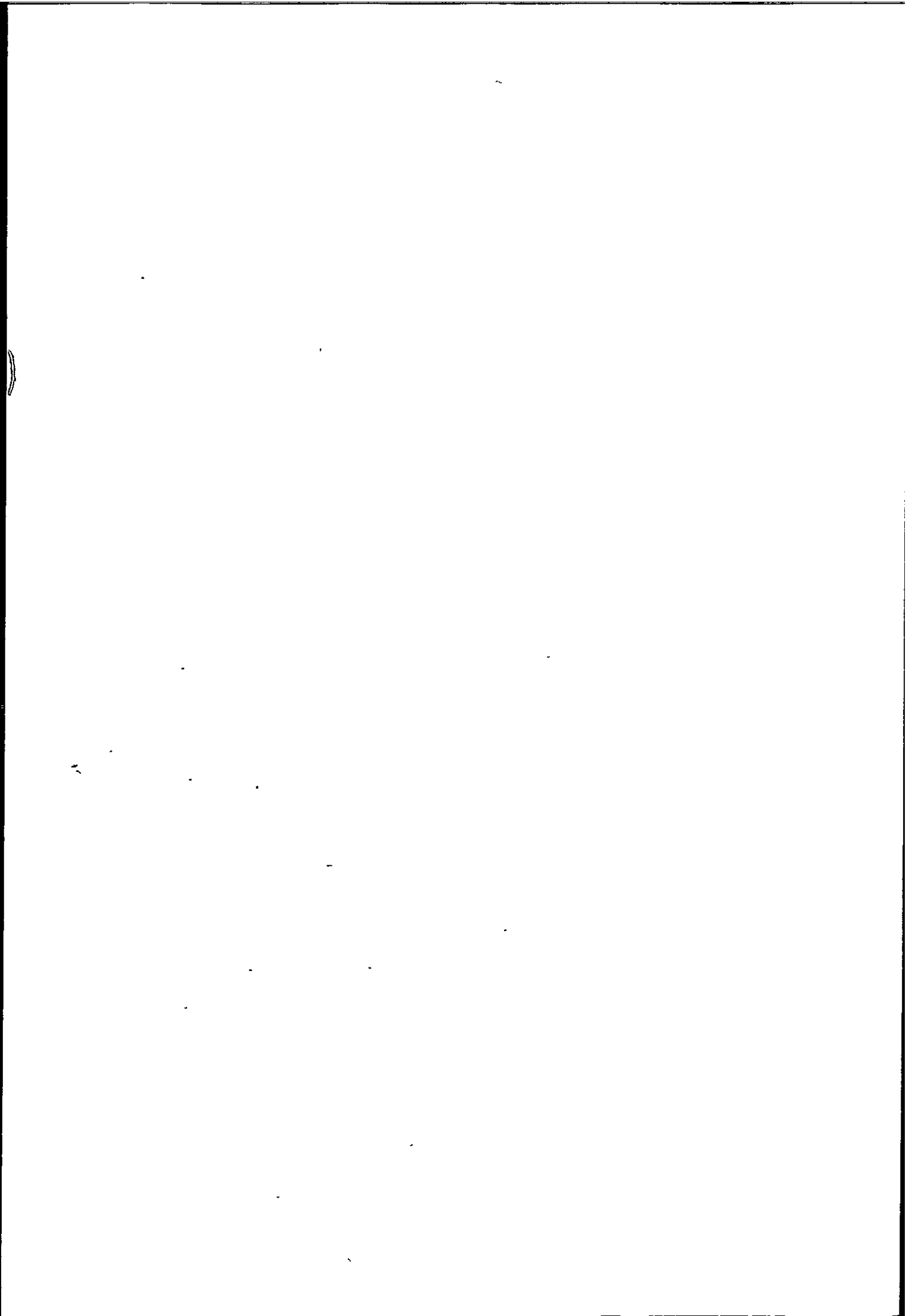
I have divided the thesis into sections to emphasise the differences in content and method, but they are not as exclusive as the structure might suggest. Section One is concerned with the

history of silent painting, and provides a full and detailed account of its origins and early development. It is a lengthy section: the inherent problems posed by the subject of this research demanded as complete an understanding as possible. Section Two focuses on practice which, whilst establishing a personal approach to the subject, offers an appraisal of the earlier theories of silent painting. However, some of Section One was also written in relation to practice, though at that early stage it was more involved with existing strategies than personal discovery.

Chapter Eleven makes up the whole of Section Three. It provides an overview of the research and its conclusions and attempts to restore a feeling of unity to the thesis as a whole.

## **Section One: Historical Models and Approaches**

In this section I will introduce the two acknowledged ways of achieving silence in painting—monotone and the grid. In each case a close analysis of the text in which the connection with silence was first clearly established will be followed by a broader examination in relation to the work of a number of representative artists. My analysis of the ways in which they were said to have achieved silence will focus on their work, their ideas and the critical responses they received. There is no suggestion of a group or movement of silent painters; they are six distinctly individual artists who have used monotone, or grid, or both, for exclusively personal reasons. Though all have avoided overt expression, their paintings are instantly identifiable from the choices made within the limits of a reductivist ethos, and of course, from the manner in which monotonous and/or grids have been realised within other elements of painting: colour, key, surface, size, shape etc. Rather than discuss the work of each of the six artists individually, I will bring them together in various pairings or groupings, first of all in relation to monotone as it developed out of Abstract Expressionism (Chapter Two), then as it subsequently became associated with Minimalism (Chapter Three), and later in relation to the grid. A diversity of strategies for achieving silence will be seen to emerge, as well as a number of different and sometimes contradictory readings. The problem of categorisation will also be noted and discussed. The final chapter in Section One will review the findings, with an analysis of the range of methods and approaches and their effectiveness. The chapter (and section) will conclude by identifying the strategies selected as a basis for practice. I will begin with monotonous painting.



## Chapter One: Silence and Monotone

'The Silent Art'<sup>2</sup> an essay by Lucy Lippard, appeared in the magazine *Art in America* in 1967.

This was not the first occasion on which paintings had been described as silent, the essay includes an earlier instance in a quotation from Allan Kaprow who was responding to Rauschenberg's series of all-white and all-black paintings.

'in the context of Abstract Expressionist noise and gesture, they suddenly brought one face to face with a numbing, devastating silence.'<sup>3</sup>

The collision between Abstract Expressionist and Minimalist sensibilities had been discussed under other titles including 'ABC Art'<sup>4</sup>, the title Barbara Rose used for her critique of Minimalism, and *Systemic Painting*<sup>5</sup>, the title of an exhibition of Minimalist work and its accompanying catalogue essay, written by Lawrence Alloway. Although some artists were included in all three essays, Lippard's had a specific concern with painting. It examined the growing interest in monotonal painting shown around that time by a number of American artists and exemplified in the imminent retrospective exhibitions of work by Ad Reinhardt and Yves Klein at the Jewish Museum in New York. The essay presented a broad framework within which this form of painting could be comprehended. Confronting the apparent emptiness of monochromatic and monotonal paintings, Lippard argued that they were neither boring, empty, nor hostile, and defined, within the confines of this severely reductive art form, three different approaches— 'the evocative, romantic or mystical; the formally rejective and wholly non-associative; and the gesture of defiance, absolution or comment'<sup>6</sup> The 24 American artists whose paintings were cited as examples of a particular approach, had all achieved individual reputations and recognition; accordingly, Lippard emphasised their individuality and dissimilarity. The absence of a group identity or common purpose perhaps goes some way to explaining the fact that, apart from odd references, 'Silent Art' as a distinct genre separate from the prevailing movements, was not pursued. Accounts of the

<sup>2</sup> Lippard, Lucy R. 'The Silent Art', *Art in America*, Vol. 55 No.1, January/February 1967 pp. 58-63.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p 61.

<sup>4</sup> Rose, Barbara. "ABC Art." *Art in America* October-November 1965 pp. 57-59.

<sup>5</sup> Alloway, Lawrence. *Systemic Painting*, New York: Solomon R Guggenheim Museum, 1966.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p.58. The 'romantic, evocative' includes Barnett Newman, Wolf Kahn, Sam Francis, Edward Corbett, Rollin Crampton, Alexander Liberman, Agnes Martin, Yayoi Kusama. Under 'gestures of defiance' Lippard cites Yves Klein as the epitome, and discusses Rauschenberg whose 'white works and the contemporary black ones, were dismissed as gestures by most of the art world'.

developments in painting from the late 1960s to the mid 1980s tended to place monotonal painters within either Abstract Expressionism or Minimalism. In 1986 a major exhibition of abstract art, *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*, was mounted in Los Angeles, it was accompanied by a substantial catalogue with critiques provided by a number of art critics including Donald Kuspit. In his chapter, 'Concerning the Spiritual in Contemporary Art', Kuspit discussed Silent Painting, citing Lucy Lippard's article in his bibliographical notes. His recognition of its significance is clear, but he goes a step further, strongly endorsing its continued validity –

'...the means by which today's best abstract art achieves its spiritual integrity are the same as they were when abstract art originated, but they are now insisted upon with great urgency: silence and alchemy'.<sup>7</sup>

The link forged between silence and spiritual content will be examined later.

A more recent reference appeared in Anna Moszynska's book, *Abstract Art* where some of the qualities of 'silent' painting are discussed.<sup>8</sup> The bibliography is arranged under chapter headings and broken down more specifically under sub-headings, one of which- 'Technologically Inspired Art and Silent Painting'- is a further acknowledgement amounting almost to an acceptance of a category; the bibliography cites Donald Kuspit's essay.

The occurrence of only three or four references to a particular type of painting over a period of twenty-three years would indicate its irrelevance if it were not for the fact that the artists concerned in all three cases have been internationally recognised.<sup>9</sup> The question therefore centres on the relevance of the term or category itself and it is complicated by the fact that no clear agreement exists about the criteria by which paintings qualify as silent. Was it and could it still be useful to group particular paintings together under the heading 'silent'? By useful, I mean – will the employment of that label respect and even protect the 'content' and essence of

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<sup>7</sup> *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Abbeville Press Publishers, New York, 1986.

<sup>8</sup> Moszynska, Anna, *Abstract Art*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1990, pp. 182-189.

<sup>9</sup> Patrick Heron had applied the word 'silent' in his essay on Paul Nash – '...if one imagines that that the recording, or story-telling function is alone valid in painting, one will suppress all the immediate values of the created thing, the picture itself, with all its plastic, colour and composition values; with all its silent music of design;...' Published in Heron, Patrick. *The Changing Forms of Art*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, p178. The essay was a composite of articles in *New English Weekly*, February 13, 1947, and March 6, 1947; and in *New Statesman and Nation*, March 27, 1948.

the work by positing a conceptual framework that both illuminates the artists' intentions and elucidates the viewers' experience?

I hope to demonstrate the validity of the term, and in agreement with Donald Kuspit, its continued relevance. It will be essential at an early stage to arrive at a clearer understanding. Once it becomes possible to identify the qualities that constitute silent painting, further explanations will be required. How does it differ from painting that employs similar formal solutions to realise other intentions, has it been wrongly categorised, and if so, how and why, what were the consequences of misrepresentation, and not least, how can an understanding of these questions be usefully employed within my own practice?

Since it is essential to begin with Lippard's ideas, the following two paragraphs (down to the middle of page 12) are a précis of her essay<sup>10</sup>. The paintings she describes as silent are detached, empty on their surfaces, but have presence. The extremes of silent painting are white or black monotonous; white implies blankness and potential, whereas black 'has obviously been painted, but painted out, hidden, destroyed.' There are three types of monotone (mentioned earlier), the evocative/romantic/mystical, to which viewers, rightly or wrongly, attach notions of spirituality or mysticism; the formally rejective/non-associative, concerned with the 'progression of painting', described as the 'cool absolute' and most relevant to the work of the American painters of the 1960s; and the gesture of defiance/absolution/comment. The latter category is broad, encompassing Rauschenberg's monotonous, Yves Klein's concern with the 'Duchampian paradox' and 'The Immaterial', and notions of 'the *tabula rasa* as a fresh start in life, the destruction of everything traditional.' Monotone 'is one of the diminishing possibilities open to a painting that might be called color painting or light painting, even when it eliminates all color variations or even all color.' It offers a new kind of surface inflection to be read differently from 'the emotive qualities of expressionism.' One of the unexpected attributes of monotone is the richness of variety made possible through the slightest changes in

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<sup>10</sup> All the quotations included in the précis are from the source in footnote 2- (Lippard, Lucy R. 'The Silent Art', *Art in America*, Vol. 55 No.1, January/February 1967 pp. 58-63)



texture, colour, tone, etc. within an otherwise uniform field; abstract art has sensitised and heightened viewers' perceptions throughout this century and monotonies continue to do so. As a result of this learning we can appreciate nearly monochromatic paintings epitomized by Ad Reinhardt's black series, which, when viewed attentively, reveal their colours. The ideal format is the square, 'the only undistorted, unequivocal shape;' the ideal colour is white, but it must be painted; an unpainted white surface, such as formica, would be sculptural. Monotone eschews attempts to gain attention through expressive gestures, vivid colour contrasts; or pretty effects (abstract expressionists, hard- or soft-edged colourists), demanding instead, prolonged, attentive viewing. The preferred colours are neutral, 'avoiding all reference to outside phenomena and denying the kind of decorative painting that requires only a glance to absorb.' The ideal monotonal painting should not be shaped, the point of monochrome is its insistence on the surface; a shaped canvas tends to activate the wall as a ground upon which it becomes the image.

In discussing the work of American painters concerned with 'the formally rejective/non-associative,' and the 'progression of painting' Lippard deals with a number of formal strategies, which depart from the ideal, and in so doing establishes some ground-rules for monotonal and monochromatic painting. Robert Irwin's exploration of optical experience and 'amorphous light energy' produces qualities that 'might be better achieved by the use of actual light.' Robert Mangold's paintings are shaped, but only at one corner or edge, and are thus able to avoid becoming objects whilst maintaining the necessary emphasis on their surfaces. It is noted that William Pettet's decision to investigate the possibilities of spraying his monochromes onto plastic might 'take these works into a quasi-sculptural area.' This is an area deliberately explored in the shaped canvases of Peter Tangen, Ron Davis and David Novros who 'do not go beyond painting so much as they ignore painting and establish a third-stream idiom,' but, Lippard observes, 'the whole point of a large monotone surface is denied by the use of exaggerated shapes, which de-emphasize surface in favor of contour.' Where painters hang differently coloured monotonal paintings together as a single work, the result is a multicoloured painting, 'not a monotonal unity.' Even paintings of the same colour, but

comprising panels of different widths, 'approach sculpture rather than retaining the single surface of true monotone.'

It is possible however, to use painterly surfaces without invoking expressionism; Ralph Humphrey, Robert Ryman and Brice Marden are cited as painters who have 'stripped the impasto of its gestural, emotional connotations. Their canvases emphasize the fact of painting as painting, surface as surface, paint as paint, in an inactive, unequivocal manner.' Their individual approaches vary from being neither expressionist nor anti-expressionist (Humphries), to excluding emotion entirely (Marden), and being concerned entirely with paint (Ryman). Lippard's final paragraph makes it clear that the kind of monotonal painting she has been discussing is not, and was not intended to be nihilistic, boring or hostile to the viewer, offering instead an endorsement of the demands made by monotonal paintings upon the viewer's perception and attention as the response moves from initial boredom into 'an area that can be called contemplation or simply esthetic enjoyment.' She ends by challenging those who would call such paintings 'empty' to imagine the range of visual approaches and ideas that would be encompassed if mixed exhibitions of all-black or all-white paintings were to be mounted from the work of artists named in the essay; 'empty', she predicts, 'will become an obsolete esthetic criterion.'

It would now be helpful to examine Lippard's account, beginning with the fundamental assertion that silent painting is synonymous with monotonal painting – other forms of 'retinal' or purely visual painting, such as Abstract Expressionism, hard-edge colour painting and even stain painting having been excluded. The ideal monotone is defined as a white painted square on which the paint is applied in a neutral, dispassionate manner.

In spite of this, most of the examples given deviate from the ideal, often moving into close-toned and close-hued work which is not strictly monotonal: some of the examples even diverge slightly from painting itself, into "a relief or sculptural concept". Furthermore, the inclusion of so many individual and distinctive approaches precludes definition; there are many ways of painting monochromes and of enlivening or enriching them with subtle variations of tone, colour or texture. From her establishment of a clearly defined central point

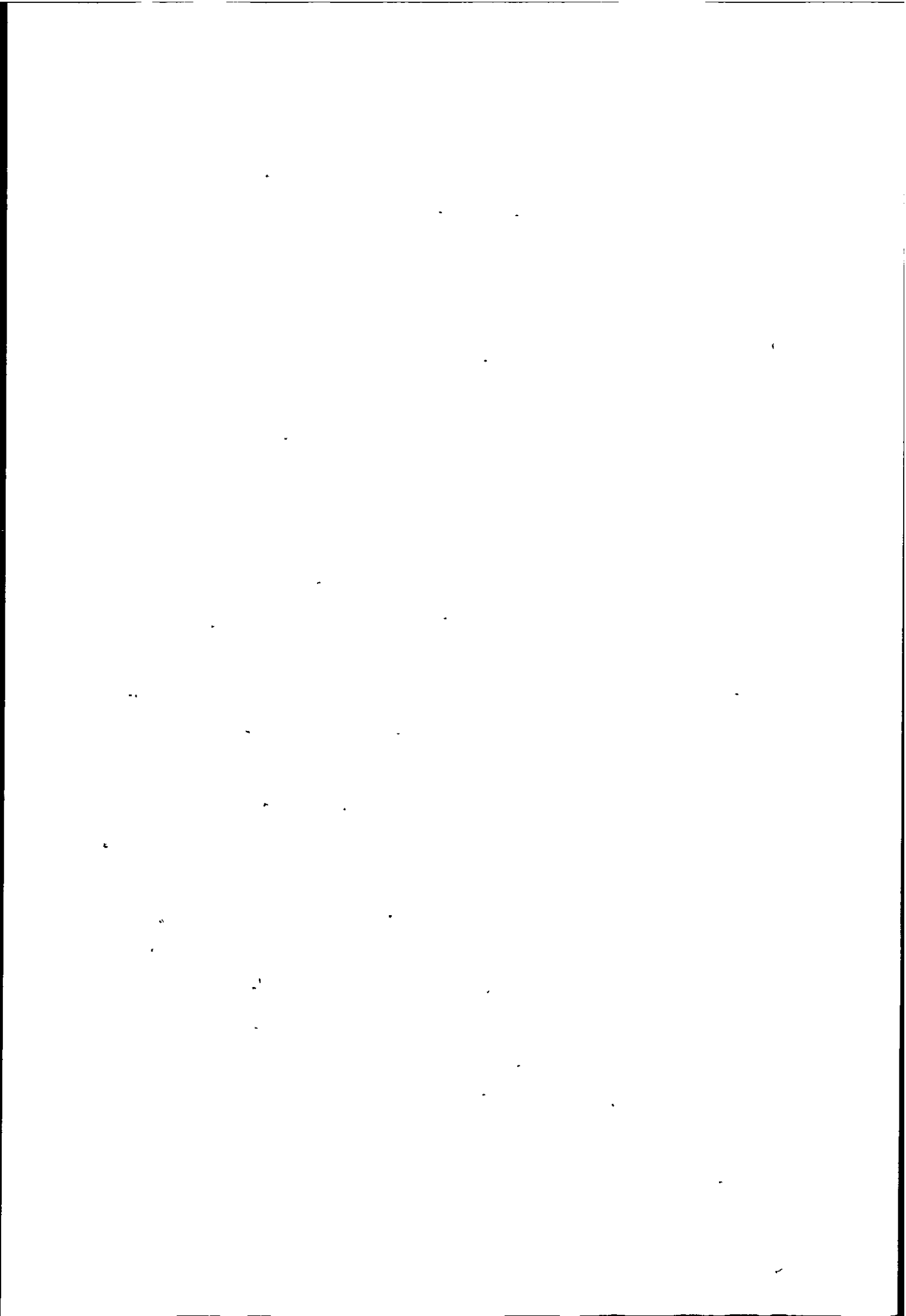
represented by the ideal white square monotone, the logical consequence of Lippard's argument is an area of exploration outside and around this point which permits the kind of personal investigation and expression by which individual monotonal artists are recognisable<sup>11</sup>. It follows that this area must have a loosely defined boundary beyond which the appearance of too much expression, contrast, colour or shape, could finally exclude paintings from either or both of the categories – 'monotone' and 'painting'. This being the case, is Lippard implying that the further a painting moves from the centre, the less silent it becomes? Are there degrees of silence or are all paintings within the area equally silent? If there is an ideal monotonal painting, what does it mean to say that some monotones are less than ideal? These questions were irrelevant to Lucy Lippard whose primary intention was to make monotone accessible to a wider public, and of little or no concern to the artists she cites; they were pursuing 'the formally rejective/non-associative,' and the 'progression of painting' rather than silence<sup>12</sup>. They are questions that I must consider in the attempt to understand and put into practice, the notion of silence in painting.

Lippard's essay raises questions about the meaning and nature of silence in the context of painting. Primarily, it applies to paintings consisting of as little as possible, those that at first sight contain the fewest pictorial events – the seemingly 'emptiest'; but other less quantifiable criteria are mentioned. A square is deemed the ideal format; distortion and evocation being unavoidable with other formats. It is not clear what Lippard means here; a monotonal rectangle is every bit as monotonal as a monotonal square therefore it cannot be monotone that is distorted. If the implication is that vertical and horizontal rectangles can be associated with figures and landscapes, then perhaps we are to understand that they evoke ideas and words, and therefore silence is distorted. Or is it that the perfect symmetry of a square creates the feeling of stillness, which is synonymous with silence? Similarly, a gestural application of paint can convey too much emotion and expression; emotional restraint is an essential quality of the work discussed and therefore another determining factor for silence. This is

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<sup>11</sup> The painters discussed by Lippard might have produced some ideal monotones, but their work often investigated other means; even Robert Ryman, who perhaps came closest to the ideal, added other marks and colours in the form of masking tape, metal brackets etc.

<sup>12</sup> Agnes Martin and possibly Ad Reinhardt are the exceptions.



understandable especially in view of the deliberate move away from Abstract Expressionism, which was a motivation for many of the monotonal painters in the 1960s. It sets silence against noise, making it perceivable as the absence of noise and as a refusal to express. Colour is yet another criterion; Lippard credits monotone with the potential to offer a fresh line of attack on colour painting, though its use should be 'evasive or neutral;' blacks, whites, greys, browns, and pale atmospheric colours are preferred, conceivably ascribing to pure colours the quality of stridency which would by definition impair silence. The essay makes an ambiguous point about colour when discussing Ellsworth Kelly's three coloured panels, which form a three-colour painting rather than 'a monotonal unity.' This is obvious enough, but it invites speculation on whether or not three monotonal and therefore silent panels, cease to be silent when brought together as a three-colour painting. The answer for Lippard is yes, because it is no longer monotonal, and monotonal painting is silent painting; but as we have seen, it is not quite that simple, paintings do not have to be strictly monotonal. Perhaps the key word is unity; once the surface begins to separate into clearly discernible areas it can no longer be called monotonal or even nearly monotonal. If this reveals an inconsistency in Lippard's view that monotone is synonymous with silent painting, it is also clear by now that factors such as gesture, shape and colour play a significant role in preserving or impairing silence. Since the purpose of Lippard's essay was, above all, to convince readers that given time and attention, a seemingly empty, unimaginative and boring form of art can be unexpectedly rewarding and demanding, we must conclude that the word silent was used simply to attribute potential value and significance to the supposed emptiness. It fulfilled its role as a one-off convenient description in a particular context – an afterthought, a general description applied to denote a particular quality discernible in paintings produced for other and various reasons. However, it invites the possibility of intentional use, not as an afterthought, but as something sought after with the subtlety and fullness of understanding attainable through practice.

Of the twenty-four American painters named in Lucy Lippard's essay some have become sufficiently well known to appear in the mainstream literature on twentieth century art, though not all have remained committed to monotone, or to painting itself. Donald Kuspit<sup>13</sup> and Anna

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<sup>13</sup> Op.cit.

Moszynska<sup>14</sup> writing twenty or more years later have been able to identify those whose consistency has clarified and consolidated their purposes. It is from these three sources that I have chosen six painters – Barnett Newman as one of the ‘major American precedents’ (Lippard), Agnes Martin, Brice Marden, Robert Mangold, Robert Ryman and, fully accepting Lippard’s assertion that any discussion of modernist monotone painting must emphasise his central role, Ad Reinhardt. Whilst none of them can be properly categorised either as Abstract Expressionist or Minimalist, all six can be described as reductionist painters employing monotone and/or the grid. I will now examine their use of monotone in relation to silence.

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<sup>14</sup>Op.cit.

## Chapter Two: Monotonal Responses to Abstract Expressionism

Barnett Newman – Ad Reinhardt – Agnes Martin

What follows is an examination of the use of monotone by three painters who, though belonging to the group of artists known as Abstract Expressionists, produced paintings which appeared incongruous in that context: Barnett Newman (1905-70), Ad Reinhardt (1913-67) and Agnes Martin (born 1912). I should state from the outset that none of them produced true monotones but their paintings were cited as examples of silent art in Lippard's text, which, it was noted earlier, acknowledged a flexible understanding of the term. Their work covers the origins and development of silent painting; awareness and understanding of their individual models of practice will begin the process of identifying a range of formal and expressive systems within which the direction of my own practice can be assessed and determined.

'Around 1950 Newman, a strong influence on the younger generation now concerned with monotone painting, made several only slightly modulated, single-color, single surface canvases, such as the tall vertical *Day One* and an all-white painting of 1951-52. His *Stations of the Cross* series (1958-66) concludes with a precise, pure, white on white work that was unavoidably interpreted as representing transfiguration. Newman's titles indicate that he welcomes such symbolic or associative interpretation; most of the younger artists, on the contrary, are vehemently opposed to any interpretation and deny the religious or mystical content often read into their work as a result of Newman's better-known attitude and as a result of the breadth and calm inherent in the monotonal theme itself.'<sup>15</sup>

The above quotation announces Barnett Newman's work as an important precedent for the monotonal painting that developed in America during the 1960s. Some of the younger artists were influenced by his formal innovations; they rejected the spiritual, mystical content of Abstract Expressionism, the gestural application of paint, and the complexity of surface which gave rise to its emotional excesses. Ultimately, they rejected painting itself. It is, perhaps, ironic that Newman, a committed Abstract Expressionist, influenced some of the artists who were to develop what became known as Minimalism. The problem of categorisation will arise frequently throughout this discussion to the end of Section One, but my chief concern is with

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<sup>15</sup> Lippard, Lucy. 'The Silent Art', op.cit.

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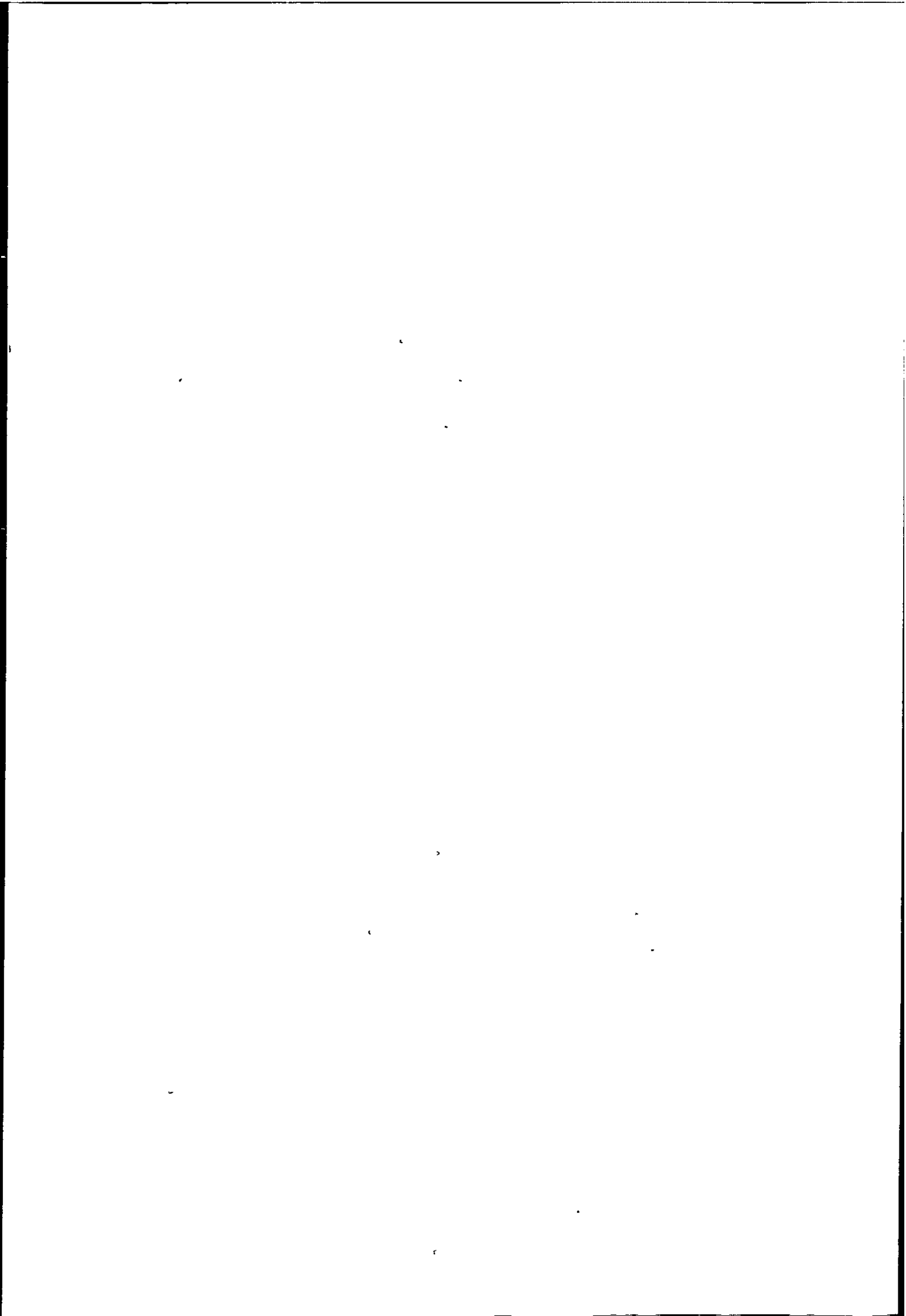
fixed a piece of tape down the centre. Then he quickly smeared a coat of cadmium red light over the tape, to test the color. He looked at the picture for a long time. Indeed he studied it for some eight months. He had finished questing.<sup>19</sup>

The use of tape was invited by the very nature and structure of the images; nearly all the paintings comprised large rectangular areas and zips, with edges usually running vertically but occasionally horizontally and always from one edge of the canvas to the other. The result of this was to move the paintings, in appearance only, closer to geometrical abstraction than expressionism, though it must not be forgotten that Newman dissociated himself from geometrical art. In a recent catalogue presenting an exhibition of geometrical abstraction Michael Auping explains that out of respect for the artist's views his work was not included in the show though he is discussed in the catalogue commentary out of necessity, since Newman was named as an influence by many of the other exhibiting artists.<sup>20</sup>

It would be helpful at this point in the discussion, to identify aspects of Newman's work that contribute to our understanding of silence in painting. To begin with, viewing time is an indisputable factor; if anything of value is to be discovered from the work it must be gained as a result of attention and awareness. Attentive viewing of Newman's paintings reveals that in spite of their seeming emptiness they cannot be understood at a glance. To dismiss them instantly, or even to enjoy them superficially as geometrical organisations or colour relationships, simply means that they have not been seen as thoroughly as the artist would have wished. They reveal themselves in some cases slowly as the viewer's awareness detects subtleties and nuances within the paintings, or more dramatically as the emotional impact of the colour takes effect. There is no intention to entertain; the paintings are non-hierarchical, eschewing exciting or tasteful colour relationships and expressive 'gestures'. Most of Newman's post 1948 paintings present large uniform areas of colour punctuated by

<sup>19</sup> Hess, Thomas B. *Barnett Newman*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1971, p.51.

<sup>20</sup> Auping, Michael. *Abstraction. Geometry. Painting: Selected Geometric Abstract Painting in America Since 1945*. Harry N Abrams Inc. Publishers, New York, in association with Albright Knox Art Gallery. 1989, pp. 17-18.







It has often been said that the problem with the label 'Abstract Expressionism', was that it described paintings which were either, abstract and not expressionist, or, expressionist and not abstract. David Sylvester's assessment of Newman's position demonstrates the diversity that existed within the movement.

'If the stylistic range of Abstract Expressionism is taken to cover an arc of 180 degrees, then the relative average positions of its leading exponents might be something like this: de Kooning 0 degrees, Gorky 40 degrees, Pollock 75 degrees, Still 120 degrees, Rothko 135 degrees, Newman 180 degrees.'<sup>22</sup>

Newman was, nevertheless, at the centre of the American Abstract Expressionist movement, playing an active role as spokesman, taking part in debates and writing statements and polemical articles. In spite of this fervour, his rejection of gesture and 'rhetorical brush marks' led him to make paintings that superficially appeared to deny expressionism. He replaced emotionally charged, broken, textured, contrasting surfaces with vast, flat, monotonal areas, thus complying with the idea of silence as an ostensibly uninflected monotonal surface. He deployed the overwhelming impact of colour on a grand scale in an attempt to express the 'terror of the unknowable' and ultimately, an experience of the sublime. This was undoubtedly a non-verbal expression of direct feeling; to bathe in the intense reflection of cadmium red is an experience beyond words. In this sense too, he achieved silence, or a kind of silence since such a powerful form of expression seems at odds with some notions of it. It can also be said that what he renounced in gestural expression he more than regained in size, with further inevitable consequences for silence. This point will arise a number of times, especially in relation to practice in Section Two, and it raises the question of whether silent paintings can demand attention by imposing themselves on the viewer. Can silence accommodate egotistical statements?

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<sup>22</sup> Sylvester, David. *About Modern Art Critical Essays 1948-96*. Chatto & Windus, London, 1996, p 325.















'There is something wrong, irresponsible and mindless about color, something impossible to control.'<sup>25</sup>



Figure 10: Ad Reinhardt - *Abstract Painting*, 1960-1965, Oil on canvas, 60x60".

Throughout this period he restricted himself to a size limit of 60 inches square, a size that relates comfortably to the human body, large enough to fill the vision without becoming grandiose or egotistical. The square format allows no emphasis either to width or height, thus avoiding the necessity for 'relational balancing of parts' and composition. The canvases are trisected symmetrically with the central horizontal band "negating" the central vertical to achieve formlessness. They are almost black and have a matt surface to eliminate reflections; this was achieved by overloading the oil with pigment but it also made the surface particularly delicate and easily damaged.

'Two of the galleries and museum rooms had to be roped off because too many viewers were unable to resist touching the surface of the paintings and leaving their marks'<sup>26</sup>

All the canvases are hand-painted with a one-inch brush, without the use of masking tape; the edges are difficult to find in any case, because of the barely perceivable tonal changes between areas. Spraying and rolling were in common use at the time but Reinhardt preferred to eliminate his brush strokes by continual brushing out. His working practices, in accordance with his art-as-art dogma, favoured the hand-made, the repetitious, and the ritualistic.

<sup>25</sup> Ad Reinhardt. Quote taken from the essay by Margit Rowell (note 36). The original source is a transcript of a panel discussion at Philadelphia Museum School of Art, March 1960. Published in *It is*, no.5, Spring 1960, pp. 34-38. This quote pp.37-38.

<sup>26</sup> Rose, Barbara, *Art as Art*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles. 1975, see 'The Black Square Painting Shows', 1963, 1964, 1965, p. 84.

Reinhardt's employment of monotone can be described and demonstrated by the broad agreement of critical opinion.

'...Colour has been all but eliminated, values are maddeningly close, so close as almost to deny the eye's effort at distinguishing them. About all one can say about them is that attention is fixed by a dark, framed 5'x 5' ("not small, not large") square and that in certain lights (the best is a raking half-light) there emerges to view a centralized cruciform against a ground.

Yet, despite their extreme reductiveness and their refusal to reward formal dissection, analysis does reveal that the squares retain everything usually regarded as indispensable to the form of Western easel painting...<sup>27</sup>

The monochromes, not being purely monochromatic, reveal an image, but only faintly. This is Reinhardt's silence. Compared to the vigorous declarations of Abstract Expressionism or the stridency of Pop Art, these images barely whisper.

'Other paintings, next to these, can easily look too colourful, too decorative, too expressionistic or too something else. Reinhardt's sober, insistent perfectionism throws a glaring light on the crassly materialist, the merely decorative, the merely anecdotal, the excessively egocentric, the mannered and the trivial.'<sup>28</sup>

His decision to reject colour as 'irresponsible' and to use only faintly coloured blacks for so long raises the question about degrees of silence. Are primary and secondary colours in some way louder than black, white or grey? Clearly, he thought they were difficult to control, but not in any technical sense. Reinhardt's art-as-art dogma was dedicated to the exclusion of references to social, religious, political and commercial issues and to everything else in the world outside art, just as his carefully achieved matt surfaces excluded reflections. Colour also gave access to unwanted qualities.

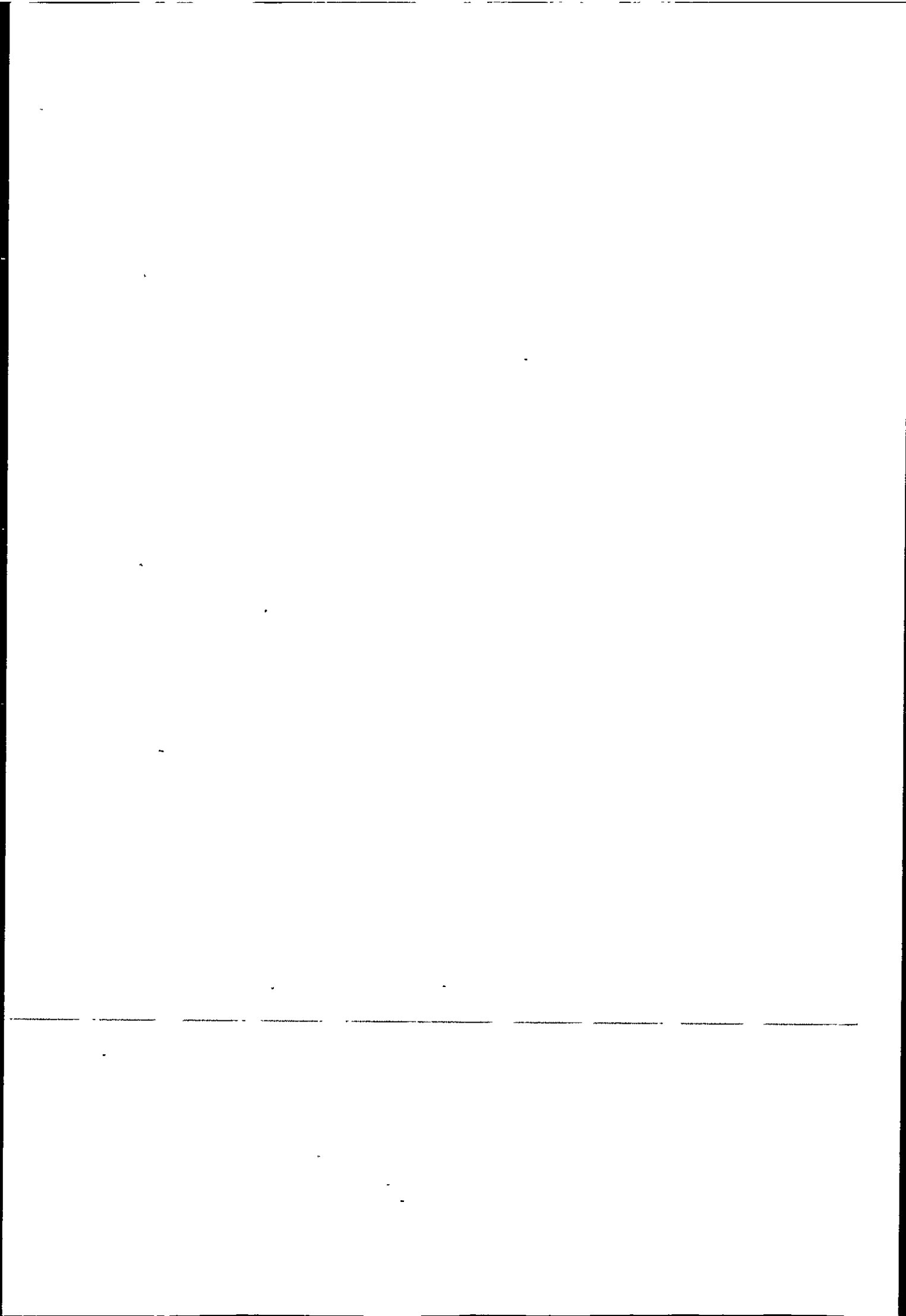
'A born colorist, if he chose to eliminate red and blue from his final paintings (having discarded all other hues many years before), it was apparently because he found them too seductive and evocative of experiences he wanted to abolish from his art: contrast and tension, illusions of advancing and receding space; sensation, emotion, affectivity, expressivity; color symbolism and art historical references of all kinds.'<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Colt, Priscilla. Op cit.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Rowell, Margit. Op cit.





In spite of all the exclusions the silence that remains, if we are to call it that, is not a blank, dead silence, it has a quality of its own; there is a distinction to be made between meaningless and meaningful silence-

'For the beholder of a "black" canvas, there are two choices: either one rushes by and sees nothing, or one spends a few minutes (1958), a quarter of an hour (1960), half an hour (1967) in front of *each* canvas...And what does one see? At first there is nothing, but gradually, of course, one discerns almost nothing, evanescent entities, phantoms of colors and shapes one can never be quite sure has seen...what one sees in front of a "black" Reinhardt is the narrativization of one's gaze (first this bar or that square "appears", but then it dissolves, to be replaced by a similar waning epiphany, leaving one with one's doubts, a plea: "Wait a minute, don't go away!"<sup>30</sup>

Lucy Lippard also described the experience of sustained looking.

'After a period of looking at the dull glow, one begins to perceive its non-blackness, though at first one can be no more specific than that about its nature. Then the extremely muted colors begin to emerge (usually tones of blue, red and green, sometimes taken to purple, ochres, maroons, olives, and a wide range of other "black" variations), and with them, but lagging a little, comes the trisection, which looks like a cross until the two overlapping bands (the horizontal over the vertical) separate themselves from the four square corners of ground. When the viewer's vantage point changes, edges and contrasts appear, are stressed, and are replaced by others. At first sight, the mind demurs and the eye busies itself with appearing and disappearing edges and contrasts, a harmless enough spectator sport that compensates many viewers for the absence of pictures and story telling images. Resisting these temptations, one is eventually drawn by anticipation and curiosity beyond boredom to speculation, thought, and a direct aesthetic/sensory enjoyment of the particular object. At this point, the infinite ambiguities inherent in any work that aspires to "nothingness" begin to operate.'<sup>31</sup>

Reinhardt's monochromes tease and frustrate perception but in so doing, involve it in a wordless experience, though there is some dispute about whether the effects are purely perceptual, or spiritual; I will discuss this later in relation to content. His art-as art is silent about everything except the painting itself, reduced, but not quite, to an absolute minimum, and in this 'not quite' exists the division between Reinhardt's work and that of the Minimalists. Their standards of finish were achieved through industrial processes and 'industrial surfaces' and involved the kind of commercial and financial transactions that Reinhardt sought to exclude from art. He painted by hand with detached but focused attention and concentration, making paintings that displayed neither passion nor the total impersonality

<sup>30</sup> Bois, Yve-Alain. *Ad Reinhardt*, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles / The Museum of Modern Art New York, Rizzoli, New York, 1991, p28.

<sup>31</sup> Lippard, Lucy. *Ad Reinhardt*, Harry Abrams Inc. New York, 1981, pp. 144-146.

characteristic of factory fabricated Minimalist objects. His subtle tones were seen by Minimalist artists as illusionistic, consequently his work had less influence on them than Newman's despite the fact that the latter was clearly more allied to the concerns of Abstract Expressionism, including the notion of painting everything as if it were for the first time. This was in contrast to Reinhardt's belief that 'everything, where to begin and where to end, should be worked out in the mind before the brush is taken up'. Art, for him, was not a search but a process of repetition and refinement; a ritual performed without ulterior motives. He made the black paintings to the same formula for years, rejecting variety, novelty and the avant-garde ethos. His intentions were stated clearly and concisely-

'The one work for the fine artist, the one painting, is the painting of the one size monochrome, one linear-division in each direction, one symmetry, one texture, one free-hand brushing, one rhythm, one working everything into one dissolution and one indivisibility, each painting into one over-all uniformity and non-irregularity. Everything into irreducibility, unreproducibility, imperceptibility.'<sup>32</sup>

Agnes Martin was also associated with Abstract Expressionism and has claimed in interviews about her work that it is Abstract Expressionist in essence. Working in New York in the late 1950s and through most of the 1960s Martin was well aware of the group of artists whose work had established the 'movement'. In some cases personal acquaintance was slight; she met Rothko and Still only once. However, her friendships with Reinhardt and Newman were close, the latter having helped her to hang her exhibitions, and as one of their co-exhibitors at the Betty Parsons Gallery she was involved with the work and ideas being generated.

Comments in interviews reveal her appreciation of much of the work, certainly that of Newman, Reinhardt, Kline, Pollock, Rothko and Still; though she has openly disapproved of de Kooning's work. She has always allied herself to the Abstract Expressionists in spite of the conspicuous differences between her work and the more gestural and vigorously expressive paintings that have become characteristic of that movement. The bond is sustained by a

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<sup>32</sup> Ad Reinhardt. 'Unpublished Notes 1962-63', from Rose, Barbara, *op cit* p.56.

commonly held belief in an intuitive, emotional basis for painting which, in Martin's case, is manifested through a highly refined sense of touch.

Martin's contribution to monochrome takes two basic forms, the monochrome onto which a linear grid is delicately drawn, and the near monochrome comprising close toned/close coloured horizontal bands. There will be much discussion of her work in the next chapter dealing with grids, but some useful observations can be made here.

A fine grid of pencil lines superimposed upon a thinly washed ground of monochrome creates an atmospheric appearance very different in quality from the simple flat ground. Martin's way of drawing the lines, sensitively preserving their hand made fragility, evokes an atmospheric, cloud-like formlessness from a device which, used differently, could easily appear mechanical and unnatural.

'My paintings have neither objects, nor space, not time, not anything-no forms. They are light, lightness, about merging, about formlessness breaking down form.'  
'You wouldn't think of form by the ocean'<sup>33</sup>

Her hand-drawn grids leave the surface open and allow many variations; the shapes and sizes of divisions can vary, larger divisions produce less veil-like grids; smaller divisions, too numerous to be counted, suggest infinity. Shape and proportion are significant; having settled to the consistent use of a 6'x 6' format, Martin found that rectangular sub-divisions created a desired feeling of dissonance within the square, lightening its weight and destroying its power. There are occurrences of other subtle additions to the optical experience, *Morning*, 1965<sup>34</sup> for example, reveals two drawings of the same grid not quite accurately superimposed, one in red which appears to have been drawn first and is revealed only where it runs slightly off register to the more dominant graphite grid. As one moves away from the canvas the red quickly loses its identity as a grid simply adding traces of colour to the atmospheric optical mixture. Whilst

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<sup>33</sup> Alloway, Lawrence. 'Formlessness breaking down form: the paintings of Agnes Martin', *Studio International*, vol. 185 February 1973 pp 61-65.

<sup>34</sup> This painting is currently on show at the Tate Modern, but no illustration is available.



















### Chapter Three: Monotone in a Minimalist Context

Robert Mangold – Brice Marden – Robert Ryman

This chapter examines the different approaches of a younger generation of monotonal painters whose work has been more closely associated with Minimalism than Abstract Expressionism though they belong to neither category. Although Robert Mangold (born 1937), Brice Marden (born 1938) and Robert Ryman (born 1930) have all produced pure monotones, since 1964 additional marks and colours have entered Mangold's work, and since 1984 Marden has abandoned monotone to pursue a more calligraphic approach. Robert Ryman has for many years, explored ways of applying different kinds of white paint to an extensive range of surfaces. As with the three painters discussed in the previous chapter, the significance for my practice lies in the range of strategies presented by their distinctive approaches. Their subtle additions and variations on the basic monotone will provide a basis for further exploration. If this investigation is to lead to discovery it must raise essential questions and plot the various possible approaches to painting silence.

Whereas the austere and restrained traces of feeling, characteristic of Martin's work, are evidence of her Abstract Expressionist roots and associations, the younger generation of monochrome painters absorbed influences that included the work of Jasper Johns and not least, the Minimalists. Robert Mangold's early monochromes embraced some Minimalist principles. He called these early works *Walls* and *Areas*; they are constructed from plywood or masonite. The panels are shaped and their surfaces sprayed with oil paint. Lucy Lippard discussed these works in 'The Silent Art', which includes an illustration of *Manila-Neutral Area*, 1966 (fig.15). She made the following comments-

'Mangold's faint gradations, consisting of two pale, closely valued colors are sprayed on smooth masonite; the formats are shaped, though only at one corner or edge, sliced





























'There were some works that I did in 1968-70, where I used the same color for the purpose of relating the pieces of a single series.'<sup>47</sup>

It was in the course of this series, in 1968 that he stopped using oil paint and changed to acrylics. In 1970 he produced a new format in the form of a frame. The frame paintings were made from masonite and painted monochromatically with acrylics. They did not continue for long though the idea was used again later. From the early 1970s he began to paint with acrylics on canvas using a roller; sprayed masonite no longer achieved the desired quality, but colour became a more important element.

'I was also beginning to think of how color would play a role, ... Up to then I would designate one color to a whole series of works. But at this point, I wanted to think of a specific color for each work.'<sup>48</sup>

This period of development began with a 'distorted circle' series, which made increasing use of geometrical figures. The canvases, either square, polygon-shaped, polygon-emerging-from-a-circle-shaped, etc., employ uniform monochromatic acrylic grounds onto which bold outline shapes of geometrical figures are drawn, usually in pencil. The combination of these particular materials is reminiscent of Agnes Martin's work, though the appearance is very different. Mangold's canvases are more brightly coloured; the clearly defined hand-drawn shapes play games with the outer shapes defined by the edges of the canvases. The basic approach has continued up to the present though other elements have changed from time to time; different outer shapes have been explored in relation to different internal, drawn structures, and flat monochromatic grounds have sometimes been replaced by broken textures made with rollers. However, many of the paintings are pure monochromes with clear, deceptively simple lines and shapes drawn onto them. There will be more to say about the reading and content of Mangold's paintings in Chapter Five.

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<sup>47</sup> Robert Mangold, Interview with Rosalind Krauss, op.cit.

<sup>48</sup> Gruen, John. "Robert Mangold 'A Maker of Images-Nothing More and Nothing Less'." *ARTnews*, Summer 1987, pp. 133-138.





a sense of scale. At the time he was working his canvases quite thickly with oil paint but finding himself dissatisfied with their hard, shiny, 'cruddy' surfaces; his remedy was to mix beeswax and turpentine into the paint so that the surfaces became soft, opaque, and matt. A thick coating of paint and beeswax was brushed onto the canvas and worked to a smooth surface with a palette knife. If the result was judged not to be successful, the mixture was scraped off, re-heated and applied again until the desired effects of physicality and feeling were created. The paintings thus produced retained their thickness but became sensuous, with a skin-like surface, occasionally broken to reveal the layer beneath. Although Marden's working process had something in common with the painterly approach of Abstract Expressionism it achieved very different results.

'An absolutely monotonal and monochromatic art is by nature concerned with the establishment and retention of the picture plane. Three New York artists, Ralph Humphrey, Robert Ryman and Brice Marden, have been working with surfaces that do not relinquish the controlled but improvisational possibilities of the paint itself. They have stripped the impasto of its gestural, emotional connotations. Their canvases emphasize the fact of painting as painting, surface as surface, paint as paint, in an inactive, unequivocal manner. ...Marden's palette is ...of neutral, rich greys and browns. A flat but rather waxy surface with random, underplayed process-markings covers the canvas except for a narrow band at the bottom, where drips and smears and the effects of execution are allowed to accumulate. He seems to exclude emotion entirely...'<sup>49</sup>

In that description Lucy Lippard emphasises some basic qualities of paintings she calls silent: a primary concern with the painting-as-a-painting, achieved through the establishment of the picture plane and the extreme reductionism intrinsic to monochromes. Nevertheless, Marden's application of thick paint incorporating traces of the process on the surface does seem to set it apart from Reinhardt's carefully brushed-out paint, Martin's delicate, almost perfect configurations, much of Newman's evenly applied paint, and from Mangold's sprayed, rolled or flatly brushed surfaces. To some extent Lippard resolves the difference by demonstrating its superficiality. There is no loss of control, the painterly, improvisatory approach does not mark a return to Abstract Expressionist values but is shown instead to be 'stripped of gestural,

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<sup>49</sup> Lippard, Lucy. 'The Silent Art', op cit.

emotional connotations' with the surviving marks described as 'underplayed'. It is as though Marden and Martin reached similar points from opposite directions, the former, by the extirpation of emotion from an essentially expressive method, and the latter, by the subtle, almost inadvertent injection of feeling into an otherwise rigorously controlled procedure.

Lippard's discussion accentuates the autonomy of Marden's work, making no reference to images, ideas, or meanings beyond the confines of the canvas. Her description is of canvases that emphasise the facts of their own reality, a reality characterised by detachment, restraint, wholeness and oneness. These basic properties can be enlarged upon by comparison with another account of the work from the same year (1967). Harris Rosenstein writing in *ARTnews* examined Marden's work along with that of Paul Mogenson and David Novros, in an article titled 'Total and Complex'. Having establishing their common interest in colour he suggested that the necessity to paint monochromes stemmed from a belief that 'color ought to have the freedom of not being realised fragmentarily or indirectly...'.<sup>50</sup> Marden chose to use only one colour to avoid the consequences of juxtapositions and interactions. He was working with the idea of 'Color rather than colors'. The establishment of the work's factual, physical nature was achieved through a process of-

'...building substance with color and surface to the point where it could not collapse into something fragile and empty'.<sup>51</sup>

Rosenstein's essay included a description of the technical process involved; it appears to be taken from Marden's own account and is worth quoting because it adds to the understanding of other aspects of the work—

'Marden's color is a felt-out balance of a number of tube colors first mixed on the canvas (a finely woven Dacron Sailcloth that shows no texture after painting) by brush and then spread flat with a palette knife. The wax-oil medium requires that the color be applied hot with the process completed before it cools. For large paintings, batch mixing is necessary. To get down the shine the paint is scraped off, reheated and reapplied, perhaps several times. The

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<sup>50</sup> Rosenstein, Harris. 'Total and Complex', *ARTnews*, (New York), May 1967, pp52-54, 67-68.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

difficulty of the process accords with the intention of getting a surface whose substance is "serious"- the same intention he had earlier with his shiny, "cruddy" surfaces. There is a further contradiction: the wax is soft and luminescent, yet the paintings themselves are hard and flat.<sup>52</sup>

A matt surface is common to many silent paintings because it preserves the painting's autonomy and separation from the surroundings; it was noted earlier that Reinhardt went to great lengths to ensure that no reflections from surrounding objects could be detected on his surfaces. In a catalogue essay Roberta Smith stressed Marden's attachment to the painting medium, its materials, methods and tradition; she noted also, his concern with 'essences themselves' and the desire to express complex experience through starkly simplified forms.<sup>53</sup> Throughout the literature generated by Marden's work there is widespread agreement about his concern for the two-dimensionality of painting, the picture-plane, the support, his physical approach to the process itself and the resulting physicality achieved by a vigorous application of thick paint and wax. His use of deep-edged stretchers deliberately overlapped with thick pigment and wax (except the bottom edge) established a paint layer with its own distinct edge-quality.

With Marden's introduction of two-panel paintings he abandoned the narrow (½ inch-1½ inch wide) pencilled-off strip that had been retained across the bottom edge of his earlier canvases to indicate scale and preserve '... a record, an index of the various layers of color'.<sup>54</sup>

'The delicate balance of such reduced elements- color, shape, surface, and a simple line- is jeopardised by the juxtaposition of two panels, each containing a line just above the bottom edge.'<sup>55</sup>

'Marden ceased marking off the margin when he began making two-panel paintings, since the relationship between panel size and painting size maintains scale.'<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Smith, Roberta. 'Brice Marden: Paintings, Drawings and Prints 1975-80', Whitechapel Art Gallery, London 1981.

<sup>54</sup> Smith, Roberta Pancoast. 'Brice Marden's Painting', *Arts Magazine*, May/June 1973, pp36-41.

<sup>55</sup> Shearer, Linda. Brice Marden Exhibition Catalogue, Solomon R Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1975, p31.

<sup>56</sup> Smith, Roberta Pancoast. Op cit.







colour was applied expressively, with an urgency demanded by the time available before the paint and wax mixture cooled. Nevertheless, it was done with full consideration for, and awareness of, the support, its dimensions and shape, its depth, the surface quality of the medium, and of course the need to establish an unequivocal two-dimensional plane. A strong and convincing physical presence was achieved when all these, plus colour and value were combined inextricably to achieve a unity of purpose and effect. The use of a single panel to hold a single colour enhanced the colour's inherent character— free from the inevitable interactions that would occur in juxtaposition with other colours, and free from figure and ground relationships. There was an imposed order that became central at this time; decisions about shape not only preceded but also determined the choice of colour. Roberta Pancoast Smith described Marden's unique ability to balance surface, colour and shape, noting particularly the rigorous demands he placed equally upon all three, and the way in which they were resolved and unified through the effects of 'weight'.

'The resolution of every painting seems to involve a particular balance, a distribution of weight between color (low to high value, warm to cool), surface (opaque to translucent, dense to porous), and shape (horizontal to verticality). The primary quality is not the weight itself but the balance of it, which always includes the absence or denial of it, often where it is most expected. The balance is at once formal and emotional in intensity, for its precariousness conveys a sense of the difficulty with which it is achieved and the oddness that it continues to hold together'.<sup>59</sup>

Marden's early preoccupation with a single 'grey' plane inevitably gave way to changes and developments as investigations into the basic elements continued. We are often reminded in the literature generated by his work, that he was a student at Yale, which bore the strong influence of Josef Albers, but that he had already taken Albers' colour course as a student in Boston and was far from enthusiastic about it. According to John Ashberry he neither enjoyed it nor understood it.<sup>60</sup> Roberta Pancoast Smith agrees.

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<sup>59</sup> Smith, Roberta Pancoast. *Op cit.*

<sup>60</sup> Ashberry, John. *Op cit.*

'He had painted primarily in black and white ever since an Albers color course at Boston left him completely confused, traumatized about color'.<sup>61</sup>

Despite this early negative experience the greys slowly gave way to more clearly identifiable colours until in 1974 he went the whole way with a series of paintings using primary colours. After the period from late 1965 to 1968, the single panel paintings gave way to two and three panel works where, unavoidably, juxtapositions of colour and tone occurred. These paintings comprised equal-sized panels placed together to form a single work, either fairly even in value but with contrasting coloured greys, or fairly close in colour but with clear contrasts of value. In 1967 Marden embarked upon his *Back* paintings, in which equal-sized panels were used for a whole series. Having firmly established in the single-panel paintings that shape determined colour, to such a point of consistency that when he painted two panels of the same size, separately, one out of sight of the other, their colours were found to be practically identical, he now had to find different colours for the same shapes and sizes. The imposition of strict rules and limits upon the working process enabled a slow and thorough exploration of the demarcated area, but this inevitably gave rise to questioning and examining the possibilities for change. It is in the nature of reductive work that changes, though seemingly small, assume great significance to the artist, and to the viewer if the work is successful. So it was that new problems presented themselves for thorough investigation, the balance of shape, colour, and surface became more complex. Two or three abutted shapes created the whole; Marden is reported to have attached so much importance to the shape of his panels that he considered the rectangle to be a 'shaped' canvas. Colour became subject to change through juxtaposition— I have found no source to confirm it, but Josef Albers must have begun to make sense at this point. Referring to the work of this period Roberta Pancoast Smith observed—

'He is frustrated by color, skeptical about it, *about its ability to exist definitely and to be perceived singly.*'<sup>62</sup> (My italics).

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<sup>61</sup> Smith, Roberta Pancoast. Op cit.

<sup>62</sup> Smith, Roberta. Pancoast. Ibid. p.38.

And later in the same article—

‘Two or more juxtaposed colors influence and determine each other; they aid in location of one another and so the colors in these paintings begin to be more exact and forceful.’<sup>63</sup>

Colour interaction, rather than being something to be avoided, was now seen to be playing a positive role. With the field of inquiry thus extended, surface, shape, colour and value had to be resolved in ways that could hold two or three panels together on the same plane. Part of Marden’s solution was to create a sense of visual awkwardness and deliberate difficulty; one manifestation of this being his selection of barely related colours. He explored different methods of creating interrelationships within some of the three-panel paintings, based on what Roberta Pancoast Smith has called a ‘focal’ panel. Placed centrally, an ambiguously coloured focal panel might evoke separate colour links with each of the differently coloured outside panels, which in turn could create their own connections through a shared value, both e.g. being equally lighter than the focal panel. In other examples the focal plane might be placed asymmetrically, on the left or right, creating a new set of problems and solutions. The dividing lines that marked the edges of adjoining panels were an acknowledged part of the work, imposing themselves strongly enough to demand full consideration. In the context of deliberately uneventful monochrome panels vertical or horizontal lines, resulting from placing panels together, become elements to be organised along with the rest of the work; even if they are accepted simply as neutral, structural necessities, they must be consciously recognised. Marden’s method of painting each panel separately until it achieved the required effects of physicality and metaphysicality made the joints unavoidable, but their effects were used purposefully. Where dark toned panels met, the joints tended to merge and become less conspicuous; where dark-toned panels joined light-toned panels the joint attached itself to the dark one giving the impression of no join, or a hardly noticeable one. Where two light panels

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid. p. 39.











































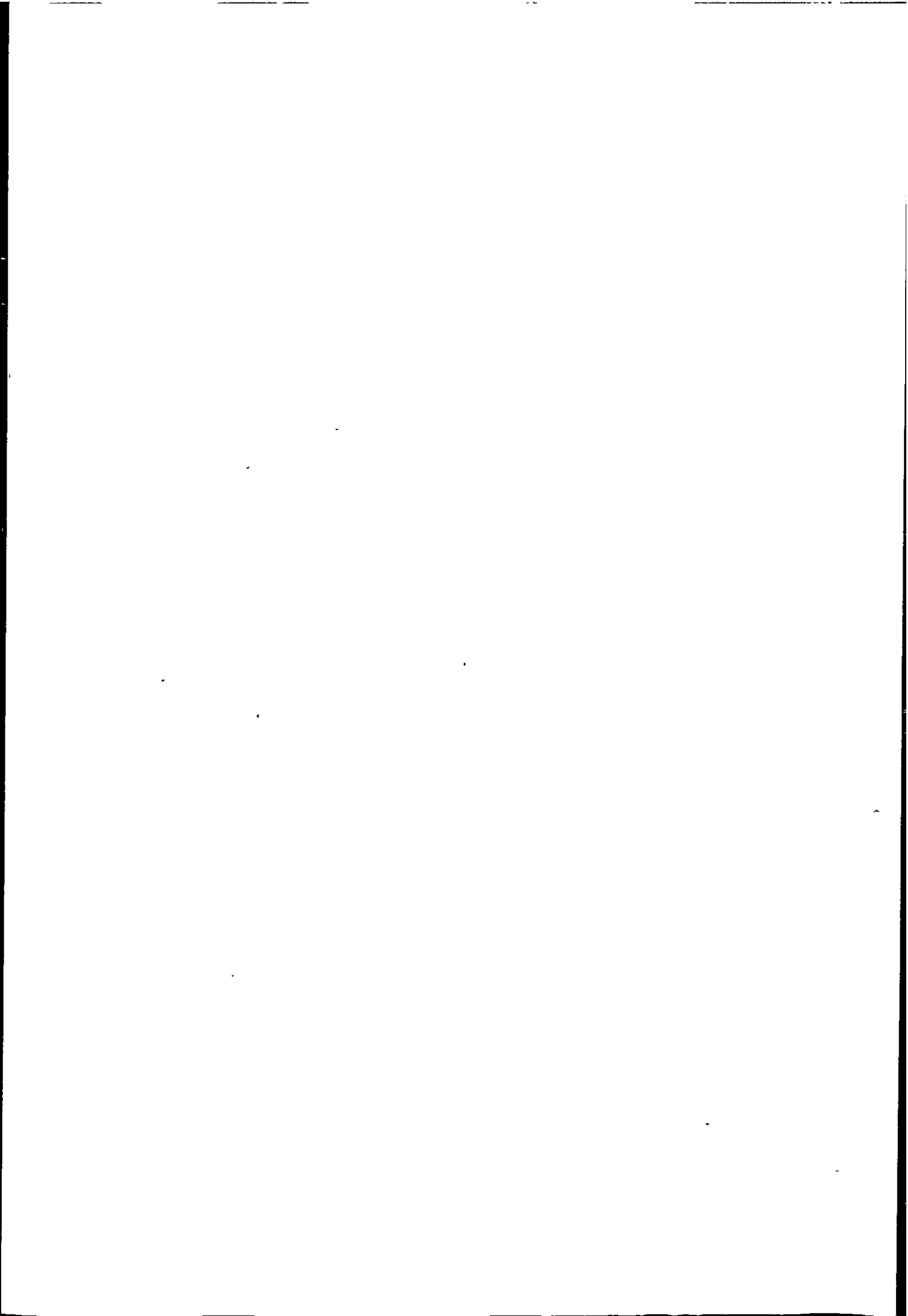


Ryman has employed unpainted materials in combination with painted surfaces, and occasionally moved towards construction—something Mangold abandoned. *Credential*, 1985, 62¾ x 22 x 2 inches (fig.37) provides examples of both. Fabricated from oil paint, aluminium sheet and four round-faced steel bolts, it is divided into three main parts, an evenly painted thin sheet of aluminium projecting from the wall at the top, a central division of unpainted aluminium, and a second evenly painted aluminium plane close to the wall at the bottom. There are strips of aluminium at both top and bottom through which the steel bolts are fixed into the wall. The work contains two perfect monotonal white squares that conform to the description of Lippard's ideal monotone, but breaks the rules with its overall vertical format, use of relief and reflective aluminium surfaces, by consisting of three parts, one of which is narrower than the other two, and by the conspicuous deployment of aluminium fixing strips and bolts. Of the six artists I have discussed, Ryman has at times moved furthest away from painting whilst appearing to remain closest to the pure silent monotone.

This chapter and Chapter Two have introduced examples of work in relation to the use and elaboration of monotone. I have discussed the approaches of all six of the artists selected from Lippard's essay showing how their paintings have presented a range of strategies developing out of an apparently empty and austere form. Whilst all have to some extent explored variations of size, shape, scale, paint application, key, colour, value, colour/value relationships, interval and structure, each has concentrated on a different combination of variables. Newman varied size, scale, colour, and interval; Martin, apart from her early work and the drawings and prints, has varied key, colour, value, colour/value relationships, interval and, to a limited degree the application of paint. Mangold has explored primarily the use of different shapes in relation to internal figures, but also size, colour, and the juxtaposition of



panels. Marden sought change through the exploration of size, shape, colour and 'architectural' arrangements and constructions of differently coloured panels. Ryman not only explored different paints and their qualities in relation to a range of different supports but also the ways of attaching supports to the wall. These elements added in conformity with the establishment and development of each artist's ideas, preferences, interests and influences, create an increasing number of models from which the successes and failures of silent painting can be assessed, especially in relation to the introduction of complexity and 'noise'. The various approaches that have emerged will be recalled in Chapter Six at the end of Section One, and will inform the practical investigations in Section Two. Before that however, I want to discuss in the next chapter, the use of the grid, and in Chapter Five, under the heading 'content', various ends to which silence has been employed, and some of the ways in which it has been received.



## Chapter Four: The Grid – Theories

Fourteen years after Lippard wrote 'The Silent Art' Rosalind Krauss wrote an essay titled 'The Originality of the Avant-Garde' in which she discussed the grid, describing it as an 'emblem' of Modernism.<sup>76</sup> Linking it directly to the pursuit of a purely visual art, Krauss connects its non-referential, autotelic properties with silence. Clearly, she was well aware of Lippard's application of the word to reductionist painting, and of the many other manifestations of silence in various art forms (Cage, Beckett, Pinter, Bergman) during the 1960s and 70s. In 'The Originality of the Avant-Garde' and another of her essays, 'Grids', artists whose work provides examples for Krauss's argument are among those cited by Lippard, particularly Agnes Martin and Ad Reinhardt. This is not surprising since both monotone and grid are extreme forms of abstraction that readily combine. The grid offers an obvious and inexpressive way to subdivide a rectangular monotonal canvas without disrupting its non-hierarchical colour-surface. It would be fallacious and impractical to discuss many examples of the work included in Lucy Lippard's essay, or to proceed with personal practice, without reference to the theories proposed by Rosalind Krauss; firstly, because grids are included in a number of the paintings discussed by Lippard; and secondly, in relation to practice, it would be wrong to omit a device which, as we shall see, has been so convincingly associated with silence. Of those who have written about the grid's role and function Krauss provides the most pertinent rationale. Discussing its 'imperviousness to language' she writes-

'The grid promotes [this] silence, expressing it moreover as a refusal of speech. The absolute stasis of the grid, its lack of hierarchy, of centre, of inflection, emphasizes not only its anti-referential character, but more importantly – its hostility to narrative. This structure, impervious both to time and to incident, will not permit the projection of language into the domain of the visual, and the result is silence.

This silence is not due simply to the extreme effectiveness of the grid as a barricade against speech, but to the protectiveness of its mesh against all intrusions from outside. No echoes of footsteps in empty rooms, no scream of birds across open skies, no rush of distant water – for the grid has collapsed the spatiality of nature as well as of speech, the result is still more silence.'<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Krauss, Rosalind. 'The Originality of the Avant-Garde', Originally published in *October*, no. 18, Cambridge, Mass., Fall 1981. Reprinted in Krauss, R. *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge, Mass. And London, 1986, pp. 151-70. Also reprinted in Harrison, Charles and Wood, Paul. *Art in Theory 1900-1990*, Blackwell, Oxford UK and Cambridge Mass. USA, 1992, pp. 1060-1065.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

Whereas Lippard's essay, 'The Silent Art' was written in 1967 to explain the apparent silence of monotonal paintings being produced at the time, Krauss's analysis, written in the 1980s, is a critique of modernist notions of originality rather than an argument in support of silent painting. It is a more complex argument that deals with silence but has other points to make. The grid, she asserts, was constantly discovered by the avant-garde in spite of the fact that its 'copyright expired sometime in antiquity and for many centuries this figure has been in the public domain.' I would argue that this particular criticism has little relevance for current practice since postmodernist painters working with the grid do so in full knowledge of its recent history at the very least. Where no claim to authorship exists there can be no accusations that painters are entertaining delusions of originality. They use it either with reference to those of its qualities that have been acknowledged, or to explore possibilities overlooked in Krauss's analysis. Clearly, it would be helpful to determine which of the grid's properties can usefully contribute to current practice; I will proceed with an outline of all Krauss's main assertions, followed by an evaluation of their relevance. Before I do, to avoid confusion I should point out that there are two essays dealing with the grid in Krauss's book *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, one is called 'The Originality of the Avant-Garde' and the other 'Grids'.

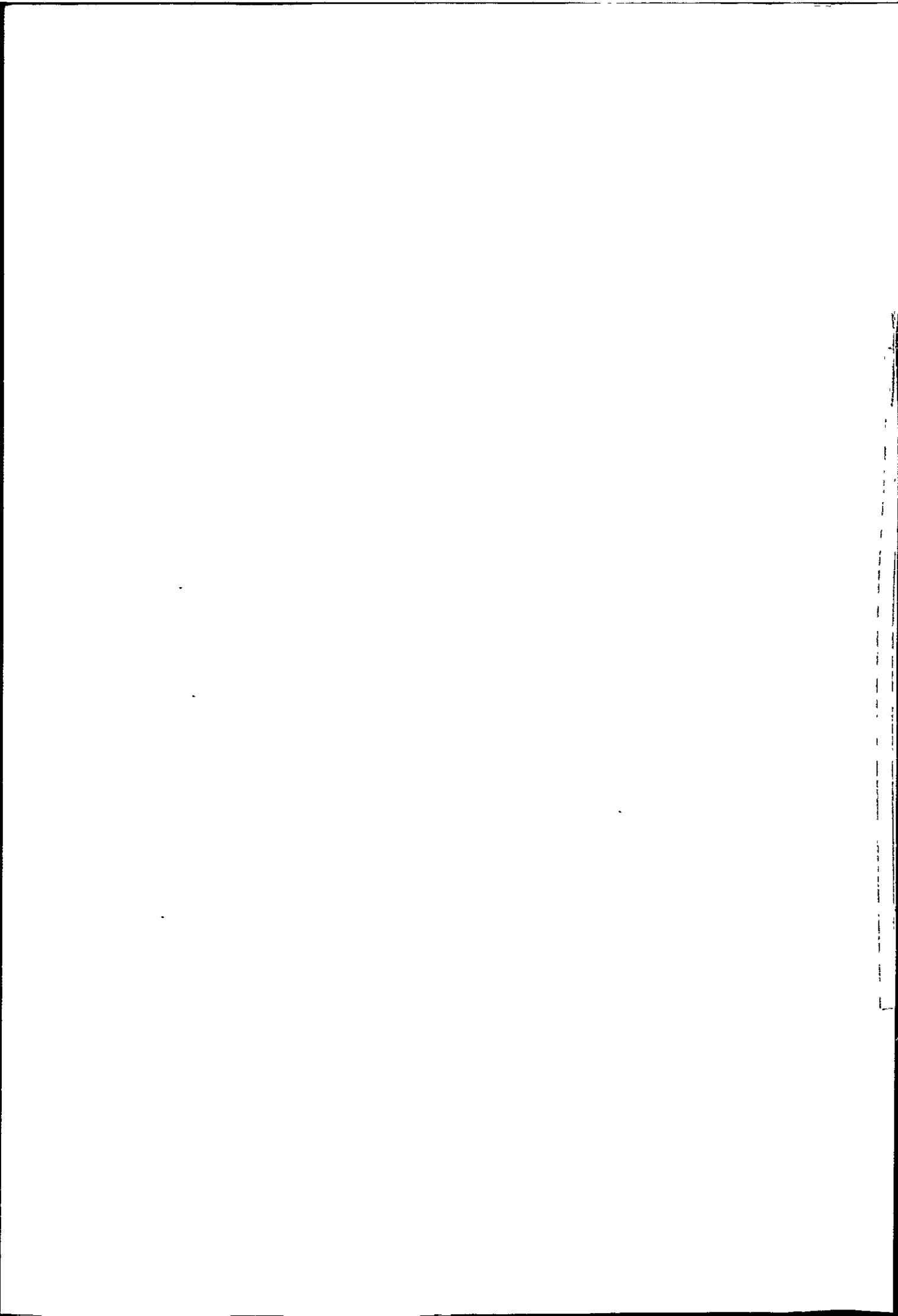
In the essay 'Grids'<sup>78</sup> Krauss firmly links the grid with Modernism describing it as 'emblematic of the modernist ambition'. Its role in the attempt to place painting in the realm of the purely visual is clearly acknowledged—

'...the grid has done its job with striking efficiency. The barrier it has lowered between the arts of vision and those of language has been almost totally successful in walling the visual arts into a realm of exclusive visuality and defending them against the intrusion of speech.'

In fact Krauss describes this position as a 'ghetto'.

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<sup>78</sup> All quotations until the final paragraph on p.67 are from Krauss, Rosalind E. *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, 1986 pp 8-22 'Grids'.



The grid 'resists development' she asserts, noting the paradox that is evident when avant-garde artists choose to work with a device that is so 'impervious to change', and which actually resists notions of progress in favour of repetition.

The grid functions both spatially and temporally. Spatially it renders the work autonomous, 'antinatural, antimimetic, antireal', and being the 'result of aesthetic decree', it excludes nature. 'The grid declares the space of art to be at once autonomous and autotelic.'

Temporally, it is 'the form that is ubiquitous in art in *our* century'.

The grid is flat and geometrical, mapping the surface-area of the canvas but also mapping 'the physical qualities of the surface onto the aesthetic dimensions of the same surface.' For this reason it is materialistic, but as Krauss points out, some exponents, Mondrian and Malevich for example, spoke instead of Mind, Spirit and Being, whilst Ad Reinhardt could not have been unaware of the spiritual implications of his Greek cross. Krauss explains that 20<sup>th</sup> century artists inherited the 19<sup>th</sup> century split between sacred and secular, science and religion, and faced with the consequent need to choose between them, chose both. Art had become a 'secular form of belief.' However, so the argument continues, because there was an embarrassment during the 20<sup>th</sup> century about discussing art in terms of the spiritual, the grid's effectiveness derived from its capacity both to conceal and disclose the embarrassment. And so to another paradox, the contradiction between material and spiritual is not resolved by the grid but obscured. Its 'mythic power' results from the possibility of being read in materialistic terms connoting science and logic, whilst allowing spiritual associations involving belief and illusion. Krauss identifies two opposing 19<sup>th</sup> century influences that have affected our reading of the grid, one being materialist/positivist derived from treatises on physiological optics illustrated with grids;<sup>79</sup> the other, metaphysical, having its origins in the geometrical barred windows to be found in some symbolist paintings. The windows, according to Krauss, draw significance from the dual qualities of transparency and opacity; the transparency allowing

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<sup>79</sup> 'Because it was a matter of demonstrating the interaction of specific particles throughout a continuous field, that field was analysed into the modular and repetitive structure of the grid.' Ibid.

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light and 'spirit' into the interior darkness, the opaque reflecting the sealed space of the mirror image.<sup>80</sup>

A final point deals with two different ways of constructing and reading a grid; Krauss describes its bivalent structure, calling it schizophrenic. A centrifugal grid is seen as a fragment of a far larger structure capable of extending infinitely in all directions and continuous with the world. It can be used in several ways and can 'dematerialize the surface'. A centripetal grid works inward from its outside edges, separates the work of art from the world, becomes 'an object of vision', and is autotelic. But here lies yet another paradox; it would appear that the centrifugal grid extending into the world should be associated with the scientific legacy of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and thus be seen as positivist and materialist, whilst the centripetal, autotelic grid would seem to stem from symbolist windows and therefore be read more spiritually. This is not the case in practice; grids organised inwardly from the edges are in fact more materialist (Krauss cites Alfred Jensen and Frank Stella), whilst those extending outwards dematerialise the surface—'the dispersal of matter into perceptual flicker.' (Agnes Martin and Larry Poons are given as examples of artists exploring the perceptual field). Finally it is noted that the 'schizophrenia allows for many artists – from Mondrian, to Albers, to Kelly, to LeWitt – to think about the grid in both ways at once.'

In the essay 'The Originality of the Avant-Garde'<sup>81</sup> Krauss makes more observations on the nature of the grid. She argues that for artists concerned with originary purity, disinterestedness and purposelessness, from which the grid's promise of autonomy stems, the grid provides a 'sense of being born into the newly evacuated space of an aesthetic purity and freedom'. For those, on the other hand, seeking 'an empirically grounded unity', whose interest centres on the grid's simultaneous depiction and inscription of both the surface and area of the support, 'the grid scored surface is the image of an absolute beginning'. This completely new beginning, the argument continues, accounts for the grid's popularity with artists who felt it

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<sup>80</sup> There is a lengthy structuralist exposition of the myth which is not directly relevant to this research but which concludes as follows: "I do not think it is an exaggeration to say that behind every twentieth-century grid there lies-like a trauma that must be repressed-a symbolist window parading in the guise of a treatise on optics."

<sup>81</sup> 'The Originality of the Avant-Garde', op. cit. see footnote 76.



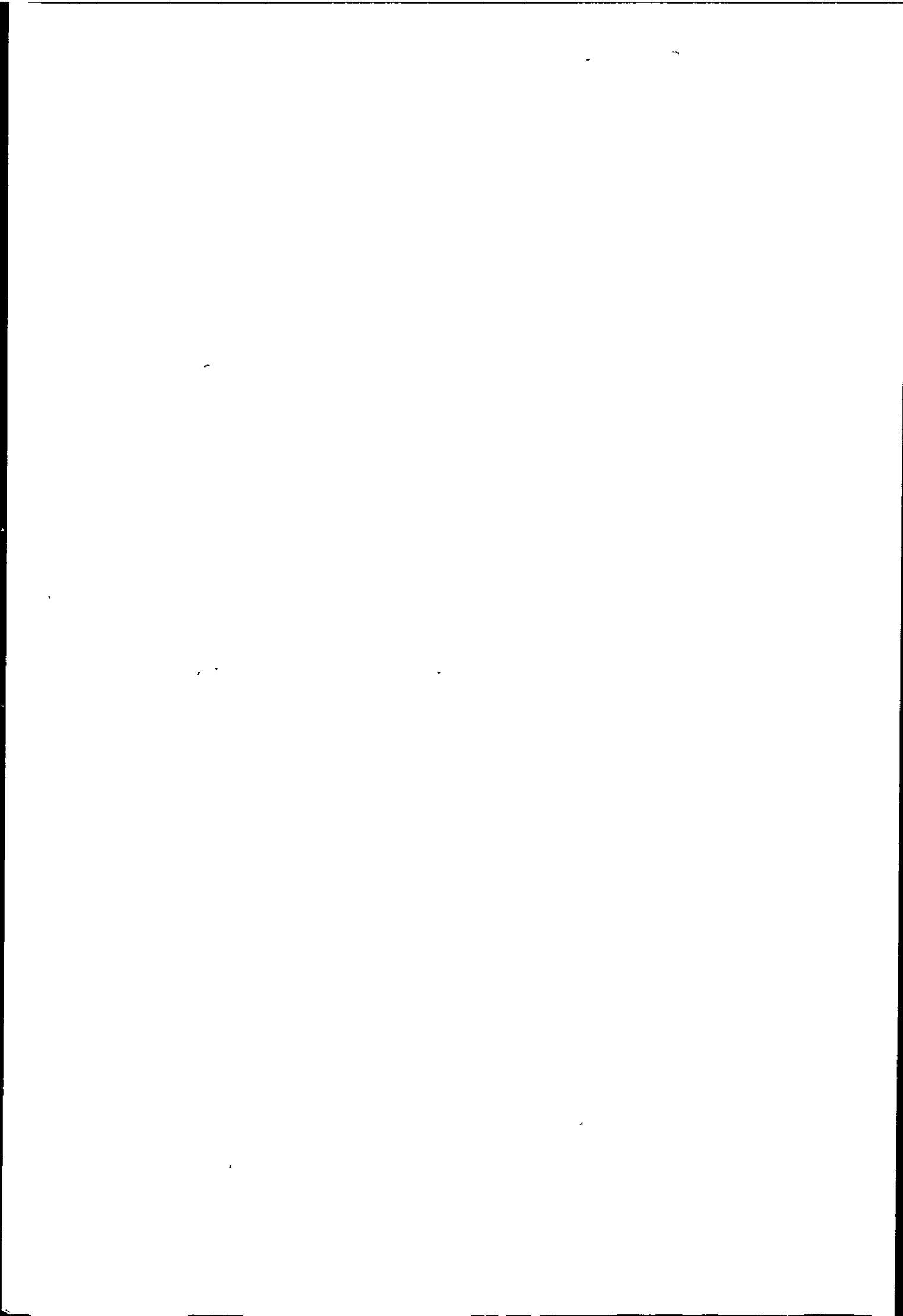
was their discovery— an act of originality resulting from a process of searching and uncovering.

Another instance of the grid's paradoxical character is illustrated with the image of 'a prison in which the caged artist feels at liberty'. Krauss labels it 'a badge of freedom' whilst emphasising its inflexible and restrictive nature; when artists begin to use the grid their work becomes repetitive and ceases to develop. Her point is not negative, it centres on the conflicting pairing of the terms originality/repetition; originality being 'valorized' whilst repetition is discredited. The grid's ubiquity and unoriginality compel the artist merely to repeat a 'logically fraudulent original'. Similarly, the artist is occupied with the 'fiction' of the 'originary status' of the picture surface.

'This origin is what the genius of the grid is supposed to manifest to us as viewers: an indisputable zero-ground beyond which there is no further model, or referent, or text.'

Krauss attacks the notion of the 'originary unity' claiming that it is not achieved when a grid is drawn onto a surface. It does not create a unity, it merely repeats and maps the surface, echoing the structure of the canvas. Instead of revealing the canvas it lays a veil over it. The argument then becomes less relevant to this research as it proceeds more deeply into questions of originality.

Which of those qualities, intrinsic to the grid, are enduring and appropriate for meaningful inclusion within current practice? To begin with, the recurring references to its paradoxical nature offer good reasons for its continued use. It is simultaneously avant-garde, ancient and ubiquitous, simultaneously static and repetitive, simultaneously an emblem of freedom and a formulaic, inflexible, self-inflicted prison for the artist, and simultaneously spiritual, material, scientific and logical. Also, as we have just seen, the effects of centripetal and centrifugal grids defy expectations. These contradictions and uncertainties lead directly from theory to practice; they are areas open to investigation, manipulation and control. Their true effects operate and are distinguishable only in the realm of visual perception.



The grid's resistance to development entails the practice of ritual and repetition compatible with contemplation and silence; Krauss does not dismiss this.

"There is no necessary connection between good art and change, no matter how conditioned we may be to think that there is. Indeed, as we have a more and more extended experience of the grid, we have discovered that one of the most modernist things about it is its capacity to serve as a paradigm or model for the antidevelopmental, the antinarrative, the antihistorical."<sup>82</sup>

Its capacity to promote silence through the exclusion of narrative, and to prohibit references to everything but the surface of the canvas and its two dimensional extension is no less true today than it was in the 1960s, 70s and 80s, though its current use is no longer associated with Greenberg's formalist doctrines nor with the avant-garde quest for originality. As I have already argued, such notions are now irrelevant since deliberate appropriations or re-examinations of modernist devices are unconcerned with laying claim to originality.

Can the grid still be described as autotelic, and if so does that property have lasting relevance? In the modernist era, the grid offered an approach to painting that reinforced the concerns of formalism. Being an end in-itself, it emphasised the autonomy of a painting, focusing attention on the elements it comprised i.e. colour, tone, line, texture etc. At the same time it referred, as Krauss has said, to the surface of the canvas, its weft and warp, and also to the surface-area. The postmodernist critique of modernist painting adds a second level of reflexivity; its current use must occur in the knowledge of its emblematic status within modernism. It refers to its own recent history and in so doing becomes a signifier of silence.

Does the 'mythic' power identified by Krauss reside in the contemporary grid? It has been established that knowledge of the grid's associations with modernism places the viewer in a knowing relationship with the work, but what effect does awareness have on the concealment of contradictory meanings? If viewers approach the grid in the knowledge that it can be read

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<sup>82</sup> Op. cit.

in scientific, mathematical, logical, and spiritual terms they will search for the ways in which all these qualities operate, and the extent of their various effects. But here we are dealing with a perceptual ambiguity rather than received notions of a modernist device, and whether one comes to the work with a prior knowledge or not, it must be experienced and apprehended visually. A sense of order is intrinsic, the mathematical and logical connotations will be either felt or recognised immediately. We are familiar with graph paper, charts, tables etc., and with paintings of all kinds. The act of measuring is implied by a surface divided regularly into equal size rectangles based on the proportions of its overall shape and size. A suggestion of geometry is evident in the structure and organisation, and in some paintings it can be detected in the precision of handling and the sharpness of the edges. The spiritual dimension will be more readily apprehended by some than others. Although I have already indicated that artists and viewers are thought to have been less inclined to attach such notions to paintings since the 1960s, the idea has by no means vanished. Of course the word spiritual causes problems—

SMP Do you think an experience of painting can be likened to a spiritual experience? Do you want your work to impart a contemplative mood?

RM ...I am not sure 'spiritual' is such a good word because of its associations with religious experience. I am referring instead to the very personal, intense relationship you can have with a work.<sup>83</sup>

Reductive paintings, especially Rothko's, still retain spiritual associations that seem to become more apparent according to the degree of quiet contemplation they induce. Where the suggestion is present it becomes more discernible through stillness, emptiness and silence. In the same way, the grid's propensity for silence causes the materiality of a painting to be weighed against its spirituality. It might explain why Agnes Martin and Ad Reinhardt felt uncomfortable about their inclusion in Minimalist shows given Minimalism's attitude towards notions of the spiritual in art. Martin and Reinhardt are the artists Krauss names as examples of those whose work 'makes us think we are dealing with materialism (or sometimes science, or logic) while at the same time permitting us the possibility of a release into belief (or illusion, or fiction).' They provide an illustration of the power of the myth. It is difficult to say with absolute certainty whether or not the grid still conceals its contradictory

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<sup>83</sup> Robert Mangold. Interview with Sylvia Plimack Mangold in *Mangold*, Phaidon Press Limited, London, 2000. p60.

spiritual/materialist readings, but I believe it does. Artists can choose to work with the ambiguity, but if instead they focus on just one of the two conflicting readings, inevitably they will hide one behind the other. In every material grid a hidden spiritual grid will be present for at least some viewers, and vice-versa. This being so, Krauss has identified an enduring quality.

The identification of centripetal and centrifugal grids cannot be eroded by the passage of time. The properties described belong to visual perception and appear every time a grid is drawn. The paradox described by Krauss is an invitation to investigate, though I do not believe that many present day viewers confronting the image of a grid will be either aware of or concerned with 'a symbolist window parading in the guise of a treatise on optics'. Their reading of the grid will not be influenced by the expectations of materiality or spirituality based on its 19<sup>th</sup> century legacy; they will see it in a context chosen and controlled by the artist. This might entail Krauss's centripetal/materialist, centrifugal/spiritual order, or following the example of Mondrian or Albers, 'both ways at once'; however, it does seem fair to argue that if the centrifugal grid extends into the world, it could be read as materialist; similarly, the centripetal grid withdrawing from the world could be seen as spiritual. I think such readings depend on the specific nature of the painting in which a grid appears. Where there is a sufficient degree of ambiguity and uncertainty to warrant exploration and manipulation, handling and context are clearly influential.

Although much of Krauss's argument in 'Modernist Myths' is concerned, as would be expected, with the notion of originality, the passage likening the grid to a prison in which the artist feels a sense of freedom, makes an essential point. Bridget Riley has discussed the surprising nature of working within strict limits; she quotes Igor Stravinsky and adds her own view. I will quote from both sources, beginning with Stravinsky.

'My freedom thus consists in my moving about within the narrow frame that I have assigned myself for each one of my undertakings.

I shall go even further: my freedom will be so much the greater and more meaningful, the more narrowly I limit my field of action and the more I surround myself with obstacles.

Whatever diminishes constraint diminishes strength. The more constraints one imposes, the more one frees oneself of the chains that shackle the spirit.<sup>84</sup>

‘...I realised that the most exciting way of setting about work was to establish limits, in terms of each particular piece, which would sometimes push me and the work as we evolved together into such tight corners that they yielded surprising riches. It was like a forcing house: through limiting myself even severely, one discovers things that one would never have dreamt of.’<sup>85</sup>

The grid has much in common with monotone in that both can appear to be cul-de-sacs in which creative endeavour will remain trapped indefinitely unless it reverses out again to a more promising destination. Painters who choose either approach claim the opposite; just as monotone lends significance to every change that takes place on its surface, so the grid’s inflexible and repetitious nature invites the examination of its possibilities for subtle change and nuance. However, the limitations are not inescapable, grids are often employed in the context of a variety of other marks or grounds through which the space defined by the cage can be expanded or contracted in line with the artist’s purpose. The grid need not be the only controlling factor. This observation can be expanded by shifting the focus from Rosalind Krauss to include other viewpoints, beginning with John Elderfield who has identified two ways of referring to, and employing grids.<sup>86</sup> He differentiates between grids as structures and grids as frameworks, using Agnes Martin’s early work as an example of structur .

‘If we take, for example, a painting by Agnes Martin and mentally remove the grid (its “visible skin”), any “underlying organization” that remains would indeed be invisible, for the painting is all grid. There are more general problems in the idea of things “underlying” art, but for present purposes, what is significant is that grids such as Martin’s are *all* that is “displayed.” They do not “service” other pictorial components (for none exist) and must therefore by a simple act of deduction, be counted as structural.’<sup>87</sup>

In contrast to this he cites the work of Larry Poons as an example of the grid as framework; Poons used it as scaffolding on which to hang other marks and explained the difference between scaffolding and structure in an interview with Phyllis Tuchman:

<sup>84</sup> Stravinsky, I. *The Poetics of Music*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass, 1970, p 87.

<sup>85</sup> Bridget Riley—Talking to E.H.Gombrich, transcribed in *Bridget Riley, Dialogues on Art*, Zwemmer, London, 1995, p. 34. The dialogue from which the quote was taken originally appeared in *Dialogues on Art* transmitted on BBC Radio 3 on 7,8,9,10, and 11th December 1992. (Extract from 8th December)

<sup>86</sup> Elderfield, John. ‘Grids’ *Artforum*, May 1972, pp 52-59.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.* p 53.

PT: It's like scaffolding, right. When the picture was finished, hopefully, the scaffolding wasn't to be seen.

Like structure?

LP: That's kind of a simplistic idea of structure. If it's on graph paper, people feel its structure. It's no more structures than anything else. It's just a lot of people began to think of structure in terms of if you can count them, if you can subtract them, if you see the whole canvas divided equally, that's structure. Now, that's not structure. That's just divisions.<sup>88</sup>

If it is the case that simple grids with no additions are structures, and grids that 'service other pictorial components' are frameworks, then clearly structures impose the strictest limitations whereas frameworks permit greater freedom.

Elderfield is critical of grids that constitute the structure of paintings. Whilst agreeing with Krauss that they 'depict the literal object' and support 'the flatness and delimitation of flatness', he asserts that boredom increases in direct proportion to the size of the divisions. Sol LeWitt is given as someone who employs grids effectively, that is, in a 'quasi-Impressionist' manner with close hatchings that create a 'regularized vibrancy of sensation'. This argument coincides with Krauss's analysis of Agnes Martin's explorations of the perceptual field, where she achieves a dematerialisation of the painting surface and the 'dispersal of matter into perceptual flicker.' In Elderfield's estimation, grids are more effective pictorial devices when used as frameworks.

'We can, [therefore] usefully separate grids as frameworks into those that work to cohere a surface and those that fracture it. Hence, even within works using intact grids, we may observe the familiar distinction between relational and non-relational distribution.'<sup>89</sup>

Richard Anuszkiewicz and Ellsworth Kelly are named as examples of painters who, by employing relational elements as discernible 'subgroupings', have subverted the grid.

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<sup>88</sup> Lippard, Lucy R. 'Top to Bottom, Left to Right', Essay in the catalogue *Grids, Grids, Grids, Grids, Grids, Grids, Grids, Grids, Grids*, Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, 1972.

<sup>89</sup> Elderfield, J. Op cit.

Alan Shields and John Walker have provided examples of fragmented grids, where paintings comprise several elements, one of which is part of a grid. Elderfield also refers to grids that simply 'inaugurate' paintings but are eventually relegated to a minor role within the finished work, and to those that are 'literally' frameworks to which marks are attached.

As the variations accumulate—centripetal, centrifugal, material, spiritual, scaffolds, frameworks, relational, non-relational, fragmented etc.the grid appears less prison like, or at least less like a single prison. This probably accounts, partly, for the title of the 1972 exhibition—Grids, Grids, Grids, Grids, Grids, Grids, Grids, Grids<sup>90</sup>. The exhibition catalogue includes an essay 'Top to Bottom, Left to Right' written by Lucy Lippard, which consists largely of statements made by some of the participating artists, but including some useful comments by Lippard emphasising the openness of the framework grid. Here are a few extracts:

'The grid *per se* is of absolutely no importance to any of the artists in this exhibition, providing, as it does, merely an armature for a variety of styles, means and contents'

'The exhibition itself has been successfully organised on the grid principle (an arbitrary framework on which to build an entity, a self-restrictive device by which to facilitate choice).

'The grid is music paper for color, idea, state of mind. It is a standard measure. It repeats the traditional shape of the canvas itself. It implies, illogically, logic, and harmony and unity, and is therefore all the more interesting to alter or destroy, no matter how slightly.'

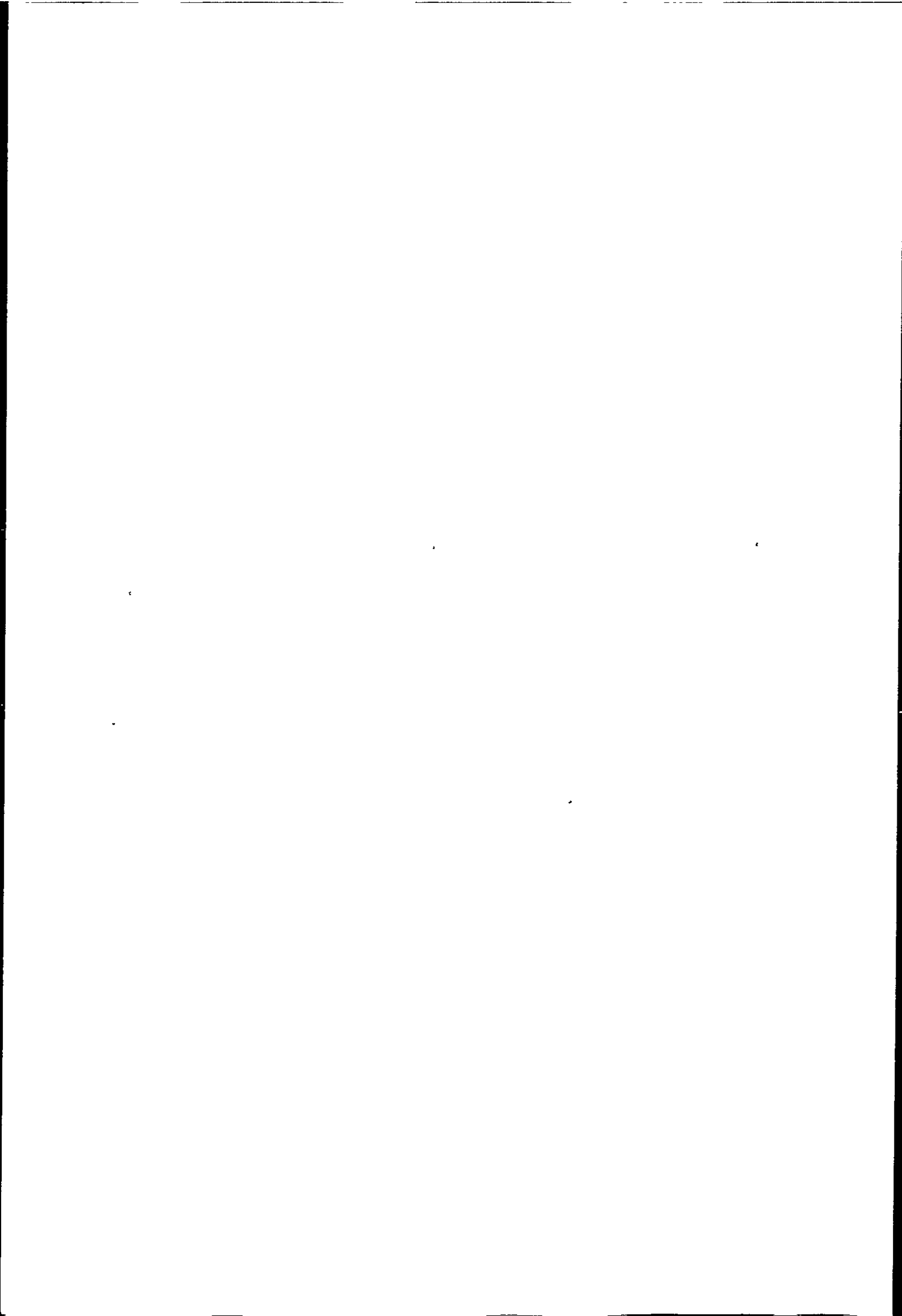
'For those uninterested in form, it provides an undistracting armature for content or material. For those emphasising nuance or emotion, it provides a safely valve.'

It is clear from all this that the grid can be approached knowingly, to be re-examined and employed in many relevant ways, except of course ways that might relate to avant-garde notions of originality. Within the expositions presented by Krauss, Elderfield and Lippard, we have seen the perceived function of the grid change from a state of purity, an emblem of freedom and originality, to that of a mere armature whose significance is finally questioned by

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<sup>90</sup> Op cit.





the very painting it supports. Whereas Krauss has referred to artists who (unsuccessfully) attempt to use 'the canvas surface and the grid that scores it' as the 'absolute unity necessary to the notion of an origin.'<sup>91</sup>, Lippard has noted its use as an 'instrument by which to control the void that is the beginning of a canvas, a way to *violate* the ominously blank surface.'<sup>92</sup> The possibilities have opened up throughout the discussion through the accumulation of different viewpoints. The grid remains, for some artists, a valid means of achieving specific intentions. It provides, amongst other things, a vehicle capable of signifying materiality by mapping the actuality of the painting surface, or the very opposite qualities associated with mind or spirit; the intangible and ineffable.

There are more observations on the grid from sources not yet discussed but most of the material pertinent to this research has been included; more will be added later in relation to the work of Agnes Martin and Ad Reinhardt. I would like to end this section with a quotation from John Elderfield, who, having declared the continued viability of the grid accompanied by a warning that many of those artists using it have produced work that is 'merely pleasant', optimistically notes:

'...it was not the grid itself that made their art – it merely initiated it.'

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<sup>91</sup> The Originality of the Avant-garde, op cit.

<sup>92</sup> Top to Bottom, Left to Right, op cit. (my italics).









antimimetic, antireal and autotelic. It excludes nature and confirms the autonomy of the painting. Temporality is manifested through its ubiquity in the twentieth century, e.g. cubism, de Stijl, Mondrian, and Malevich. This discussion centres on the grid's spatial qualities. Krauss identified two types of grid, centrifugal and centripetal. Centrifugal grids are "arbitrary" fragments of grids that extend beyond the limits of the canvas to infinity. Centripetal grids work inwards from the outer edges of the canvas organising both image and surface inwardly and thus establishing the work's status as a self-reflexive, autotelic 'object of vision'. (Arguments about material and spiritual qualities will be dealt with in relation to content in the next chapter). It is indisputable that Reinhardt's work was intended to be autotelic and devoid of references to the world beyond art; it has already been established that he overloaded his oil paint with pigment to exclude the possibility of reflections, thus preventing the outside world from becoming part of the painting. It was consistent with his aims therefore, to use a centripetal grid. If the canvas had simply been divided into nine equal squares, a centrifugal grid would have resulted, but the creation of a central horizontal 'bar' caused the square to be internally organised and therefore to become centripetal and autotelic in conformity with the condition of art-as-art. Reinhardt described the structure as-  
'...trisected (*no composition*), one horizontal form negating one vertical form...'<sup>93</sup>

It is useful to compare Krauss's analysis of the grid's inherent features with some of Reinhardt's theories. Krauss notes the impossibility of further development once the grid formula has been employed; subsequent work is merely repetitive. (Albers and Mondrian are cited as examples). Furthermore, she argues that quality is not dependant upon development—  
'There is no necessary connection between good art and change.'<sup>94</sup> She also asserts that 'The grid serves as a paradigm or model for the anti developmental, the anti narrative, the anti historical.'<sup>95</sup> Similar points can be found in Reinhardt's writings— 'The one direction in fine or abstract art today is in the painting of the same one form over and over again.' In the essay 'Timeless in Asia' he observes that Asian sculpture is based on 'standard forms and identical

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<sup>93</sup> Rose, Barbara. *Art as Art*, op cit.

<sup>94</sup> Krauss, R. *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, op cit. p 22.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

patterns...repeated and refined for centuries.'<sup>96</sup> He clearly embraces the idea— 'The intensity, consciousness, and perfection of Asiatic art come only from repetitiousness and sameness, just as true originality exists only where all artists work in the same traditions.' In the unpublished notes from 1963 he reinforces this position declaring 'There is nothing less significant in art, nothing more exhausting and immediately exhausted than endless variety.'<sup>97</sup> In the same spirit he made many similar statements in relation to repetition; one frequently encountered statement that connects his other assertions to the use of a grid will suffice to sum up this particular point.

'The one work for the fine artist, the one painting, is the painting of the one-size canvas, the single scheme, one formal device, one colour monochrome, one linear-division in each direction, one symmetry, one texture, one free-hand brushing, one rhythm, one working everything into one dissolution and one indivisibility, each painting into one over-all uniformity and non-irregularity. Everything into irreducibility, unreproducibility, impenetrability.'<sup>98</sup>

John Elderfield distinguishes between a 'factual display', clearly visible, e.g. in the work of Agnes Martin where 'the painting is all grid', and a 'framework', simply 'to be departed from' e.g. Larry Poons. In attempting to relate Reinhardt's work to these two models it soon becomes clear that he has been elusive as always. His use of the grid constitutes neither a factual display, nor a structure to be departed from. Poons made marks *in relation to* a grid that was then painted out. Reinhardt made no other marks in relation to a grid that he then painted out— almost, to borrow a key word from Yve-Alain Bois. The idea of 'almost' is central to the catalogue commentary 'The Limit of Almost' written by Bois to accompany an exhibition of Reinhardt's work in 1991. In it he discusses the grid as non-relational and as a means of avoiding composition but makes a fundamental point concerning the role of the grid in Reinhardt's black paintings— 'The grid made his black paintings *paintings*, instead of black reliefs'<sup>99</sup>.

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<sup>96</sup> See Rose, Barbara, op cit. p 216-18.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Lippard, Lucy. 'Top to Bottom, Left to Right', from *Grids Grids Grids Grids Grids Grids Grids Grids*, op cit.



It has been shown that Reinhardt's black paintings use the grid in a number of ways. They use it as a centripetal form to emphasise the autonomous nature of the work and to remove it from the world beyond the realms of art. Its incorporation into the image also creates a symmetrical, non-relational structure giving equal importance to the surface as a whole, thus creating balance and stillness within the confines of the canvas. It presents a standard form that excludes the necessity for constant renewal and change, inviting instead repetition and ritual. The anti-narrative function is common to the paintings of Reinhardt, Martin, and in some instances Ryman, but Reinhardt's work differs in the way his grids exist between blocks of barely distinguishable qualities of black. Until the different areas are perceived, the grid and all its properties remain hidden. When it does appear it is as an inherent element of the monotonal surface; the two devices simultaneously reinforce the work's autonomy, stillness and silence.

Most of the grids that appear in Agnes Martin's paintings are not formed by the edges or intersections of painted areas, they are linear drawings that map the two dimensional surfaces in the way Krauss describes. Lawrence Alloway has described the process.

'[The grid] is put down in pencil so that the network consists of marks far less clearly given than we are accustomed to in American painting with its usual standard of high emphasis and unrelieved clarity. Thus the grid, though tight, does not close the surface, but establishes an open plane, identified with the surface of the picture but accumulating sufficient differences to suggest, for all its regularity, a veil, a shadow, a bloom.'<sup>100</sup>

Martin's departure from Abstract Expressionism's 'unrelieved clarity' and the particular effects produced by her drawing of the grid are fully in accord with her notions of perfection, universal emotions, and silence. Alloway describes how this content was more effectively realised when she abandoned the use of a margin around the grid.

'By removing the internal boundaries of the grid, by which it was seen to stop and start, Martin emphasizes not the succession of modular bits from, say, left to right, but the wholeness of the module, its occupancy of space rather than its duration in time.'<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Alloway, Lawrence. 'Formlessness breaking down form: the paintings of Agnes Martin', *Studio*, vol. 185, February 1973, pp61-65.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

Predetermination plays an undeniable part. It is impossible to set about drawing onto canvas a symmetrical grid or a specific number of horizontal or vertical stripes of equal width, either from edge to edge or within a prescribed area, without being able to predict the outcome. Once the divisions and intervals have been decided, the (ideal) image is formed in the mind of the painter. Lawrence Alloway borrowed the term 'stimulus domain' from Max Kozloff to describe this process, 'it is the set of rules by means of which each pattern is constructed'. He notes also the ambiguity created by a carefully drawn grid which at the same time appears as 'an image dissolving', describing its effect as 'precision and elusiveness at once'. This slightly hard to grasp quality, though quite different in its appearance and in the means by which it was achieved, seems in some ways comparable to the effect of Reinhardt's almost indistinguishable grid concealed between close toned, close hued rectangles.

Martin has drawn attention to the fact that although her canvases are always square her grids are not, consequently, the effect is of dissonance and a lightening of the weight of the square so as to destroy its power. Lucy Lippard has drawn attention to the different sizes and shapes of grids that the paintings explore.

'Agnes Martin's channels of nuance, stretched on a rack of linear tensions which "destroy the rectangle", are legendary examples of an unrepentive use of a repetitive medium.'<sup>102</sup>

A short but perceptive analysis has been written by Kasha Linville, based on observations of the changes occurring as the canvases are viewed from different distances.

'Miss Martin's canvases from 1960 to 1967 are sequences of illusions of textures that change as viewing distance changes. In most cases they blend finally into a single tone: a beautiful gray or gray-white that still carries the emotive impact of the lines that have by this time almost disappeared from sight. Either a taut denseness, or deep-breathing expansiveness remains, depending on the initial nature of the grid.'<sup>103</sup>

Observing first of all at close range, she notes the quality of Martin's hand-drawn lines as they break up on the uneven surface of the canvas. (See fig.41).

'... you can feel her hand moving, her touch-judgements. She makes touch tangible and visible. Sometimes her line is sharp, as in an early painting, *Flower in the Wind*, 1963.

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Linville, Kasha. 'Agnes Martin: An Appreciation', *Artforum*, New York, April 1973, pp72-3.





close-up surface, and the 'wall-like stela' of the impassive, perfectly square panel in the distant view.'<sup>107</sup>

The painting *Tundra* demonstrates the establishment of this middle 'atmospheric' element by slightly different means. Linville once again confirms the importance of subtle changes and devices for the perceptive viewer—

'Its surface is divided by three lines into six tall rectangles. The pattern reminds you of a window, but the surface is closed. It suggests the heavy, white-jade blankness of a snowy sky. The lines that divide it are dominant at close range, but something very peculiar happens as you move back from this canvas. Because the horizontally brushed, grayish wash on the surface stops near but not against the lines, they seem to have halos around them. These halos actually swallow the lines at middle distance, leaving only their white ghosts.'<sup>108</sup>

Thomas McEvelley has also described the effects of moving back from the paintings—

'Activated and tingling, the grid is the place of infinite creativity, the ground to which we must return for "the renewal of memories of moments of perfection." When Martin's grids disappear as one backs away from the painting, they disappear, as it were, into the otherwise formless ground, where they reside always in a kind of latency, giving the ground an appearance of floating vibrancy, of light-filled potentiality, of invisible but active force.'

In addition, he has investigated the mathematical aspects of Martin's grids in the 1960s paintings. Having counted the divisions and calculated the numbers of columns in relation to rows he discovered the repeated occurrence of some simple ratios.

'When asked about decisions having to do with how many elements would be included in a given work, Martin answers that her interest is more in scale, in an architectural sense, than in arithmetic. Yet her works tend to cluster around the simple ratios 1:2, 2:3, and 3:4, which have long been viewed as creative and dynamic.'<sup>109</sup>

Martin's grids derive their character and effect from the way in which they are drawn; a seemingly mechanical organisation of repeated rectangles has made viewers focus on the slight deviations from an otherwise standard, predictable formula. A device that carries mathematical and scientific associations has been transformed into one that is subtly expressive and spiritual.

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<sup>107</sup> Krauss, Rosalind. *Bachelors*

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> McEvelley, Thomas. 'The Grey geese Descending: The Art of Agnes Martin', *Artforum*, Summer 1987 pp94-99.

*'You commented once that you adopted the grid because it was universal, yet your lines are handmade, they emphasise touch which is associated with the personal, the idiosyncratic. Do you see any contradiction in that?*

No. I drew them just as perfectly as I could, I didn't think at all about my hand, but in nature it is impossible to make a perfect line, so the lines have that lack of perfection. The composition carries it.

*But the sensitivity of the lines is very important, at least in my perception of the work; indeed, the fluctuations in the line contribute to a sense of atmosphere in the work.*

I didn't expect it but I value it...<sup>110</sup>

The grid lines are carefully drawn with pencil on the rough tooth of canvas; the result is, inevitably, slightly inconsistent and uneven as the pencil point catches the highest parts of the woven fabric gradually becoming blunt as it travels across. Often, the lines are drawn onto monochrome grounds of particular tones and colours but sometimes they are drawn and then over-painted with gesso or a single colour, and sometimes the small rectangular subdivisions of the grid are carefully painted in around the lines. Martin's paintings have employed centripetal grids set inside the square of the stretcher with a margin all around, and centrifugal grids that continue up to (and beyond?) all four edges. Different ratios, scales and sizes of the subdivisions have been investigated along with their various veil-like and atmospheric qualities. The predominant effect is of delicacy and at times fragility, which is why they have so often been discussed in terms of their 'touch' and their restrained expressive qualities. In the next chapter there will be further discussion of the way Martin's grids operate.

Robert Ryman's work is not particularly concerned with the investigation of grids, but in making occasional use of them he has added approaches not covered by the work of Reinhardt and Martin. In *Stretched Drawing*, 1963 (fig.42) a grid has been drawn in charcoal onto stretched, unprimed cotton canvas, then removed from the stretcher and restretched to create slight distortions in the lines. In works such as the *Classico* series and *Lugano*, 1968, Ryman has painted onto sheets of paper that have been fixed to the wall, creating a visible grid where

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<sup>110</sup> Interview with Irving Sandler, op cit.







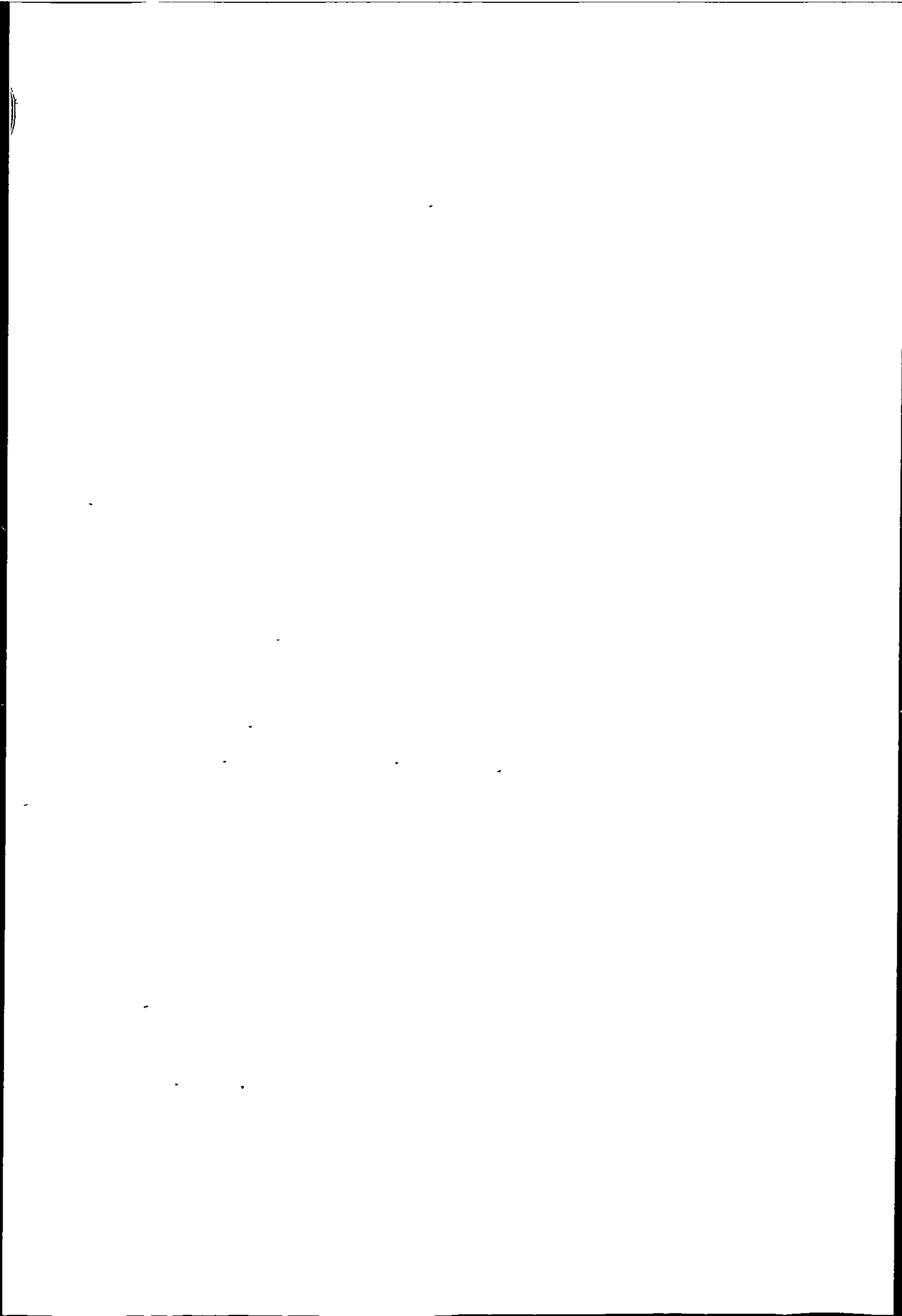








their greater or lesser allegiances to Abstract Expressionism or Minimalism. If all their relevant works are silent we might concede that there are different kinds of silence, different reasons for creating or allowing it and different ways of achieving it, or, that silence results simply from the use of monotone (Lippard), or the grid (Krauss). These are things that must be examined through practice, so I will return to them in Section Two.



## Chapter Six: Content and Meaning

This chapter examines the content and meaning of silent painting. It investigates the declared intentions of the artists and the differing readings contributed by various critics. The impassive appearance of Minimalism suffused with the residual emotional content of Abstract Expressionism has rendered the blankness of monotone open to differing and sometimes contradictory analyses. Clear statements by artists were no protection from the urge to detect meaning wherever possible.

It might seem odd to consider the content of silence since there should be none, but that is not always the case. For example, Barnett Newman was a firm believer in subject matter whilst Robert Ryman is far closer to the 'what you see is what you see' approach of Frank Stella (which means that Newman's work will be discussed at greater length here than Ryman's). Also, Reinhardt's work, in spite of all his assertions, has been interpreted spiritually, and Mangold whose work often combines emptiness with traces of feeling, does not include silence amongst his intentions. The purpose of this chapter is to examine the extent to which meaning has been intended by the artists and read into the paintings by critics and reviewers. It will also investigate the breadth of content that can be revealed within the work of six 'silent' painters.

What did Barnett Newman say his paintings were about?

'One thing that I am involved in about painting is that the painting should give man a sense of place: that he knows he's there, so he's aware of himself... To me the sense of place not only has a mystery but has that sense of metaphysical fact'<sup>111</sup>

'Anyone standing in front of my paintings must feel the vertical dome-like vaults encompass him to awaken awareness of his being alive in the sensation of complete space.'<sup>112</sup>

<sup>111</sup> Barnett Newman, Interview with David Sylvester in *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, op cit. p 257. – Also published in *The Listener*, August 10<sup>th</sup>, 1972.

<sup>112</sup> Barnett Newman, 'Frontiers of Space', Interview with Dorothy Gees Seckler, *Art in America*, vol. 50, no. 2, Summer 1962, pp 82-87.

'Almost fifteen years ago Harold Rosenberg challenged me to explain what one of my paintings could possibly mean to the world. My answer was that if he and others could read it properly it would mean the end of all state capitalism and totalitarianism. That answer still goes.'<sup>113</sup>

'It is full of meaning, but the meaning must come from the seeing, not from the talking.'<sup>114</sup>

These statements emphasising awareness, a sense of place and mystery, focus on the direct response of the viewer. Newman directs our attention towards feelings and glimpses of the infinite, the unknowable and the ineffable – to vision rather than speech. In common with many artists he eschews simple explanations that can be substituted for the paintings. He will not diminish the richness or obstruct the subtle evocation of feelings, ideas and associations by narrowing the meaning down to mere description.

Nevertheless, Newman insisted that 'subject' (rather than object) matter was the fundamental requirement of good art; it distanced itself from the decorative. Newman felt that for too long European art had been concerned with beauty, thus reducing paintings to aesthetic objects.

'Those who emphasise the world of objects and insist that an object can be art must, it seems to me, in the end make man himself an object. Now, this attitude is okay for generals, for politicians, for professional patriots, and for pagan aestheticians, who make man into so much material; but I think man is more than an object.'<sup>115</sup>

He opposed this approach with his concept of the sublime – 'the terror of the unknowable' which his fields and zips were intended to evoke. Newman's final article for *Tiger's Eye* in December 1948 'The Sublime is Now', catalogued his disagreements with, and ultimate rejection of European art, which had inherited from the Greeks an enduring preoccupation with beauty. He believed that 'man's natural desire in the arts to express his relation to the Absolute became identified and confused with the absolutisms of perfect creations.' Tracing this confusion on through the philosophical investigations of Kant and Hegel he noted that only Edmund Burke separated the Sublime from the Beautiful. He explained also, the

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Newman, Barnett. Interview with Lane Slate, published in *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, Ed. John P. O'Neill, University of California Press, Berkeley : Los Angeles, 1992, p253.



significant role played by the Impressionists in breaking with 'the rhetoric of beauty', though this did not lead to their reinstatement of the sublime. His views were unequivocal—

'I believe that here in America, some of us, free from the weight of European culture, are finding the answer, by completely denying that art has any concern with the problem of beauty and where to find it.'

'We are reassessing man's natural desire for the exalted, for a concern with our relationships to the absolute emotions.'

'We are creating images which are devoid of the props and crutches that evoke associations with outmoded images, both sublime and beautiful.'

Among recent commentators, Jean Francois Lyotard has investigated the nature of the sublime (*The Sublime and the Avant Garde*), his assertion is that although the sublime is beyond the here and now of familiar experience, the true experience of here and now is anything but commonplace; the awareness is strange and difficult to grasp, hence Newman's use of such titles as *Here, Now, Be, or Not There – Here*.<sup>116</sup> It is 'as if a feeling is without articulation, form or structure, and hence cannot be elucidated.'<sup>117</sup> In confronting the 'Sublime' and the 'terror of the unknowable' Newman was dealing with the ineffable, the actual, silent experience of an instantaneous grasp of the infinite, a sudden awareness of one's being here and now, and the accompanying existential terror.

Newman disseminated his views in published articles, essays and interviews, so it is hardly surprising to find many critics referring to self-awareness, a sense of place and time (the instant), and of course the sublime, but some have proceeded further into the realms of interpretation. Thomas B. Hess's analysis of Newman's work examines metaphorical and spiritual concerns as well as the formal and physical aspects. He resolves some of the differences between these two occasionally antithetical critical approaches but speculates beyond the limits established by Newman. Hess asserts that the influence of the Kabbalah is

<sup>116</sup> Lyotard, Jean-François. (ed. Andrew Benjamin), *The Lyotard Reader*, Basil Blackwell Ltd. 1989 – see 'The Sublime and the Avant-Garde', see chapter 13 'Newman: The Instant', pp240-249.

<sup>117</sup> Lyotard, Jean-François. *Op cit*.

central to the work, emphasising its fusion of mysticism and logic. He also establishes the source and significance of the number 18 within Jewish religion, and the frequent use of 18 in the measurements of Newman's canvases. He reveals a 'secret symmetry' based on divisions of halves, quarters, eighths etc. within which squares are concealed by placing one side of a vertical stripe in the centre of a canvas so that the width of the stripe and the attraction of its other edge mask the true position of the painting's centre. These elements are detected only after long and careful viewing followed, presumably, by some measuring. A good example of secret symmetry is to be found in *Abraham*, 1949 (fig.46) a black on black painting that has particular historical significance—

'...a new sense of freedom and a new range of options opened out. Painting as different as Reinhardt's *silent squares* and Still's grandiose, gestural walls relate directly to the sensation of *Abraham*.'<sup>118</sup> (My italics)



Figure 46: Barnett Newman – *Abraham*, 1949, Oil on canvas, 82¼x32½”.

Hess pursues the interpretation of Newman's work in terms of Jewish mysticism and Kabbalistic influences, acknowledging that Newman 'only left clues.' He states clearly that the artist '...was violently opposed to mysticism' and that he 'was not overtly pious— nor was

<sup>118</sup> Hess, Thomas B. *Barnett Newman*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, N.Y. 1971, p 60.

he a member of any organized religion' but in spite of this, the urge to offer explanations and meanings continues—

'I would suggest, again taking *Onement I* and *II* as clues, that the painterly stripe — like that in *Onement I*, which perhaps stands for the newly created man, Adam, could also be his metaphor for the physical sphere, that which is touched, felt, informed by the manipulation of the artist... on the other hand, the taped clean edged, smooth zip could refer to the more intellectual, metaphysical sphere, as in *Onement II*, where it assumes the presence of an abstract force of division — as God separated the waters and the firmament in Genesis.'<sup>119</sup>

This again appears to exceed some of Newman's own assertions. Hess's willingness to discuss a painting in terms of what certain parts might 'stand for' is to recreate it, as Susan Sontag has said—

'Interpretation makes art manageable, comfortable.'<sup>120</sup>

Newman's concern with the viewer's direct experience of the work involves 'the idea that man is present.' In an essay concerned with this aspect of the work, Michael Zakian discusses the 'stripes' more in accordance with direct experience, by relating them to the body of the viewer—

'The stripe serves as a point of focus within an undifferentiated spread of color. It functions as a means of access to an otherwise uniform—and psychically impenetrable—field. Whereas any mark on an uninflected spread of color could serve to focus our attention, Newman's vertical repeats the upright stance of the human body and, thus, invites an apprehension of the work that involves the entire body and not just the eyes. The viewer's awareness of his relation to the painting before him provides him with a "sense of place," a comforting if limited and momentary intuition of his place in the world. Because the painting is strongly objective and relatively free from the domineering signs of any one ego, it is open to all who choose to confront and understand it as it really is, as a concrete object, apart from the residual emotional, referential, and symbolic allusions it may carry.'<sup>121</sup>

Locating the fine line between a reductivist abstract painting that refers to something beyond itself, and one that does not, is important if the idea of silence is to be understood in relation to painting.

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid, p 66.

<sup>120</sup> Sontag, Susan. *Against Interpretation and other Essays*, Andre Deutsch Limited, London, 1987, p 8.

<sup>121</sup> Zakian, Michael. 'Barnett Newman: Painting and a Sense of Place', *Arts Magazine*, vol. 62, March 1988, pp 39-43.

What do Newman's titles suggest about the content? Lucy Lippard has stated that he welcomed symbolic or associative interpretations.<sup>122</sup> Hess too, made much of the 'clues' to meaning suggested by Newman's titles, though the references are clearer in the case of *Stations of the Cross* than in many other works. Newman acknowledged in interviews that he attached significance to his titles. Each one occurred to him during the act of making a particular painting and reflected his emotional state in relation to the work. It was employed to guide the viewer's thoughts and feelings towards an experience of the work in accordance with the artist's purpose. In the final session of discussions involving a number of major artists at Studio 35 in Greenwich Village in 1950, Newman was asked about his titles. His answers included the following—

'I think it would be very well if we could title pictures by identifying the subject matter so that the audience could be helped...Perhaps we are arriving at a new state of painting where the thing has to be seen for itself...'<sup>123</sup>

In an interview with David Sylvester he said—

'In titles I try to evoke the emotional complex that I was under; for example, with one of the paintings, which I call *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, that man can be or is sublime in his relation to his sense of being aware. I give paintings titles actually because I think they have some meaning. I try in the title to create a metaphor that will in some way correspond to what I think is the feeling in them and the meaning of it.'<sup>124</sup>

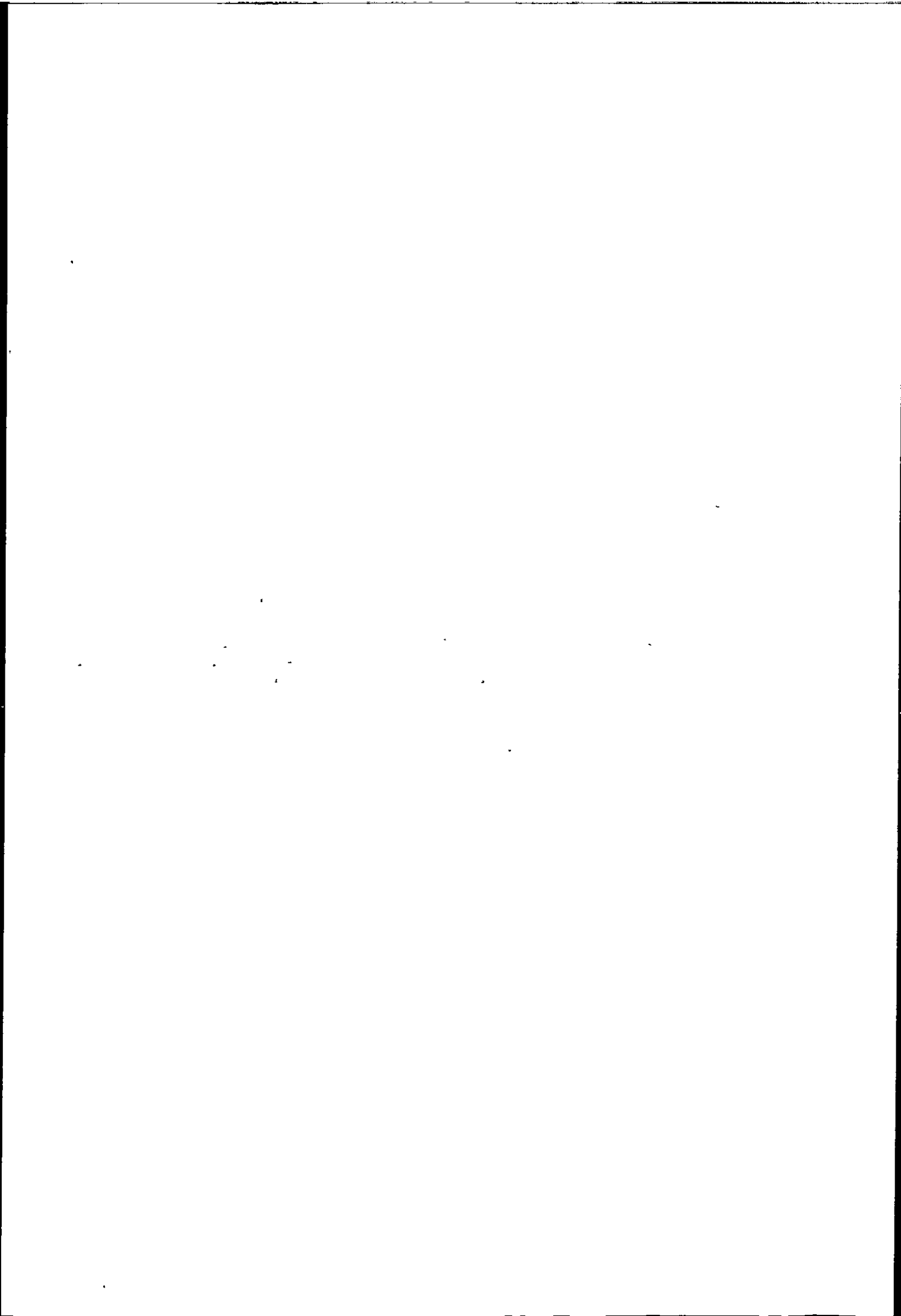
He gives no strict boundaries within which to work though it becomes obvious when someone goes too far in any direction, e.g. treating the painting as an object devoid of subject matter (he said he would have numbered the paintings if this had been his intention), or conversely imposing images upon the paintings. Many of those who have written about Newman's work fall between these extremes whilst leaning towards one or the other. Hess's reference to Newman's creative process as 'an equivalent (or metaphor) of Genesis' appears to be in accordance with the artist's intentions. The subsequent claim that—

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<sup>122</sup> Lippard, Lucy. 'The Silent Art', op cit.

<sup>123</sup> Barnett Newman from *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, op cit, p 240.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.* p 258.







in her essay 'The Stance of Barnett Newman'. She is as rigorous in depicting the purely visual qualities of the work and its physical characteristics, but she also describes the emotional impact of the paintings.

'Identification with (this) zip relates oneself with a light-exuding field so much larger than one's lateral reach that the painting holds a terror through total scale which Burke would have recognized as "sublime" rather than "beautiful".'<sup>127</sup>

Harold Rosenberg too, understood that the subject matter could be apprehended in its pure and immediate form.

'But the direction of the mind's movement as it passes through the sensuality of the painting as setting and through critical speculations regarding Newman's intentions is toward the purity of wordless recognition.'<sup>128</sup>

This description of his response suggests the sense in which Barnett Newman's paintings contribute to the notion of silence.

Newman saw himself as an Abstract Expressionist, in so far as he could tolerate labels; his painting embodied the same beliefs in high passion, spontaneity, and subject matter; despite this however, it rejected rhetorical brush-strokes and the episodic drama that has come to typify the movement. Newman's achievement was to divert some of the commonly held aims and beliefs into a completely different approach, a visual solution that broke away from, and even seemed at odds with the movement. As a consequence of this, much of the discussion relating to Barnett Newman's mature work focuses on the purely visual and clearly discernible facts that the paintings present to the viewer. Formalists are generally content to analyse the paintings in terms of size, shape, colour, the relationship of parts, division and organisation of areas, quality of edges and painted surface, and the translucency or opacity of the pigment.

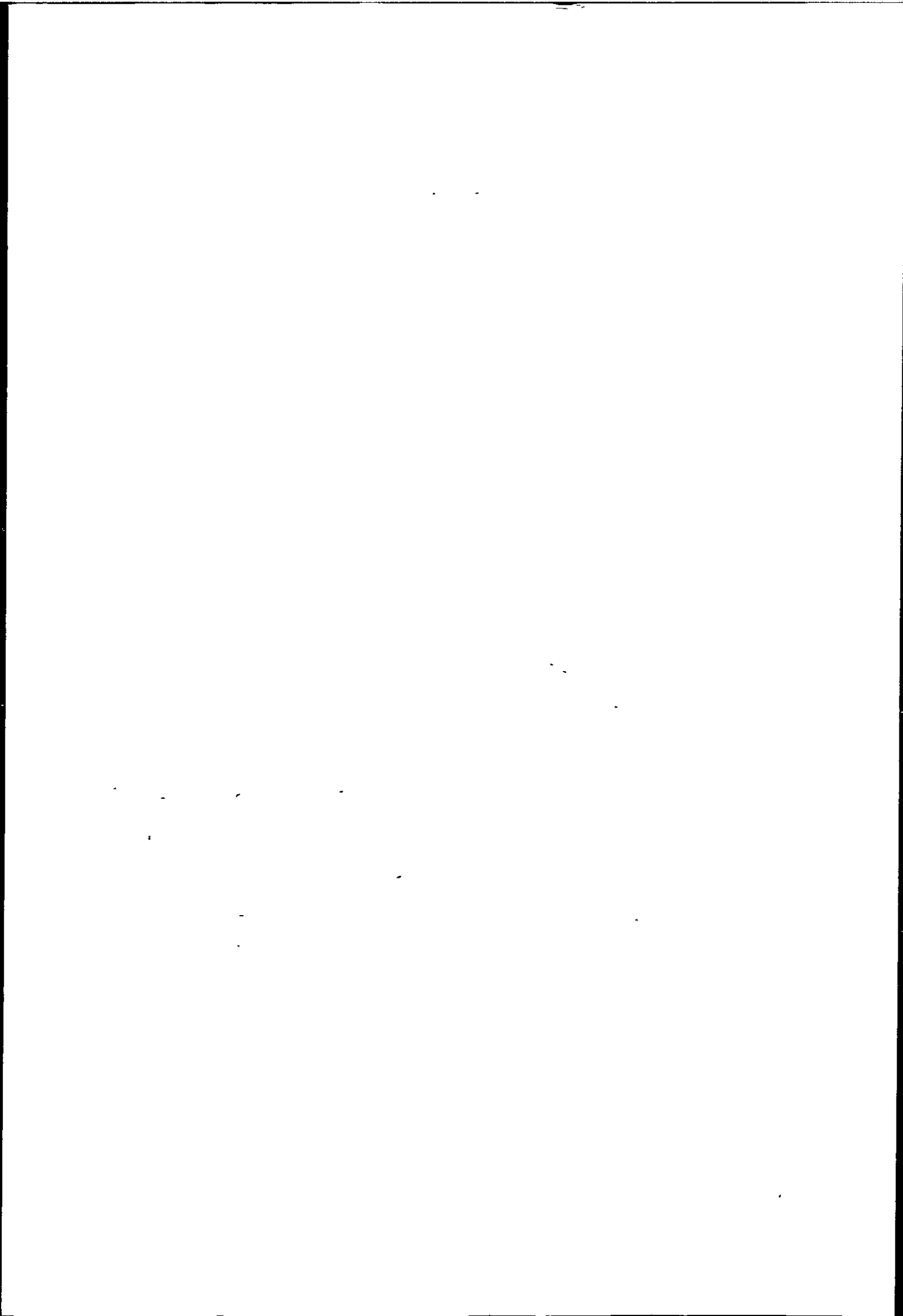
The best example of this approach is Donald Judd's description in 1964 of Newman's painting *Shining Forth (To George)*, 1961 (fig.48).

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<sup>127</sup> Reise, Barbara. 'The Stance of Barnett Newman', *Studio International*, 179, February 1970, pp. 49-63.

<sup>128</sup> Rosenberg, Harold. 'Barnett Newman: A Man of Controversy and Grandeur', *The Anxious Object*, New York: Horizon Press, 1969 pp. 169-174.









moral convictions. His ideas were followed through to their ultimate conclusions with resolute consistency. He made a point of being difficult in many ways ('the conscience of the art world'), but his polemics and critical tirades were based on a considerable knowledge of art and its history. The sources informing his work were numerous and superficially disparate. His respect for George Kubler's approach to the study of art history is well known. Reinhardt reviewed 'The Shape of Time' in the January edition of *ARTnews* in 1966. Included in the review are thirteen 'roughly randomly chosen, "out of context" parts of sentences, from memory.' Here are four of them.

'The definition of art as a system of formal relations matters more than meaning.'

'All art development is continuous and any periodization should be based on aesthetic consideration.'

'The most valuable critic of contemporary work is another artist engaged in the same game.'

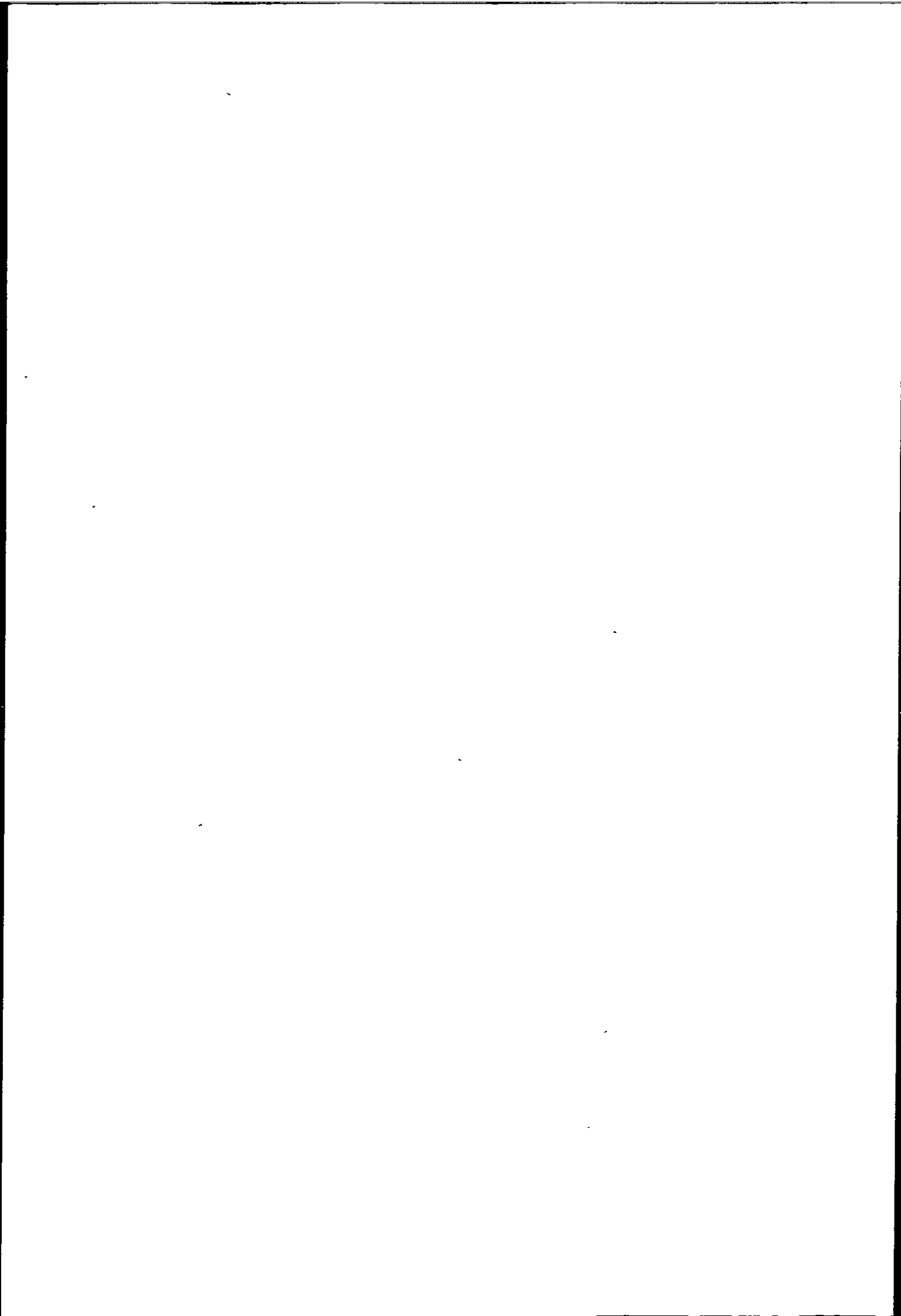
'Instead of our occupying an expanding universe of forms, which is the contemporary artist's happy but premature assumption, we would be seen to inhabit a finite world of limited possibilities, still largely unexplored...'<sup>130</sup>

The connection with Reinhardt's work is clear. The third of the statements was unquestionably an idea he strongly endorsed and practised. He endured much unpopularity on account of his censorious attitude towards fellow painters, dealers and critics, some of whom had been his friends, and for his attacks on Abstract Expressionism. The last statement encapsulates a belief that sustained his repetitive practice for fourteen years.

Other figures influential in Reinhardt's thinking were Henri Focillon, Kubler's teacher, (who wrote *The Life of Forms in Art*), and the formalist critics Clive Bell (*Art*), and Roger Fry. Reinhardt had studied art history with Meyer Schapiro and philosophy with Irwin Edman, as an undergraduate. In Barbara Rose's view— 'By the time he began to paint, his mind was

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<sup>130</sup> Rose, Barbara, *Art as Art, The selected Works of Ad Reinhardt*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles. 1975, pp.225-226.



already highly disciplined, structured by a classical education...'<sup>131</sup> His studies of Chinese, Japanese, Islamic and Cambodian art, and of oriental thought including Zen Buddhism and the Tao, are well documented. In Western art his early influences embraced Cubism, Malevich and Mondrian, including their written ideas and theories. His worldwide study of art and its history led him to an understanding of the one common concern of all artists. It was upon this that his ideas were founded. 'Art is separate from everything else, is related to nothing, and so is one thing only, only itself.'<sup>132</sup> Sifting and synthesising the diversity of sources, constructing and disseminating his art-as-art dogma in articles, interviews, and unpublished writings, all served to prescribe and describe the form and essential nature of Reinhardt's paintings, which, though detached from the world and free of meaning, cannot be seen simply as objects. The questions they pose in this respect have particular significance for silent painting.

It was apparent in the study of Newman's work that no matter how clearly an artist states his or her intentions, other readings will be proposed; and where the artist might occasionally be less than clear, the ambiguity presents an irresistible invitation. One such instance will prove significant in the case of Ad Reinhardt.

'Art-as-art is neither in this world nor out of this world. It takes us out of the everyday world and takes us in from otherworldliness.'<sup>133</sup>

This is a typical Reinhardt statement, saying what a painting is not in order to leave us with art, pure and simple. Later in his life he said—

'I've been called a Protestant, puritan, Byzantinist, a mandarin, a godless mystic, a black monk, a Zen-Buddhist, an iconoclast, an Ahab. At any rate, I suppose there's a reason for making a religious analogy. Maybe that's the best analogy today.'<sup>134</sup>

This not only indicates some of the ways in which the black paintings in particular have been received and described by various critics, but also, when seen in conjunction with frequent references in his writings to 'the one', 'the Tao', 'silence', 'stillness', 'perfection',

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid. p. xiii.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid. p. 216

<sup>133</sup> Ibid. p. 57.

<sup>134</sup> Vine, Naomi. 'Mandala and Cross', *Art in America*, Vol.79, November 1991, p. 126.

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'spirituality', 'darkness', 'mystery' etc., exposes a breach in his otherwise impenetrable defences. For those convinced of the work's spiritual nature, it provides a point of entry; Naomi Vine presents a convincing case in her article 'Mandala and Cross'.<sup>135</sup> In Reinhardt's private notes Vine detects a less dogmatic tone than that customarily employed in his public statements, and discerns a similarity between Reinhardt's writings and 'Zen koans'. She suggests that the notion of ascribing spirituality to works of art had been somewhat overworked and devalued by claims made for Abstract Expressionism and that Reinhardt and those critics sympathetic to him had therefore 'found it necessary to deny the overt influence of religious thought on the black paintings.' It is well known that in the early 1950s Reinhardt attended Suzuki's lectures on Zen at Columbia, and it is quite possible to see a Zen influence in many of his written statements, e.g.—

'The one work for the fine artist, the one painting, is the painting of the one-size-canvas, the single scheme, the one formal device, one color-monochrome, one linear-division in each direction, one symmetry, one texture, one free-hand-brushing, one rhythm, one working everything into one dissolution and one indivisibility....'<sup>136</sup>

Sam Hunter endorses and reinforces the connection.

'He was attracted to Zen because it goes over and over something until it disappears.'<sup>137</sup>

Reinhardt's notes abound with such statements including direct references to the Tao— 'The Tao is through and through mysterious and dark.' However, the problems that immediately arise when attempting to read the paintings this way are first of all Zen's elusive nature, i.e. if you think you have got it, you haven't; then there is Reinhardt's commitment to art-as-art and his insistence that *nothing* must be allowed to contaminate its purity. Perhaps his rejection of religious interpretations was not so much a conspiracy between the artist and his sympathetic critics as an adherence to the fundamental principle on which the work was based. Among the statements to be found in his private notes is the declaration 'Interpreters are philistines.' He

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Rose, Barbara. *Op.cit.* p. 58

<sup>137</sup> Hunter, Sam. 'Ad Reinhardt: Sacred and Profane', *Record of the Art Museum (Princeton University)* vol. 50 no.2, 1991, p. 29.



also made clear his belief, in his much-quoted response to a statement by Rothko and Gottlieb in 1947, that 'there is no such thing as good art about something'. It has been shown that interpretation can be avoided; for some attentive viewers Reinhardt's black paintings simply alter the state of awareness, drawing attention to the nature of consciousness and to the process of visual perception as the almost invisible becomes more clearly visible. Naomi Vine's thesis goes beyond this—

'...the artist's biography and the notes that he made about his work encourage a spiritual, if not outright mystical, interpretation of the black paintings.'<sup>138</sup>

Her contention is that the trisection, which was Reinhardt's purest method of achieving symmetry within a square, creates both the Christian cross and the four-pointed mandala. She quite rightly reminds us that Reinhardt's notes refer to mandalas, which like the cross are contemplative symbols. A particularly strong piece of evidence comes in the form of a statement by the Trappist monk Thomas Merton, a friend of Reinhardt's, on receipt of a small painting not dissimilar in composition, darkness, and closeness of tone, to the 1960s black paintings.

'It is a most recollected painting. It thinks that only one thing is necessary and this is true, but this one thing is by no means apparent to one who will not take the trouble to look. It is a most religious, devout and laetitic small painting...'<sup>139</sup>

The importance lies in the fact that the work was requested and given as a devotional object.

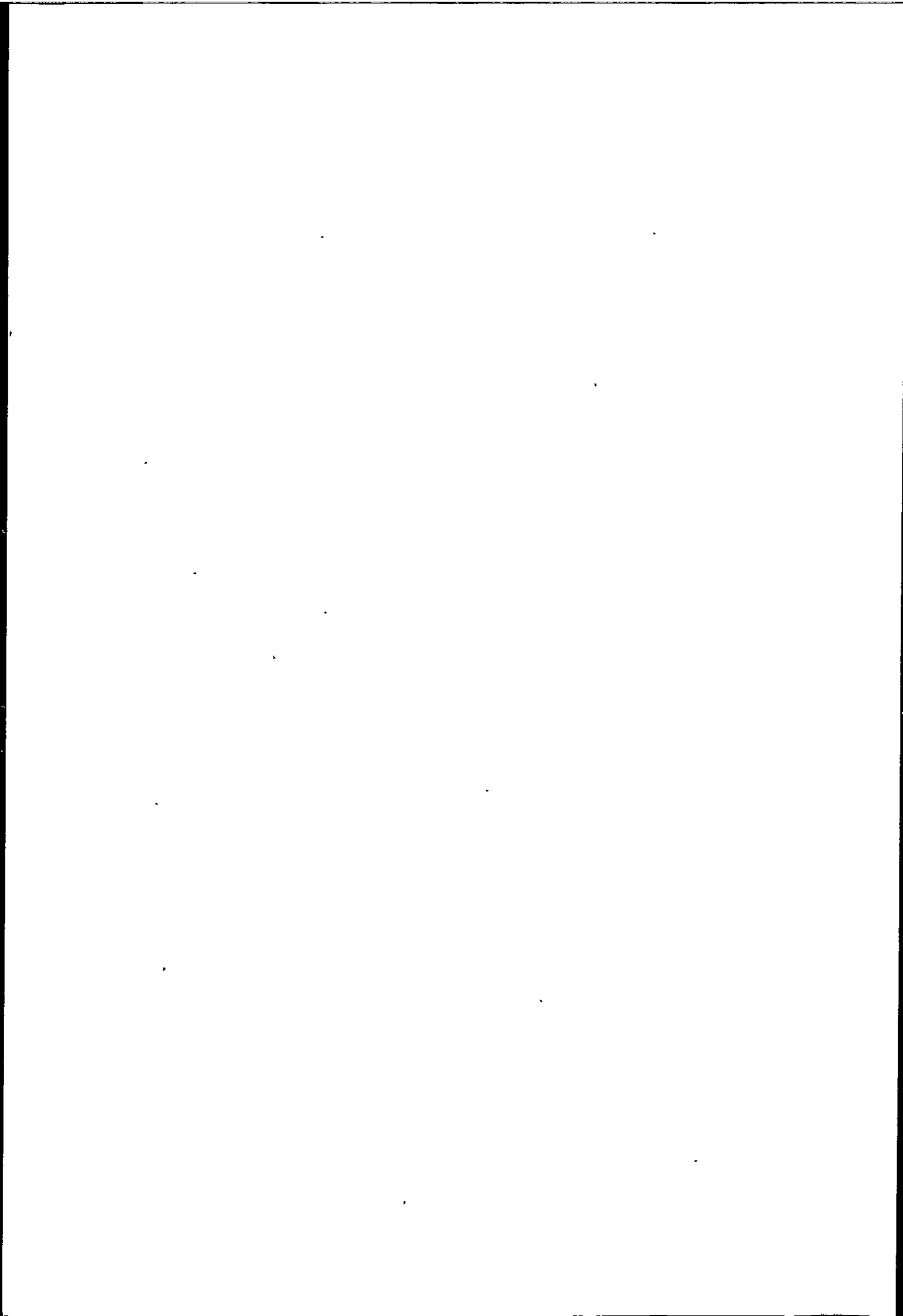
Vine then links the spirituality of Reinhardt's paintings back to the Abstract Expressionist movement in general, with the reminder that his roots were there in spite of his indisputable animosity towards most of its excesses; this connection is reinforced with evidence that demonstrates a negative comparison with Minimalism.

'The exclusion of his work from early MOMA exhibitions of Abstract Expressionism was painful to Reinhardt, and when, in the 1960s, MOMA wanted to buy one of his black

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<sup>138</sup> Vine, Naomi. *Op. cit.* p.127.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.* p. 128. Vine refers to this work as 'a virtual prototype for the larger, perfectly square compositions to which Reinhardt would devote his exclusive attention from 1960 until his death.'



paintings, he worried that it would be shown only with Minimalist work by younger artists and would thereby lose both context and substance.’<sup>140</sup>

It has to be accepted that Reinhardt’s statements on this subject are sometimes ambiguous and contradictory; it would be possible to argue a case both ways by selecting particular statements and disregarding others. Nevertheless, and in spite of the art-as-art dogma, spirituality is a quality often ascribed to the paintings. Sam Hunter sums it up similarly.

‘Naomi Vine made the point that he consciously sought a repeatable spiritual, yet not explicitly religious, experience in his highly rationalized, mandalalike black paintings. Although Reinhardt called his black paintings “art-as-art,” insisting upon their separation from life, his thesis did not exclude spiritual implications.’<sup>141</sup>

Hunter’s essay contains many helpful though occasionally conflicting assertions. I find it useful to include the following quotes.

‘Not only do the squares into which Reinhardt subdivided the field come together as a barely visible cruciform configuration, but the exquisitely subtle variations by which this shape is revealed requires such close, concentrated looking that viewers may find themselves slipping into a trancelike state. Moreover, at the same time that Reinhardt repudiated everything supernatural in art as incidental and distracting metaphysical baggage, his uncompromising quest for an art of absolute purity tended to elevate the non-objective, totally self-referential painting to the status of a holy object.’<sup>142</sup>

(‘Mark it off, to keep it holy, not to be mistaken for ordinary’ – Ad Reinhardt)<sup>143</sup>

‘Yet Reinhardt’s religiosity was open to question, could only persist as a partial enthusiasm, and may even have been something of a charade.... At heart, he repudiated the content of works of art with overt religious meanings, feeling that they falsified the aesthetic object by preventing it from functioning as an end in itself.’<sup>144</sup>

Rosalind Krauss points to a spiritual reading of the work, laying the blame unequivocally on Reinhardt.

‘There is no painter in the West who can be unaware of the symbolic power of the cruciform shape and the Pandora’s box of spiritual reference that is opened when one uses it.’<sup>145</sup>

Yve-Alain Bois, however, restates Reinhardt’s insistence that none of this should be read in terms of religion – ‘...he found preposterous the idiotic interpretation of his tripartition—that is, a grid on the verge of the figural – as alluding to Christianity.’<sup>146</sup>

<sup>140</sup> Ibid. p. 130.

<sup>141</sup> Hunter, Sam. Op. cit. p. 31.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid. p.31.

<sup>143</sup> Rose, Barbara. Op. cit. p. 73.

<sup>144</sup> Hunter, Sam. Op. cit. p. 32.

<sup>145</sup> Krauss, Rosalind. *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and other Modernist Myths*, op. cit. see ‘Grids’, p. 10.

An account that explains the spiritual readings without casting doubt on the integrity of Reinhardt's art-as-art dogma, is supplied by Lucy Lippard.

'One can *become* the painting; one's perception and mood must be slowed to the pace of such obdurate surfaces. The observer must become almost as passive as the object, a feat increasingly difficult in this day and age. This is so rare an experience that it can have curious psychic effects, which explains the frequent association with religious and mystical experience.'<sup>147</sup>

This is a fitting response to the work; Reinhardt clearly did not welcome religious associations but spirituality in itself does not undermine his intentions. It is something experienced by the viewer in response to the work; an experience beyond language.

Agnes Martin has stated her aims in interviews, lectures and poetic written pieces. Her declared intention is to express universal ideas such as beauty, happiness, innocence, perfection and exaltation. Whilst accepting the existence of personal feelings in her paintings she discounts them as serious content, striving instead for 'perfection', in the full knowledge that it can never be achieved.

'We must surrender the idea that this perfection that we see in the mind or before our eyes is obtainable or attainable. ...But our happiness lies in our moments of awareness of it.'<sup>148</sup>

It is a view related to Plato's belief that reality must always fall short of the ideal world; 'the hint of perfection' present in a successful work of art can, she believes, awaken an idea of perfection existing in the mind of the viewer. Although claiming her work is 'in the Classic tradition' Martin adopts an essentially intuitive rather than intellectual approach. Her sources of belief and inspiration (the latter being a notion she fully embraces) include the Bible, Tao (Chuang Tzu and Lao Tzu), Plato, William Blake, Zen, and of course Abstract Expressionism. In spite of her close association with the Abstract Expressionists she has often been viewed as a Minimalist. Thomas McEvilley has emphasised the importance of touch and expression in her paintings.

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<sup>146</sup> Bois, Yve-Alain. *Ad Reinhardt*, op.cit. p. 29.

<sup>147</sup> Lippard, Lucy. *Ad Reinhardt*, Harry Abrams Inc., New York, 1981. pp. 142-143.

<sup>148</sup> Martin, Agnes. *The perfection Underlying Life*, Notes for a lecture given at the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, February 14, 1973

'While Minimalism developed partly out of Abstract Expressionism...-it rejected the Abstract Expressionist emphasis on touch, subjectivity, and romantic notions of selfhood. Formally, Martin's work exhibits many of the Abstract Expressionist elements that passed into Minimalism - overall composition, repetition of structural motif, hard edge, and so on - but it emphasises touch, and, above all, it is saturated with the expression of feeling and emotion that the Minimalists formally abjured, a feeling much like that of the sublime. The comparison of Martin's art to Minimalism was rooted in a certain similarity of look, but look alone is an insufficient criterion for such judgements.'<sup>149</sup>

Many of the articles written about Agnes Martin's work take the same line as McEvilley's, acknowledging the links and comparisons often made with Minimalism but ultimately rejecting them. They generally agree on the emotional qualities discernible in the handling, touch and slight but palpable irregularities. Their judgements are made all the more irrefutable by Martin's clear insistence that she was, and continues to be an expressionist.<sup>150</sup> Expression and emotion are concentrated in the fragile linear grids of the earlier work and in the high-key colour shifts that characterise the 'band' paintings produced in, and since the 1970s. Restraint and refinement of expression are the means by which Martin seeks to evoke corresponding sensitivities within the viewer; her paintings are embodiments of sensibility endeavouring to express the ineffable.

'My interest is in experience that is wordless and silent, and in the fact that this experience can be expressed for me in art work which is also wordless and silent.'<sup>151</sup>

In the attempt to express beauty, perfection and happiness Martin subdued her colours, drew grids whose dimensions were known beforehand, and avoided egotistical devices—including huge canvases.

Martin began with an idea of perfection and the conviction that work achieves success and becomes 'alive' when there is a hint of perfection present. She accepted that in spite of intense concentration and effort, minute, unpredictable deviations would cause the work to fall short.

<sup>149</sup> Mc Evilley, Thomas. 'The Grey Geese Descending: The Art of Agnes Martin', *Artforum*, Summer 1987 pp 94-99.

<sup>150</sup> See 'Interview with Irving Sandler', *Art Monthly* no. 169, September 1993, pp 3-11, and 'Perfection is in the Mind: An Interview with Agnes Martin', Joan Simon, *Art in America*, May 1996 pp 82-89 and 124.

<sup>151</sup> Quote taken from Thomas Mc Evilley, 'The Grey Geese Descending: The Art of Agnes Martin', *Artforum*, Summer 1987 pp 94-99. Original source 'Agnes Martin, *The Still and Silent in Art*, 1972, ICA archives, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, USA.

The element of unpredictability serves as a reminder that Abstract Expressionism exploited the accidental and unconscious processes of creativity; at its most expressive, its surrealist, automatist methods were inextricably bound up with the spontaneous act of painting, which was practised as an existential activity in which emotions were expressed directly through gesture, paint quality, colour, space, line etc. Each painting was discovered in the act of its making in a procedure that involved the artist responding to unpremeditated marks created as a consequence of the free and exploratory way in which the medium was employed. Splashes, drips, splatters and other 'natural' occurrences were welcomed and incorporated wherever they served useful purposes. None of these ideas or processes accord with Agnes Martin's intentions. It is clear however, from her 'deviation from perfection' and concern with 'touch', that even universal values must be subject to the restrictions imposed by the artist's temperament, concentration and physical control, and by the characteristics of the materials employed, hence the subtle variation in line quality etc. to which spectators have responded. When asked by Irving Sandler about the variations and the sensitivity in her lines, and the atmosphere this lends to the work, she replied – 'I didn't expect it but I value it.'<sup>152</sup>

Nevertheless, Martin's control has always constituted an important and impressive element in her work. Wayward paint has invariably been eschewed. Accidents have not been encouraged; apart from some tonal variations in thinly brushed monochrome grounds, the paintings reveal little evidence of spontaneous response to unexpected marks or opportunist acceptances of the unbidden. Her work signals conscious control rather than unconscious spontaneity. Why then, having rejected such an important premise of Abstract Expressionism, should she choose to identify herself with that movement? The answer inevitably lies in the work's content rather than its appearance; a concern with spiritual as opposed to materialistic values; painting as a way of life, and the search for a deeper reality that excludes other activities. These are values

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<sup>152</sup> Sandler, Irving. 'Agnes Martin' (Interview), *Art Monthly* no.169, September 1993, pp. 3-11.

capable of accommodating a spectrum of individual interpretations as William Seitz has explained—

‘Where does the truth or reality of Abstract Expressionism lie? Though there is no single answer, different positions belong to the same constellation, for they are responses to common problems. They arise from unconscious and egoistic levels of the personality; they have to do with nature, and they converge toward intuitions which can be called mystical. In the instances in which a painter’s content lies mainly within his immediate personal life, its emphasis is existential. If on the other hand, his intuition moves in the direction of a focus felt to be outside the self – surrendering the ego – his content is also subjective, but in quite a different sense. A separation of the existential from the transcendental is helpful, even essential, in structuring this nebulous topic.’<sup>153</sup>

Clearly, in contrast to the existential emphasis of e.g. Willem de Kooning, Martin’s focus is transcendental. She does not speak much of making discoveries in the act of painting but describes instead how she waits for inspiration, how she listens carefully to what her mind tells her and then carries out its directions.

‘I don’t take responsibility for the inspiration. ...At night the intellect goes to sleep and gives inspiration a chance.’<sup>154</sup>

The literature relating to Agnes Martin’s work is largely consistent in its acceptance of her aims and the form in which they have been realised. This might be attributable to the written statements and interviews in which she consistently reiterates the subject matter of her paintings and the nature of her creative process; statements characterised by the same clarity and simplicity as her paintings.

‘I would like [my pictures] to represent beauty, innocence and happiness; I would like them all to represent that. Exaltation.’<sup>155</sup>

Asked in what sense she considered her work spiritual, she replied—

‘I think our minds respond to things beyond this world. Take beauty; it’s a very mysterious thing, isn’t it? I think it’s a response in our minds to perfection. It’s too bad, people not realizing that their minds expand beyond this world.’<sup>156</sup>

Her comments on the work of Rothko and Newman emphasise the view.

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<sup>153</sup> Seitz, William C. *Abstract Expressionist Painting in America*, National Gallery of art, Washington, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 1983. (From a dissertation submitted in 1955)

<sup>154</sup> Interview with Irving Sandler, *Art Monthly* no.169, September 1993, pp 3-11.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>156</sup> ‘Perfection is in the Mind: An Interview with Agnes Martin’, Joan Simon, *op cit.*

'I agree with them. I have great respect for their work and philosophy, their transcendentalism.'<sup>157</sup>

A common interest in spiritual matters did not guarantee agreement on other issues however; Martin took issue with John Cage, who was amongst other things a follower of Zen Buddhism, over his interpretation of silence. Cage took a perceptual stance, noticing and drawing attention to ambient sounds; his 4' 33" made the audience conscious of sounds outside and inside the auditorium, the shuffling and coughing and even perhaps, each individual's own breathing. He also took a more empirical, scientific approach.

'There is no such thing as an empty space or an empty time. There is always something to see, something to hear. In fact, try as we may to make a silence, we cannot. For certain engineering purposes, it is desirable to have as silent a situation as possible. Such a room is called an anechoic chamber, its six walls made of special material, a room without echoes. I entered one at Harvard University several years ago and heard two sounds, one high and one low. When I described them to the engineer in charge, he informed me that the high one was my nervous system in operation, the low one my blood in circulation. Until I die there will be sounds.'<sup>158</sup>

In her interview with Irving Sandler, Martin explained why she disagreed with Cage.

'Well for one thing, he wrote a book about *Silence* and in the very first line he said 'there is no such thing as silence'. But I think there *is*. When you walk into a forest there are all kinds of sounds but you feel as though you have stepped into silence. I believe that is silence.'

The important word is 'feel'; both Martin and Cage are right, but for different reasons. The composer Toru Takemitsu spoke of 'confronting silence'—

'Hasn't art been the human creature's rebellion against silence? Poetry and music were born when man first uttered a sound, resisting the silence.'<sup>159</sup>

Martin confronted silence when she stretched her canvas and began to paint; absolute silence would have been better served by not painting. What Martin painted however, was the feeling of silence— an important point to bear in mind in practice.

'It's all about feeling... everything, everything is about feeling... feeling and recognition.'<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Interview with Irving Sandler, op cit.

<sup>158</sup> Cage, John. *Silence*, Calder and Boyars, London, 1968.

<sup>159</sup> Takemitsu, Toru. *Confronting Silence*, Fallen Leaf Press, Berkeley, California, 1995.

<sup>160</sup> Gruen, John. 'Agnes Martin: Everything, everything is about feeling... feeling and recognition', *ARTnews*, September 1976. pp.91-94.



Silence is a word often encountered when reading about the work of Agnes Martin; it appears in her own statements and in descriptions written by others. Robert Mangold provides one source of confirmation—

‘Agnes Martin’s work is wonderful...I think her work most perfectly fits “Silent Art”.’<sup>161</sup>

Her silence is achieved by the means previously discussed— lightness of tone, closeness of colour, softness of line, in amalgamation with clarity of thought, structure, and execution.

Martin’s careful but slightly imperfect application of marks to the canvas confers an indispensable individual human presence to the universality of the subject matter without in any way obscuring it. Her manner of expression breathes life into the work whilst eschewing egotistical concerns. Neither her immediate emotions nor the purely mechanical have any relevance; the paintings simply disclose her humanity.

‘The silence on the floor of my house is all the questions and all the answers that have been known in the world.’<sup>162</sup>

I have suggested throughout this study that the work selected for discussion avoids categorisation either as Abstract Expressionism or Minimalism. It exists somewhere between them with Newman, Martin and Reinhardt more closely associated with Abstract Expressionism, and Brice Marden, Robert Mangold and Robert Ryman closer to Minimalism. As Minimalist theories came to predominate, it became inappropriate to discuss paintings in terms of grandiose notions such as ‘the sublime’ or even ‘tragedy’ or any form of spirituality. Paintings became more and more reflexive and about what they actually were. Even so, Brice Marden is difficult to place, his early grey monochromatic canvases have the appearance of Minimalism, especially in reproductions, but his materials, working methods and intentions have more in common with Abstract Expressionism. Lucy Lippard placed Marden close to

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<sup>161</sup> Robert Mangold, in a letter written to the author on July 15<sup>th</sup> 1998.

<sup>162</sup> Agnes Martin, unpublished notes, Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. Quote reprinted in Alloway Lawrence, ‘Agnes Martin’, an essay included in her exhibition catalogue at the ICA, January 22-March 1, 1973.

(but not in) Minimalism, as we saw in Chapter Three (page 44), noting that his canvases emphasised 'the fact of painting as painting, surface as surface, paint as paint', and that he seemed 'to exclude emotion entirely'.<sup>163</sup> Her reading of Marden's work was in keeping with the development towards Minimalism and the waning interest in subject matter and expression, but according to other commentators, emotion has not been entirely excluded. Harris Rosenstein has described Marden as a 'romantic, emotional painter of highly refined sensibilities evolving directly out of Abstract Expressionism'.<sup>164</sup> Jeremy Lewison has also referred to Marden's development from the tradition of Abstract Expressionism describing the emotional aspect of his work as restrained and muted but 'nonetheless expressive of reserved emotion'. He quotes Marden's own words—

'I try to give the viewer something to which he will react subjectively. I believe these are highly emotional paintings not to be admired for any technical or intellectual reason but to be felt'.<sup>165</sup>

This position is reiterated in a published conversation with William Furlong-

'...my painting has always really been, I have thought, directly related to the New York School of painting or the abstract expressionists. I have always felt that no matter how it was classified with Minimalism and this and that, that it really reflected more of those kind of ideas – the possibilities for catharsis, you know, an emotional and expressionist attitude.'<sup>166</sup>

Whilst Marden was more concerned with the physicality of paintings than other reductivists including Rothko, Ryman and Mangold, Lewison observes—

'The difference between Marden's art and that of his Minimalist contemporaries is that his paintings sought to transcend the fact of their material presence.'<sup>167</sup>

This extends the reading of Marden's work in relation to the fact of painting as painting, surface as surface, paint as paint etc. suggested by Lippard.<sup>168</sup> Further uncertainty arises with Carter Ratcliff's insistence that—

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<sup>163</sup> Lippard, Lucy. 'The Silent Art', op cit.

<sup>164</sup> Rosenstein, Harris. 'Total and Complex', *ARTnews*, May 1967, pp.52-54, 67-68.

<sup>165</sup> From notes 1963 reprinted in Lewison, Jeremy. *Brice Marden: Drawings and Prints 1975-80*, Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1981, p 54.

<sup>166</sup> Brice Marden in conversation with William Furlong, *Art Monthly*, (UK), no.117 June 1988, pp 3-5.

<sup>167</sup> Lewison, Jeremy. Op cit.

<sup>168</sup> Lippard, Lucy, 'The Silent Art', op cit.

'Serious modernist painting is traditionally expected by critics (and I believe intended by painters) to find its meaning in a leap beyond its own physicality. Marden and a very few others (Robert Ryman? Robert Mangold?) refuse to permit that leap. The intangibles in their work [...] can never be fully extricated from the nuanced actualities of particular objects.'<sup>169</sup>

Of the three types of monotonal painting defined by Lucy Lippard, 'the evocative, romantic or mystical; the formally rejective and wholly non-associative, and the gesture of defiance, absolution or comment', Marden's paintings are clearly and intentionally evocative, romantic, and even mystical. In his own words, 'the rectangle, the plane, the structure, the picture are but sounding boards for a spirit.'<sup>170</sup> Facticity is established and developed to the point of becoming art-as-art but transcended by the subtle inclusion of detectable traces of feeling, thus avoiding pure object status. Much of his work produced before 1984 alludes to nature, specific places, architecture, people, and events that had particular significance in his life. In the early paintings colour is determined by the size and shape of the stretcher, or by memories and experiences relating to people (*Helen, The Back* series), or to places, and nature (*The Grove Group, Nebraska, Adriatic, Winter, The Seasons*). More overtly mystical and spiritual allusions are evident in other works. *Annunciation* comprises four vertical monochrome panels hung with their edges meeting. It investigates the emotional and formal uses of colour, colour juxtaposition, rhythm, value, surface, and of course size and shape. *Thira*, 1979-80 (fig.49) probably his most complex work, includes 18 panels in both vertical and horizontal 'post-and-lintel' arrangements. It derives from his interest in architecture, especially Roman wall paintings. The architectural reference implied in the title, (a Greek word meaning door), can be taken either as a formalist idea concerned with the working-out of possibilities offered by juxtapositions of colour, verticality and horizontality, or as referential, and hence a weakening of the will towards abstraction. It has however, been interpreted in mystical terms by various critics, the post-and-lintel being understood as a T motif symbolising the 'Tau' cross which is

<sup>169</sup> Ratcliff, Carter. 'Abstract Painting, Specific Space: Novros and Marden in Houston', *Art in America*, September/October 1975, pp 84-88.

<sup>170</sup> From Notes 1971-72, reprinted in Lewison, Jeremy. *Brice Marden: Drawings and Prints 1975-80*, op cit. Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1981. p 54.







Critical responses to the work of various artists have demonstrated a capacity to detect and describe the fine distinction. There is in general a consistency of judgement in much of the critical literature identifying works that include feelings, no matter how muted, and those that exclude them— notwithstanding an endemic, less perceptive approach that has ignored or failed to recognise a middle ground, preferring instead to opt for one or other of the established categories. In fact Marden has made it relatively easy, his use of an oil paint and wax mixture and his method of applying to the surface suggest content that contrasts sharply with Stella's flat, inexpressive use of industrial metallic paints which, incidentally, Marden found cynical. If we were in any doubt about his intentions his statements make them clear.

'Art isn't about cynicism; it's about faith and hope. This is a romantic point of view that is anathema to a certain sector of the art world, but the way that sector sees and talks about art is anathema to me.'<sup>172</sup>

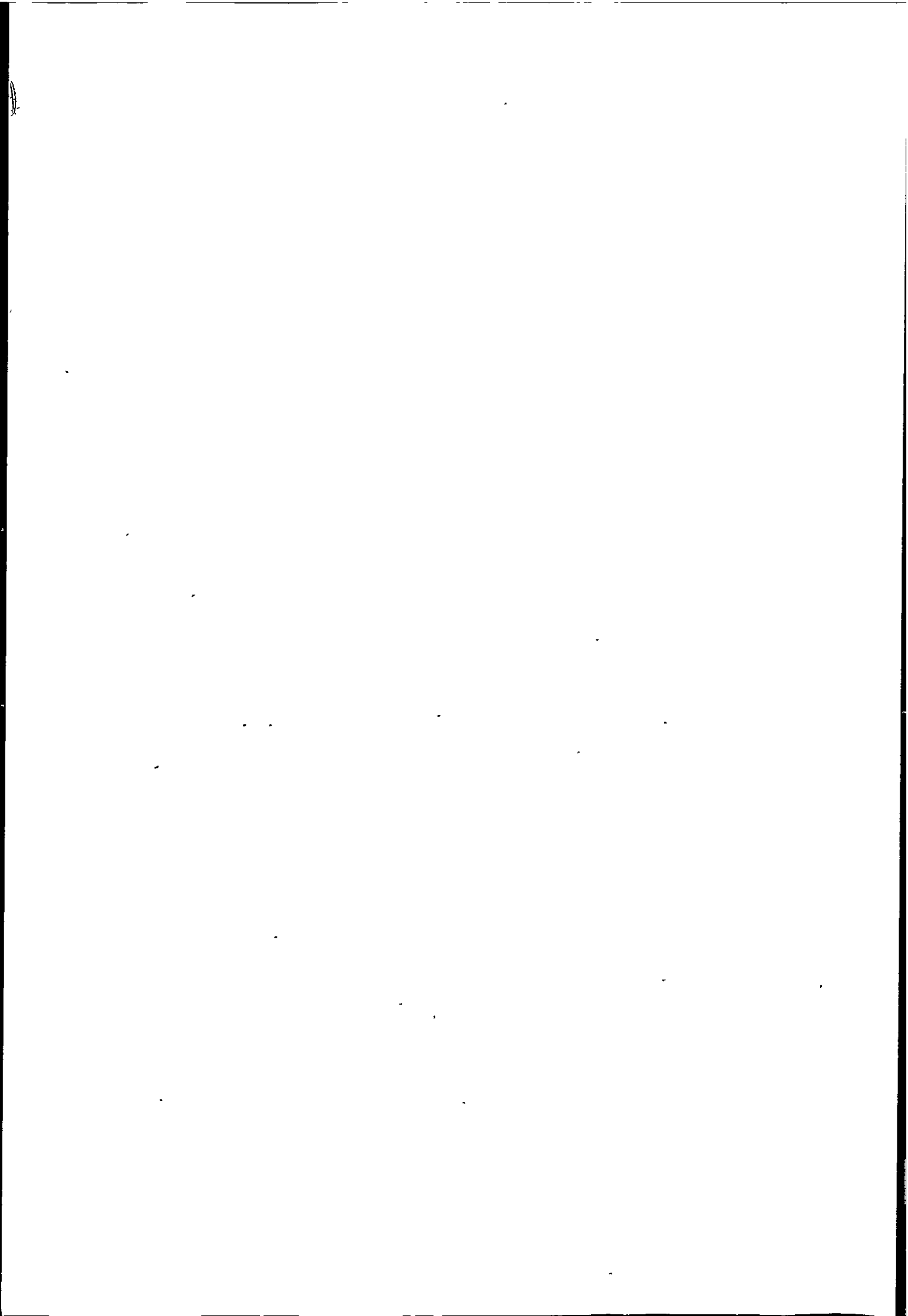
Marden has been described frequently as a Romantic whose work is determinedly subjective and emotional. His painterly approach eschewed overt gesture in order to reconcile the act of painting to the factual and planar properties of the support, but he established and emphasised the physicality of his work in order to transcend it and has 'candidly admitted that he preferred to believe in art's mystical or spiritual powers.'<sup>173</sup> The final results evoke content and feeling within the unity of shape, surface and colour. We are left in no doubt that these cathartic paintings are to be received emotionally, and even spiritually, rather than intellectually.

Robert Mangold's work requires less discussion in this section because its content is so closely bound up with its appearance that for the most part there is a consistent view of it and no justification for interpretation. The only area of disagreement centres on the degree to which the work can be described as geometrical.

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<sup>172</sup> Brice Marden, quoted in Lilly Wei, 'Talking Abstract, Part One,' *Art in America* 75, no. 7 July 1987, p. 83.

<sup>173</sup> Butterfield, Rebecca. The quote is taken from Butterfield's notes in the Chronology included in the publication accompanying the 1996 exhibition *Abstraction in the Twentieth Century: Total Risk, Freedom, Discipline*. See Rosenthal, Mark. *Abstraction in the Twentieth Century: Total Risk, Freedom, Discipline*, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Harry, N. Abrams, Inc. New York, 1996, p. 296.





Mangold's early Minimalist concerns were shown to give way to flat painting at about the same time that Greenberg's Modernist principles and the importance of painting, were being questioned.

'In the early sixties however, painting came more and more "under the gun", the feeling was that it was finished and young artists were giving it up for other positions in sculpture, film whatever. I was strongly drawn to flat art, and I felt that I had to pare painting down to its basic components, which for me were edge/shape and surface/color and internal structure/figure.'<sup>174</sup>

The paintings Mangold produced after his *Walls* and *Areas* are neither Minimalist nor Abstract Expressionist, since they appear too cool, too consciously controlled and too planned.

'...the painting process is not terribly important to me, and it takes the least amount of time in the work. Most of the effort goes into thinking about the pieces beforehand, from notations and then from drawings that I will hang up on my studio wall...'<sup>175</sup>

Clearly Mangold's creative process begins with ideas noted down and tested in drawings, models, and small-scale work. He has investigated the question of where models end and finished pieces begin, by making the same painting in a number of different sizes. It appears obvious that planning and early decision-making play a role in his working method since it would be impossible to produce works relating to uniquely shaped canvases, or even to construct the stretchers, without a clear notion of the proposed shapes, dimensions, scales, and angles. This is obvious in the case of paintings constructed from two or three panels joined to form specific shapes in which internally organised seams operate in conjunction with precisely drawn shapes. The degree of accuracy required to construct geometrical configurations that function through slight but calculated inaccuracies is not only demonstrated in the paintings, it also forms an essential part of the content. With the possible exception of Reinhardt, Mangold's paintings are the least expressive of the artists discussed so far. His lines are crisp and precise, or broad, bold and assured as they loop the monochromatic grounds with

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<sup>174</sup> Robert Mangold, from a letter written by Robert Mangold on July 15<sup>th</sup> 1998.

<sup>175</sup> Krauss, Rosalind. 'Interview with Robert Mangold', op. cit.

calculated inaccuracy. His flat areas of colour are applied with a roller in a manner designed to avoid a completely mechanical quality.

'A roller is perfect because it is an instrument that you can have a certain amount of control over and you can get the paint laid down very uniformly. You can apply it thinly and evenly and you can apply it quickly. But it does not have that hand touch. The roller limits you in what you can do. It is there as a surface and it is similar to the character of the wall itself.'<sup>176</sup>

There were, nevertheless, Abstract Expressionist influences; not in the manner of execution, or in the content, but in the way he thought about painting.

'[It] certainly influenced my thinking...after seeing A.E. painting in 1957, I literally was a changed person. I saw for the first time the possibilities for abstract painting, that it could have great expressive power and that it could be something other than abstract nature or a designed surface.'<sup>177</sup>

Mangold's comment on Barnett Newman sheds more light on this.

'Newman is...my most important mentor, as an artist his work has been and is still immensely important to me. He was the only member of the A.E. group that I knew personally.'<sup>178</sup>

He seems to share a similar approach to Newman in that, in spite of the predictable and consistent elements that define the character of his work, like Newman he refers to the fundamentally intuitive nature of his working process.

'One point I should make is that throughout the work, I've been very much an intuitive artist, I have followed intuitive feelings or hunches. And, in some cases, I do not have a clearly rational justification for decisions I've made.'<sup>179</sup>

Mangold does not mention geometry among his concerns although his exploration of circles, rectangles, polygons, crosses and triangles inevitably raises questions about its importance in his work. For example, Joseph Masheck, in 'A Humanist Geometry', his 1974 article for *Artforum*, deals primarily with this aspect, identifying related work by other artists and from other sources. He compares Mangold's semi-circular *Areas* to '...one of the tympana under the

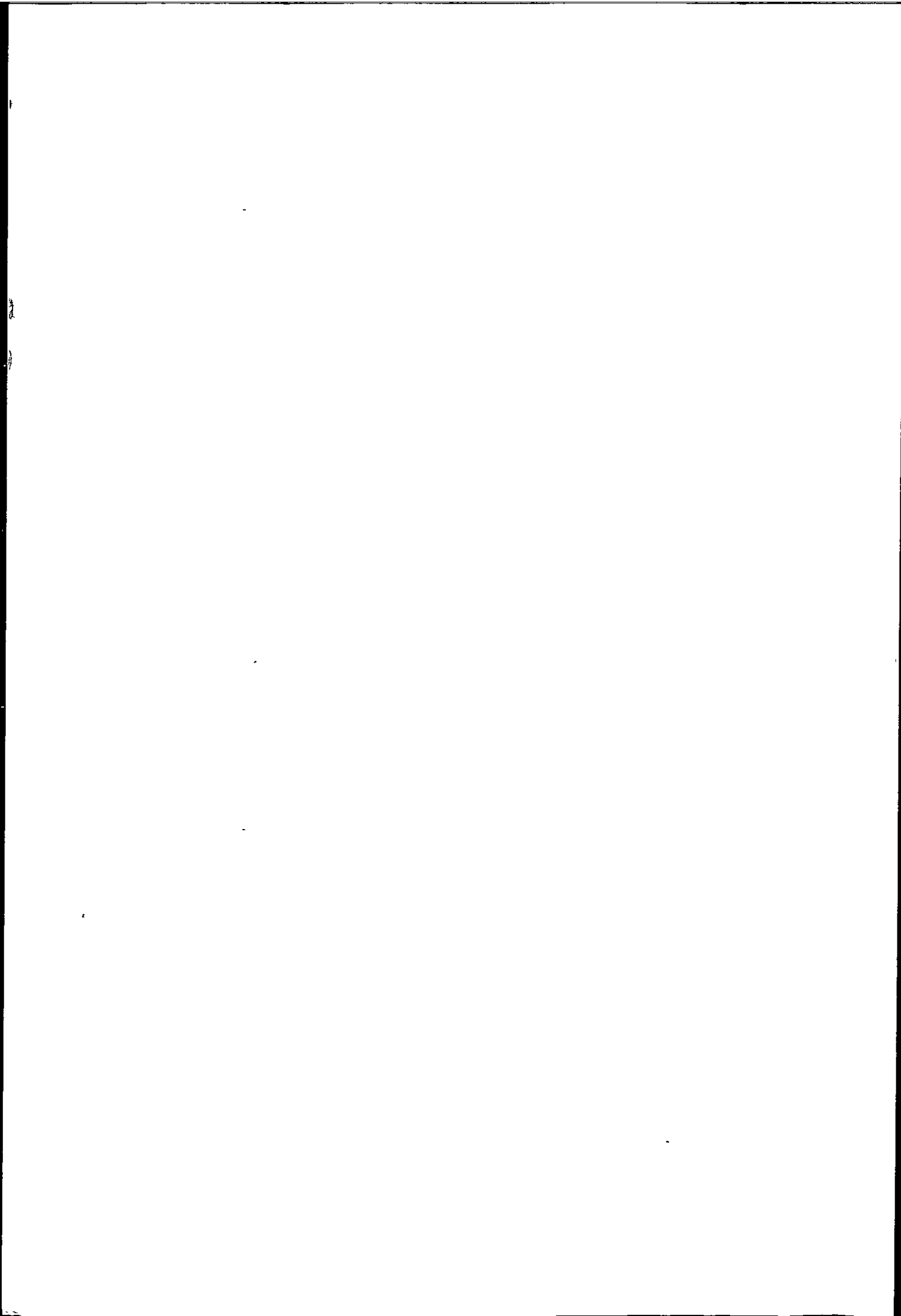
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<sup>176</sup> Robert Mangold / Urs Rausmuller, A Talk, on December 5 1992 in New York. From, Sauer, Christel and Rattsmuller, Urs. *Robert Mangold*, Hallen für neue Kunst, Schaffhausen and RENN Espace d'Art Contemporain, Paris. 1993.

<sup>177</sup> Letter from Robert Mangold to the author, July 15<sup>th</sup> 1998.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

<sup>179</sup> Robert Mangold, an Interview with Rosalind Krauss, *Artforum*, March 1974.



facade arcade of S. Miniato al Monte, at Florence...'<sup>180</sup> and a 'thermal window' pattern often used by Palladio. Whilst some analyses refer to geometry,<sup>181</sup> most accept Mangold's assertion that he is not a geometrical abstractionist and that the content is not geometry. Paul Groot reviewing the exhibition held at the Stedelijk Museum helps to set the record straight.

'Glancing through the catalogue one sees right angles that are not 90 degrees, circles that do not meet as circles should, segments crookedly extracted from circles. Mangold draws, paints, and constructs geometric figures that deliberately offend Euclidean linearity.'

And that is the whole point—subversion, the questioning of perception and knowledge. Lynne Cooke sums it up clearly.

'Geometry is subverted by an infraction of the rule to order, and through that the interplay between a measured and a sensed perfection, between the mental and the visual, is set in motion to the point where (at times) it becomes impossible to gauge which, if either, of the components is a perfect form, or what their precise relationship to each other is.'<sup>182</sup>

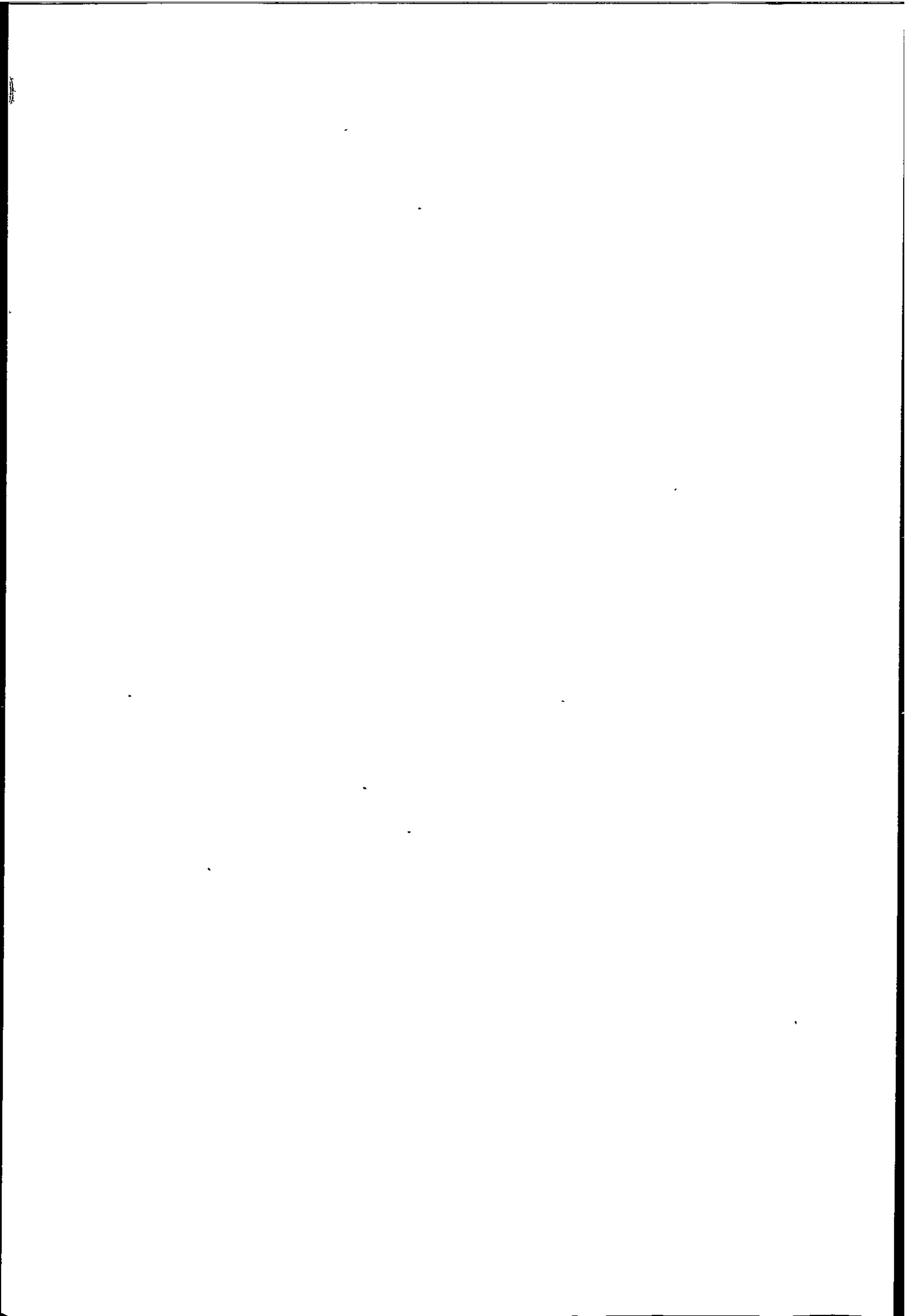
Mangold thoroughly explores subverted geometry within a variety of formats, including circles in slightly irregular rectangles that might easily be mistaken for squares, and circles that appear regular but fail to connect when the artist's hand in the act of drawing returns not to the starting point but to a point slightly out of line with it. There are distorted circles in polygons, distorted circles in and out of polygons where the shaped canvas comprising a half-circle at one side and half of a polygon at the other, contains a drawing, which, by reversing the configuration, completes both shapes. Of course, rectangular and triangular formats are also explored. It is important to draw attention to the simplicity of the actual works, which comprise simple, hand-drawn figures (often in black pencil) on monochromatic, often shaped, grounds. The presentation and realisation are refined and economical, the visual/conceptual content far more complex.

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<sup>180</sup> Masheck, Joseph. 'A Humanist Geometry', *Artforum*, March 1974, pp. 39-43.

<sup>181</sup> Marden's work was included in the exhibition 'Abstraction: Geometry: Painting' at the Albright-Knox Gallery 1989; see Auping, Michael. *Abstraction. Geometry. Painting: Selected Geometric Abstract Painting in America Since 1945*. Harry N Abrams, Inc. Publishers, New York in association with Albright Knox Art Gallery. 1989.

<sup>182</sup> Cooke, Lynne. 'Robert Mangold Frames of Reference' from *Robert Mangold Attic Series I - VI*, Lisson Gallery, London, 1990.



It is clear from this investigation, from Mangold's interviews, and from commentaries in books, articles and reviews, that the work is consistently discussed and analysed in physical, factual and perceptual terms. There is no mention of anything other than that which visibly constitutes the paintings, apart from its effect on the viewer's perceptions and expectations. For the most part Mangold's comments deal with flatness, the depth of the stretchers, the relationships between surface, colour, outer edge, shape, internal structure, figure, etc. Is his work simply a conformation of the Minimalist decree that what you see is what there is? Not according to Robert Berling.

'...his abiding concerns do not, finally, conform to Minimalist criteria. There is too much concern for internal relationships, too little for "objectness." What you see is decidedly not the totality of what is there, nor is it assumed to be a quantifiable given. For Mangold the psychology of seeing plays a central role as does, in a deceptively quiet way, the metaphorical potentiality of all visual experience. His art is, finally, too personal, too lyrical, and too painterly to fit the Minimalist canon.'<sup>183</sup>

The factual, the perceptual, the 'ever-present distinction between "physical fact and psychic effect",<sup>184</sup> are, as Berling points out, controlled to some extent by the personal.

'When you make all those little decisions in the work, when you decide what colour you are going to use, or how heavy to make the line, then all of those decisions together are what makes the result. And that is based on some kind of internal need or desire of how you want the painting to look and feel. I mean, sometimes you want the painting to look very bright and gay and sometimes you want it to be very sombre.'<sup>185</sup>

Is the work silent? Well Berling says that 'Mangold speaks for the value of quiet attentiveness', but in reply to a recent question about his inclusion in Lippard's article

Mangold made the following reply—

'I remember the article Lucy L. wrote but cannot quite remember her reasons for calling our work "Silent Art".'<sup>186</sup>

In a more recent answer to a direct question on this matter he stated—

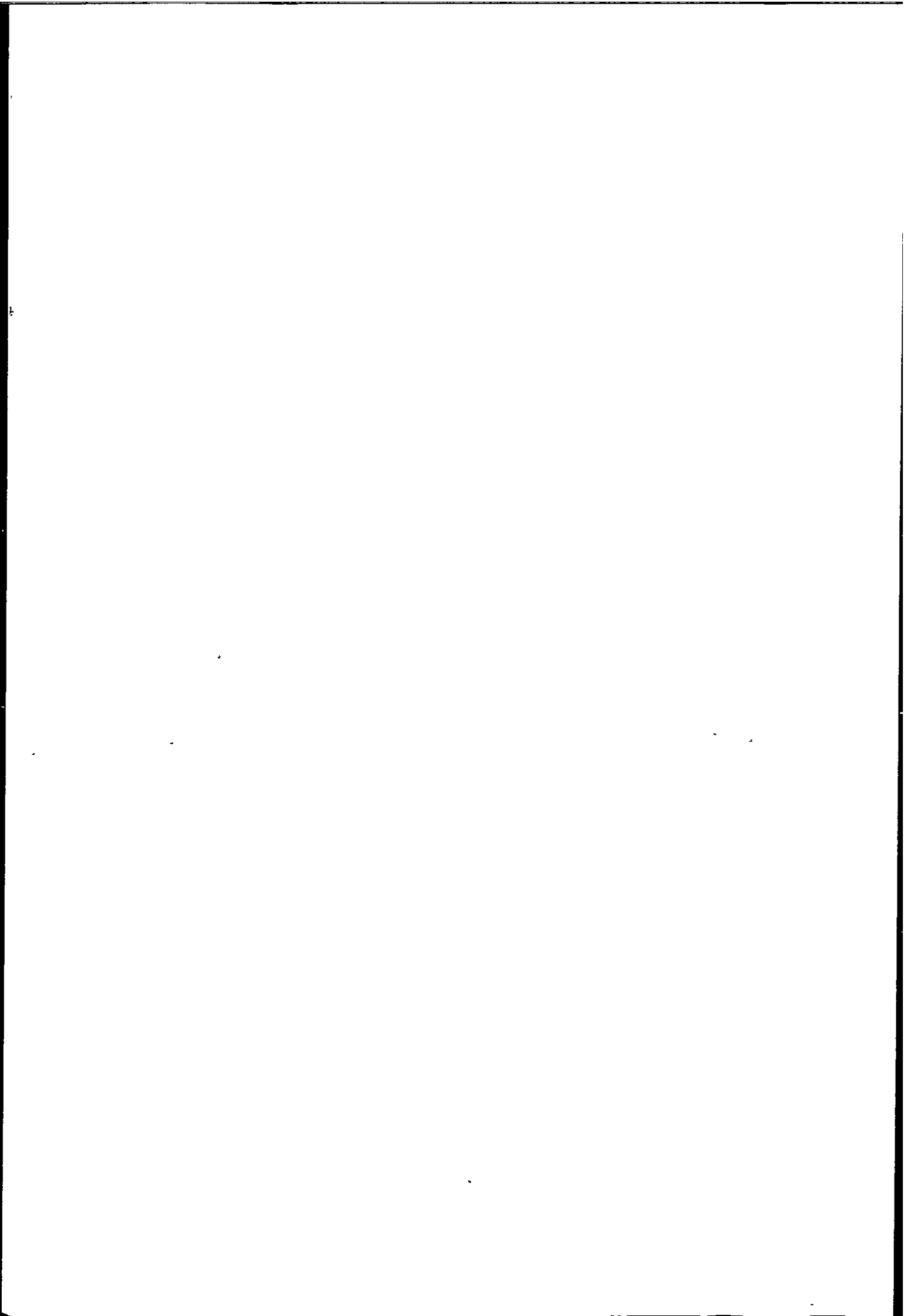
'No it was not my intention to make paintings that were about silence. I think this was used to describe the art because it was so different from Pop art and Op Art etc. that were so active and image filled.'<sup>187</sup>

<sup>183</sup> Berling, Robert. 'Robert Mangold: Nuanced Deviance, *Art in America*, May, 1985, pp160-167.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

<sup>185</sup> Robert Mangold / Urs Raussmuller, op cit.

<sup>186</sup> Letter from Robert Mangold, July 15<sup>th</sup> 1998.



The irony is that his work is purely visual and not about anything, its autonomy is deeply rooted in his own.

'Mangold's life and art have been of a piece. He acted out his social and professional autonomy by moving to the country and re-establishing the privacy of his studio.'<sup>188</sup>

Furthermore, the 'meaning' of his work is elusive and ineffable.

'The subject of meaning or content in my ... painting causes me to try to talk about how I work without talking about formal structure or painterly method'.<sup>189</sup>

I will give Mangold the last word in his answer to a question by Rosalind Krauss.

'I don't know what to say, really. I am interested in the idea of presenting as simple, economical, and as wholly readable a statement as possible. But at the same time, I really don't know what that means.'<sup>190</sup>

In the case of Robert Ryman the overlapping of content and form becomes even more pronounced and difficult to separate. The discussion of his work under the heading of 'monochrome' in Chapter 3 has, because of Ryman's literal, materialist stance, inevitably involved content.

'There is never a question of *what* to paint, but only how to paint. The *how* of painting has always been the image.'<sup>191</sup>

Most reviews and critiques of his work focus on considerations of surface, materials, methods and hanging devices; there are however, some questions that can broaden the discussion. The most relevant and difficult ones have been raised by Thomas McEvelley in his article 'Absence Made Visible'<sup>192</sup>. I will refer to, and quote from this text in the following discussion.

Ryman's paintings are generally acknowledged to adhere closely to Minimalist principles—  
painting as object, painting as activator of surrounding space, painting as visible fact, what

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<sup>187</sup> Mangold, Robert. 'Written answer to a question by the Author', September 2001.

<sup>188</sup> Shiff, Richard. *Robert Mangold*, Phaidon Press Ltd., London, 2000, p. 43.

<sup>189</sup> Robert Mangold quoted in 'Robert Mangold'. *Ibid.* p. 16

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.* p. 17.

<sup>191</sup> Robert Ryman, from Storr, Robert, 'Simple Gifts', catalogue essay from *Robert Ryman*, Tate Gallery and Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1993.

<sup>192</sup> McEvelley, Thomas. 'Absence Made Visible', *Artforum*, Summer, 1992, pp. 92-96.



you see is what there is. He uses the term 'Realism' to emphasise the refusal of illusion and allusion in his work; both representation and metaphysical abstraction refer to ideas beyond the work itself. Ryman's Realism draws a clear distinction between paintings and pictures; narrative and metaphor are excluded, only the physical facts are presented. McEvelley asks to what extent Ryman's work can be seen as sculpture, in spite of the artist's assertions to the contrary. The early work, as with Mangold's *Walls* and *Areas*, was produced at the time when the emphasis was shifting to sculpture, and the relevance of painting was being questioned along with its Modernist illusionism and 'metaphysical assumptions'. Ryman's emphasis on the materials, specifically listing every item included in the work, has more in common with sculpture than painting.

'His materialism is implicitly sculptural. In sculpture, material is of primary significance, whereas in painting it is usually irrelevant whether the artist has worked on, say, cotton or linen. Similarly, in sculpture any object such as a bracket or screw or peg is considered part of the work, while the means of hanging a painting are traditionally considered external necessities to be made as unobtrusive as possible'.<sup>193</sup>

The sculptural implications are reinforced by the degree to which the paintings activate the space around them, particularly the way in which they extend onto and make use of the wall. Thus, the white, and for Lippard the ultimate monotone, might almost seem to fall foul of her own rule about sculpture, though to be fair it specifically referred to shaped canvases where the emphasis on contour de-emphasises the surface and creates a figure/ground relationship with the wall. Ryman's paintings use the wall without diminishing their concern with surface, but this invites another problem for McEvelley.

Where, if at all does the 'what you see is what there is' approach involve an aesthetic concern?

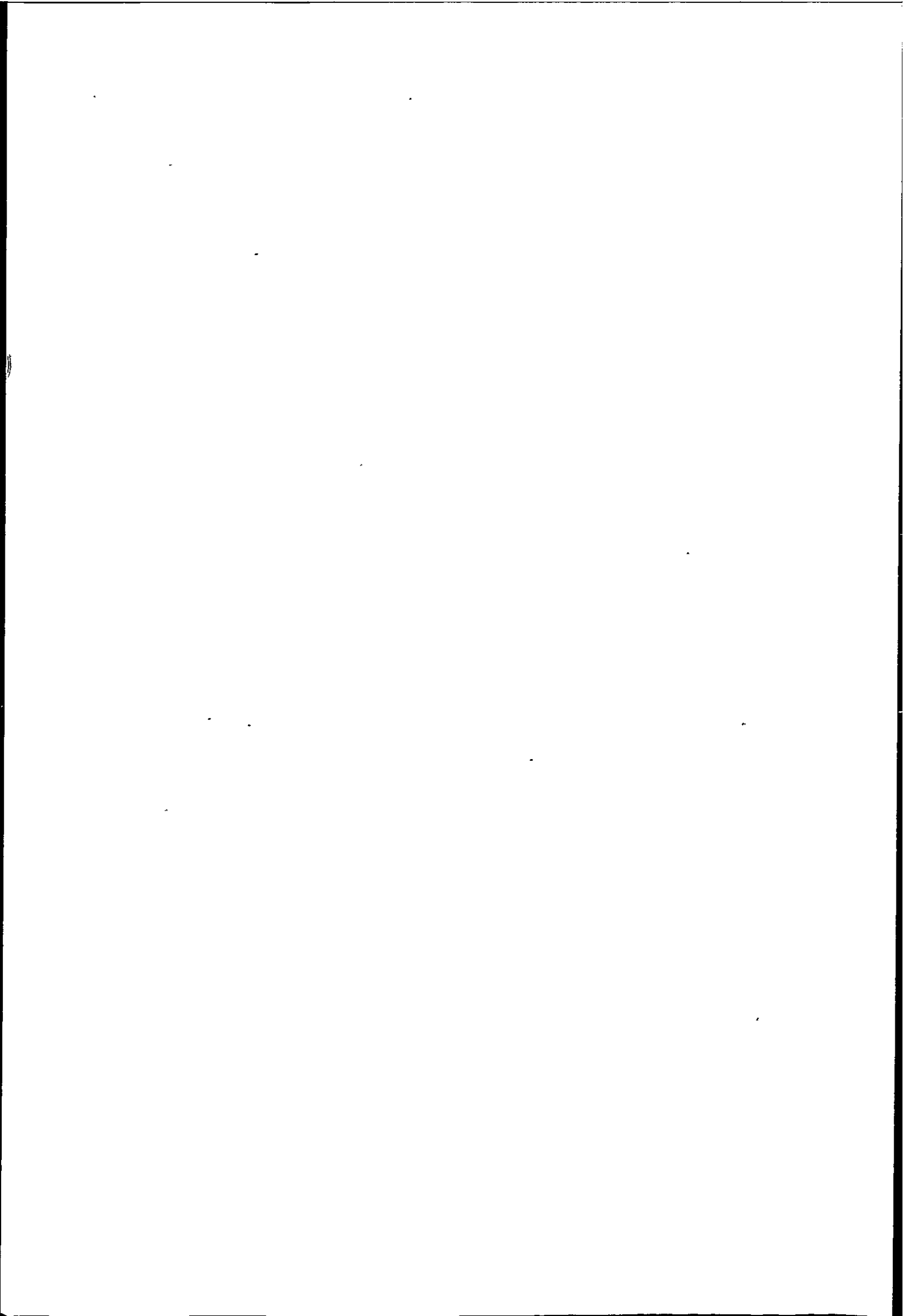
Is what we see just the literal and material reality or is there an aesthetic point?

'These artists, in other words, have not explained why they bothered to make the painting at all, rather than simply pointing to the wall, which is already there and is already "exactly what you see"'.<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid. p.94.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid. p.94-95.



McEvilley also questions the nature of monotonal blankness and its apparent refusal of narrative. He suggests that the absence evoked by a blank surface can in itself be a kind of narrative, implying either something that has been present, or something yet to come. Furthermore, there is the narrative of cleaning the clean slate, with its implications of a possible crisis that necessitated it. An 'empty' canvas indicates the process of emptying and the removal of elements that might continue to exist and be available for use at another time. Purity implies a narrative of purification. Also, arising from Ryman's intuitive working methods (not altogether unrelated to Abstract Expressionism) is the notion of a drama being acted out as the unplanned work becomes visible. The drama unfolding on the canvas occurs not as a figure on a ground, but simply as the ground. It has been suggested that these surfaces present contradictory readings, as complete, requiring no further marks, and at the same time, expectant and awaiting events of some kind.

As with most of the other artists I have discussed, Ryman's paintings have not been immune to suggestions of spirituality. McEvilley is doubtful that notions of the spiritual in art were totally rejected by artists after Abstract Expressionism. He expresses the view that Ryman succeeds, to a point, in achieving a balance between realism and mysticism.

'...it is a sublime experienced on the level of perception, and deeply informed by the materialist ethos of Minimalism.'<sup>195</sup>

Ryman's concern with perception is such that it becomes an 'absolute'.

'The work restores the simplicity of sense perception, yet invests it at the same time with grandeur and absoluteness. The peace of raw and simple perception comes to suggest a salvational force, as in Zen or *vipassana* meditation practice.'<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> Ibid. p.95.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid. p.95.

Finally, there is the problem of white. Ryman insists that no symbolism is intended, it is simply the most effective way of revealing the surface qualities. McEvelley points out that it can be difficult to exclude references.

'Ryman's work, like that of any artist, is caught in its social situation and a politically focused writer could extend this critique a fair distance.'<sup>197</sup>

From reviews of Ryman's work McEvelley quotes passages celebrating white in terms of 'the absolute...light...the all inclusive' and 'power' and responds by asking '...do we not hear a dying resonance of the age of white imperialism?' He concludes that Ryman is a traditional artist whose work is aimed at a Western audience conversant with recent art history.

Acknowledging that this might be too narrow a reading he introduces the scientific notion of white as the sum of all colours. Notwithstanding the merits of these arguments, McEvelley confirms their existence regardless of the artist's intentions. Nevertheless, he concludes—

'...Ryman's work throws itself open to this kind of interpretation, these are questions in which he himself is essentially not involved. Within the artist's sense of his work, white functions not as a signifier but as a condition of visibility: an aid to the directness and simplicity of the raw sense datum, which is the same for all.'<sup>198</sup>

This discussion of Ryman's work has once again shown that interpretations and associations happen regardless of the artist's stated intentions. This can have some advantages for an artist whose work remains almost the same for long periods; Ryman's blank surfaces, open as they are to viewers' interpretations', have been read over the last 50 or more years in ways appropriate to changing concerns and interests and thus have been able to remain relevant throughout that time. However, in relation to current practice, it has to be recognised that even the ultimate monotone i.e. the white square, is not necessarily silent.

The investigation of content has shown that monotonal paintings can be made for significantly different reasons. At one end of the scale is Newman's concern with the sublime, and at the

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<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.* p.96.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.* p.96.

other Ryman's exploration of materials and paint application. All the artists discussed avoid the totally inexpressive Minimalist object; the decision to paint seems to acknowledge a desire to leave traces of expression no matter how restrained in appearance. However, it is clear that all the work is understood in its historical context, i.e. in relation to either Abstract Expressionism or Minimalism or both. Newman's engagement with Abstract Expressionism was concomitant with his belief in painting's ability to transmit metaphysical truths, whilst his vast 'geometrical' areas of flat colour were the precursors of Minimalism. Agnes Martin has described herself as an Abstract Expressionist, accepting spiritual, interpretations of her work whilst pursuing apparently Minimalist strategies.<sup>199</sup> Brice Marden was influenced by both movements and also, by Jasper Johns. He has acknowledged a concern with the spiritual, though not a primary concern; his works deal with surface, colour, tone, weight and shape and are intended to be understood emotionally.<sup>200</sup> Ad Reinhardt attempted to rule out all connections outside art, but his mysterious black canvases have been seen by some to be spiritual. What is meant by spiritual? It is a word often used but not so often defined. Since none of the artists were particularly concerned with religion it is probably best understood as relating to the higher faculties, i.e. highly refined levels of thought and feeling. The total exclusion of illusionism and imagery from the paintings suggest an anti-materialistic stance. This is only part of the story however; the paintings arose largely out of formalist endeavours and from reactions and responses to preceding and prevailing ideas. The primacy of the purely visual has also been recognised, in e.g. Martin's atmospheric 'cloud' situated between facture and closure in a system of three viewing distances, Reinhardt's close-toned areas testing the limits of perception, Mangold's visual conundrums countering expectation with perception,

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<sup>199</sup> Robert Mangold's view differs from the conclusion I have drawn from Martin's statements in interviews; in his letter (July 15<sup>th</sup> 1998) he says 'I do not think you are correct to place her in the Abstract Exp. Movement. Her work came to the forefront in the early sixties; an exhibition at the Dwan gallery, I think it was titled '10', linked her properly with the growing area to later be known as minimal art, and her shows around this time at Robert Elkton Gallery were also memorable.'

<sup>200</sup> In a recent interview on BBC Radio 4's 'Front Row' (of which, unfortunately, I have no documentary evidence), he indicated that where spiritual concerns were involved they were best not discussed; they could be intended by the artist and detected by the viewer, but not openly acknowledged as important.

Marden's undefinable colours and worked-over surfaces, and Ryman's revelations of surface qualities that elevate perception to an absolute.

It appears that monotonal canvases, if set in the appropriate context, can convey a range of content from the intensely spiritual and metaphysical to the purely phenomenological, but therein lies confusion. McEvelley has posed a question about the optical approach that preceded Minimalism: if Newman's canvases present optical experiences through which we apprehend the sublime, then does the purely optical 'become a vehicle for all sorts of metaphysical content to be supplied by the viewer?'<sup>201</sup> However, even overtly metaphysical paintings such as Newman's have been received in purely formalist terms, not just by those concerned with the next step in the Modernist narrative, but also by the visual atheists, by which I mean those who cannot be induced to experience the sublime in front of a painting even in the full knowledge of what is intended. At the other extreme, we have seen spirituality ascribed to Ryman's work. In the midst of all the statements from artists and exegesis from critics, what becomes of silence? Where the painter today presents silence or apparent emptiness, it can operate rather like Cage's silence except that, if McEvelley is right about viewers supplying metaphysical content, there is the possibility of coughing, shuffling and breathing being replaced by the sound of interpretations and meanings being imposed. In fact the situation is more complex and indeed more open today than it was when Newman was working; some viewers will supply metaphysical content, some will be aware of more recent attitudes towards monotone, and some will no longer find monotone at all empty. Artists have some control over this, either through statements, or by a careful control of the context in which the work is viewed. Where the intended 'statement' is a simple, pure silence/emptiness, it would be best to appeal simply to the viewer's intuitive and pre-verbal responses. It might even be possible to disclose the general nature of a silence, for example,

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<sup>201</sup> Op.cit.

ineffable/contemplative/mystical/affirming etc. or even more specifically, refusal, anger, or suppression. Where the work is intentionally spiritual the silence might be respected as long as nothing exists within it (a Greek cross for example) that can initiate the process of speculation and interpretation. A purely materialist work could retain its silence, but this would be silence by default. The 'feeling' of silence can succeed, and furthermore it invites investigation into the affective qualities of colours, tones, keys, textures, sizes etc. and, importantly, into the positive, negative or ambiguous aspects of silence mentioned above. Of course, all or most of the content of silent painting dealt with in this discussion reflects the historical preoccupations associated with Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism. Contemporary examples of monotonous and grids are able to operate in a broader context.

## Chapter Seven: A Review of Section One

In Section One I have analysed the original source in which the notion of silent painting was first fully expounded in relation to monotone, and a later source linking silence with the grid. Following that, I have investigated the work of six artists identified in the original source, to discover the ways in which monotone and the grid have been employed. Difficulties have arisen throughout in determining quite what the word silence implies in relation to painting. First of all, it seems that Lucy Lippard attached the word to work that was not primarily intended to be silent. It was silent in comparison to the noise of Abstract Expressionism, developing as a formal reaction against the rhetoric, emotional excess and gestural style characteristic of that movement. It also developed to some extent from the work of Still and Rothko and of course from Newman's vast areas of flat colour; his quest for the sublime was associated with Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant who 'defined it as the mind's experience of being exalted by enormity, vacuity, darkness, solitude, silence and infinity.'<sup>202</sup> During the 1960s monotone appeared surprisingly empty and blank, Lippard was right therefore, to treat silence, blankness and emptiness as synonymous insofar as they all resist, refuse or exclude expression. It also explains why she described Newman, Rothko and Still as precedents; those who came after pursued more reductive strategies and either abandoned extravagant notions of content or reduced them to levels of subtlety. It has been shown that Martin and Marden maintained some links with Abstract Expressionist content whilst Reinhardt, Mangold and Ryman moved away from it. It also emerged, to further demonstrate the vagueness that pervades this field of enquiry, that both Martin and Reinhardt have spoken or written of silence in relation to their work.

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<sup>202</sup> Anfam, David. *Abstract Expressionism*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1990, p146.



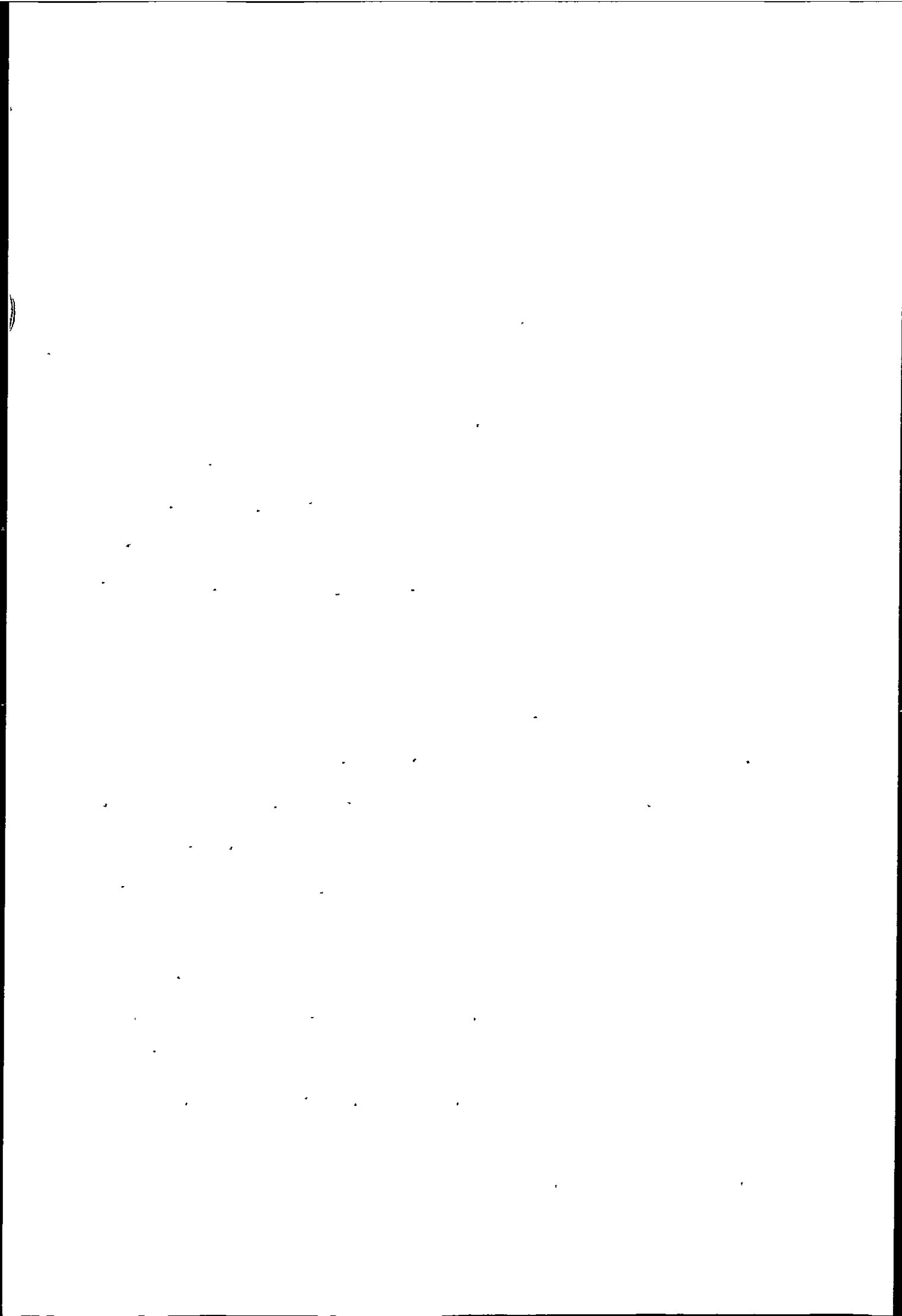
In spite of the impossibility of arriving at clear definitions and neatly categorising everything and everyone, (in the case of art and artists I would not wish it any other way), monotone is clearly a fundamental device for achieving silence. It was shown however, that all the artists added something; Martin added grids (two layers of silence?), and stripes, Reinhardt added a grid in the form of a Greek cross, and subtle colour changes. Mangold actually subtracted pieces from his *Walls* and added subverted geometry to the work that followed. Ryman, perhaps the purest in accordance with Lippard's ideal monotone, added a variety of different supports, particularly wall fixings. Marden began as perhaps the most uncompromising, but began to assemble differently coloured panels which eventually led to complexity. There was, in some cases, a sense of noise being reduced to silence only to reappear gradually.

The square was established as an ideal format, but only Martin and Reinhardt consistently used it and whilst it adds symmetry and stillness to emptiness and blankness on the list of silent qualities, we must also acknowledge the ways in which other shapes have been used. Marden strongly associated shape with colour to the point of discovering that he tended to apply the same colour to canvases of the same height and width. The importance he attached to the precise nature of a rectangle was such that he thought of rectangles as 'shaped' canvases. He sometimes used sizes that related to people, and always used thick stretchers to add to the feeling of weight and physicality. These examples draw attention to things that become visible when the image disappears from the surface of the canvas. However, the order of importance can be manipulated; the weight and thickness of a Marden becomes apparent because the surface is fairly blank, apart from the undefinable grey (in the earlier work) and the traces left from the process of smoothing down the paint and wax mixture. The skin of paint overlaps the edges drawing attention to the distance of the surface from the wall. Agnes Martin's stretchers are thinner, keeping the canvas closer to the wall; the grid and

luminescence on the surface take the viewer's attention, the physical structure of the canvas does not distract but helps the feeling of lightness. Similarly, we do not need to be aware of Reinhardt's canvases in anything other than a two-dimensional way. Mangold wanted to keep his surfaces as close to the wall as possible, and Ryman had a variety of solutions most of which required us to be aware of how the canvas/panel/sheet was attached to the wall. Also in relation to walls, it has emerged that some shaped canvases activate the wall as a ground upon which they become the image or figure, whilst the notion of centrifugal and centripetal grids suggests that some images signal their potential to extend outwards from the edges of the canvas whilst others remain firmly locked within.

With the exception of Ryman, and Mangold's early paintings on masonite, all of the artists discussed have predominantly used canvas supports. Not all have given reasons for their choice but in Martin's case the roughness of the weave has had an important effect on the quality of the graphite grids as well as contributing to the feeling of lightness. Reinhardt would probably have found a solid support too object-like, and Mangold clearly stated his desire to return to a more traditional approach. Obviously the choice of support is determined by its response during the working process, and in Ryman's case the work was largely about the support and the way in which it received paint.

Size, unsurprisingly, is one factor that must be carefully considered in relation to others. Reinhardt chose 60 inches square and Martin 72 inches square, both avoiding the egotistical associations of larger formats without losing the feeling of human proportions. Newman had a powerful statement to make and worked accordingly, but large does not necessarily mean expressive or egotistical. A vast monotonal canvas can be grandiose, but it can simply be the case that more silence is more silence. More is less.



'Yayoi Kusama had a white exhibition at the Brata Gallery in New York in October 1959, in which her paintings approximated the size of the gallery's walls; the initial impression was one of no-show, but on close scrutiny, a fine mesh of circular patterns was revealed.'<sup>203</sup>

It has been noted in Section One that many monotonal paintings tended to be greys, whites or blacks. Martin demonstrated the quiet effects of high key luminescent colour, Reinhardt explored the mysterious painted-out silence of blacks, Marden the elusive character of greys and Mangold, in his early work the neutrality of colour found in everyday, unremarkable objects. Ryman's use of white was simply functional. When Marden began to juxtapose panels of rich primaries and secondaries, he departed from monotonal silence. Again I arrive at the point of suggesting that there are different kinds of silence. The comparative noise of monotonal red may refuse one kind of silence, but it offers another; even juxtapositions of primary colours can still refuse to refer to anything specific beyond the canvas, they can still refuse interpretation and still refuse to suggest or invite words.

According to Lippard 'the ultimate in a no-color object that is still a painting might be a square ...with a sprayed white surface'. Presumably this would be the ultimate silent painting, but in wondering how empty it would be Lippard refers us to Greenberg's statement about an untouched, stretched canvas already existing as a painting but not necessarily a successful one. It would also have been predictable. What emerged from the examination of work by the six artists was a willingness to depart from the predictable by allowing more freedom to one or two elements. Colour can be noisy; it is a factor to be considered but not ruled out. If other elements remain silent, so long as it does not arouse the emotions too highly, a brightly coloured painting is silent in a particular way. Does this mean then that silent painting comprises monotonal, grids, and the restrained and subtle combinations of elements within which nothing ever clamours for attention? The conclusion from history is yes, and it

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<sup>203</sup> Lippard, Lucy, 'The Silent Art', *op cit*.

embraces concerns about perception, attention, spirituality, feeling, emptiness, boredom, mystery, facticity, objectness, rationality, order, contemplation, and of course, reaction and response to preceding and contemporary movements and ideas. Of the work discussed, a small proportion was intentionally silent, a much larger proportion achieved silence unintentionally or not at all. It was a term applied to the work from outside, after the event, but it has provided a range of approaches, interests, solutions and problems, which, in turn, offer a basis for further exploration through practice that sets out intentionally to use silence.

How does this investigation of historical precedents lead to practice? Well, in the first place it demonstrates that Lippard's 'Silent Art' was largely an unrepeatable historical development, firmly located in its time between two major movements. It shows that silence was not the goal of monotonal painters, with the possible exception of Agnes Martin and to some extent Ad Reinhardt, both of whom had aims in addition to silence. The idea was very much in the air at that time and it permeated other art forms, e.g. the work of Cage, Beckett, Pinter, and Miles Davis who recorded *In a Silent Way* in February 1969. Susan Sontag's essay 'The Aesthetics of Silence' was written in 1967, the same year as Lippard's article. In this context, attaching the label 'silent' to monotonal paintings was certainly relevant and drew attention to the nature of monotone. The same applies to the grid. Today both devices can be used in the knowledge that they are accepted as (possible) ways of achieving silence. They are no longer to be understood as merely formalist developments in response to prevailing ideologies, or avant-garde attempts at originality; they can be employed specifically for their association with silence. History has shown that the restrictions imposed by monotone and the grid are not as great as might be expected; the studies of the six artists proved that there has been enough freedom to sustain quite distinctive personal approaches, and of course both devices are still in use— but I will refer to current examples in the next section. It was clear that every

fundamental aspect of painting can be employed, and that in the absence of an image, the nature, shape, size, and thickness of the support and stretcher; the nature and method of application of paint; the relationship between support and wall; colour, surface, key, tonal relationships, avoidance of contrasts, touch, viewing distances, facture, geometry, content, and two-dimensionality all become important in their own right. The commitment to painting demonstrated throughout the historical analysis makes it an effective basis for current exploration in the medium.

It has emerged that the word silent is at best vague in relation to painting— and that it might not even be possible to achieve silence. This is the nub of this research. ‘Silent painting’ is a vague, unresolved, historical phenomenon, a label applied appropriately only in some cases. It cannot be clearly defined but it can be recognised; the historical analysis has exposed all its elements. There are no fixed rules; black, white and grey are the preferred colours but a coloured monotone can still be silent. It is open to investigation, not by testing all the historical strategies, but by clarifying the need for silence, the nature of that silence, and the means of achieving it within current personal practice.

## Section Two: Practice

I began this research when my painting was changing radically, convinced that it would be strengthened and enriched by a thorough theoretical understanding. There was a price to pay. I found that researching and writing Section One, coupled with the ongoing demands of full-time teaching, delayed for quite some time my opportunity to practice. There was a period at the beginning when I was unable to paint much at all because my time was fully occupied reading and attempting to get the thesis underway. I made some small works on paper but do not consider them part of this research because they were not informed by it. However, as the thesis began to take shape, but before Section One was complete, I was able to make a start on the practice. Even then, the time had to be shared between writing and painting. I probably over-reacted as I began to transform what had been a very free approach to practice into the terms of the research. The unfamiliar constraints resulted in work that progressed slowly and was for a while rootless. Naturally, all the paintings have explored ways of achieving silence even where they have failed, but theory alone does not always deliver the desired result. It provides direction and sets relevant limits for the work, but it has to be realised visually, especially in a case like this where the look and feel of the work are the principal guides. Initially my vague notions fitted easily into established models because I was unable to take a critical approach to ideas I had yet to investigate. Eventually, through an understanding of the theories generated by established forms of practice I was able to begin investigating and formulating a personal approach and thus to embark on a critical re-evaluation of the historical concept of silent painting in relation to my own practice-based understanding of silence.

The term 'silent painting' includes many different propositions about what constitutes silence, but my concern throughout is with the direction in which silence, or more precisely a certain

kind of silence, lies. I might simply have painted black or white monochromes right from the beginning but I would have learned little and they would have had more in common with Minimalism than silence. Instead I have been guided by feelings and perceptions, questioned and supported by analysis and argument and tested against the theoretical viewpoints of history. This will provide the basis for Section Two.

I should state at this point that the critique of my work (in Chapter Eight) does not include all of it. The combination of theory and practice requires that the thesis be submitted some time before the viva takes place; I will continue to paint throughout that time. (In fact the approach to painting I have established in the course of this research will not come to an end with the exam; it will continue to form the basis of my practice well into the future.)



## Chapter Eight: A Critique of the work

The research into recent history has assembled a mass of examples in three main areas.

1. The many ways in which monotone can be used—

This included considerations of colour, brushwork, texture, value, key, and some specific ways in which elements can be added, or removed, without losing the unity of the surface. The use of monotone was also examined in conjunction with the nature of its support, its size, shape, thickness, surface, and even the hanging devices.

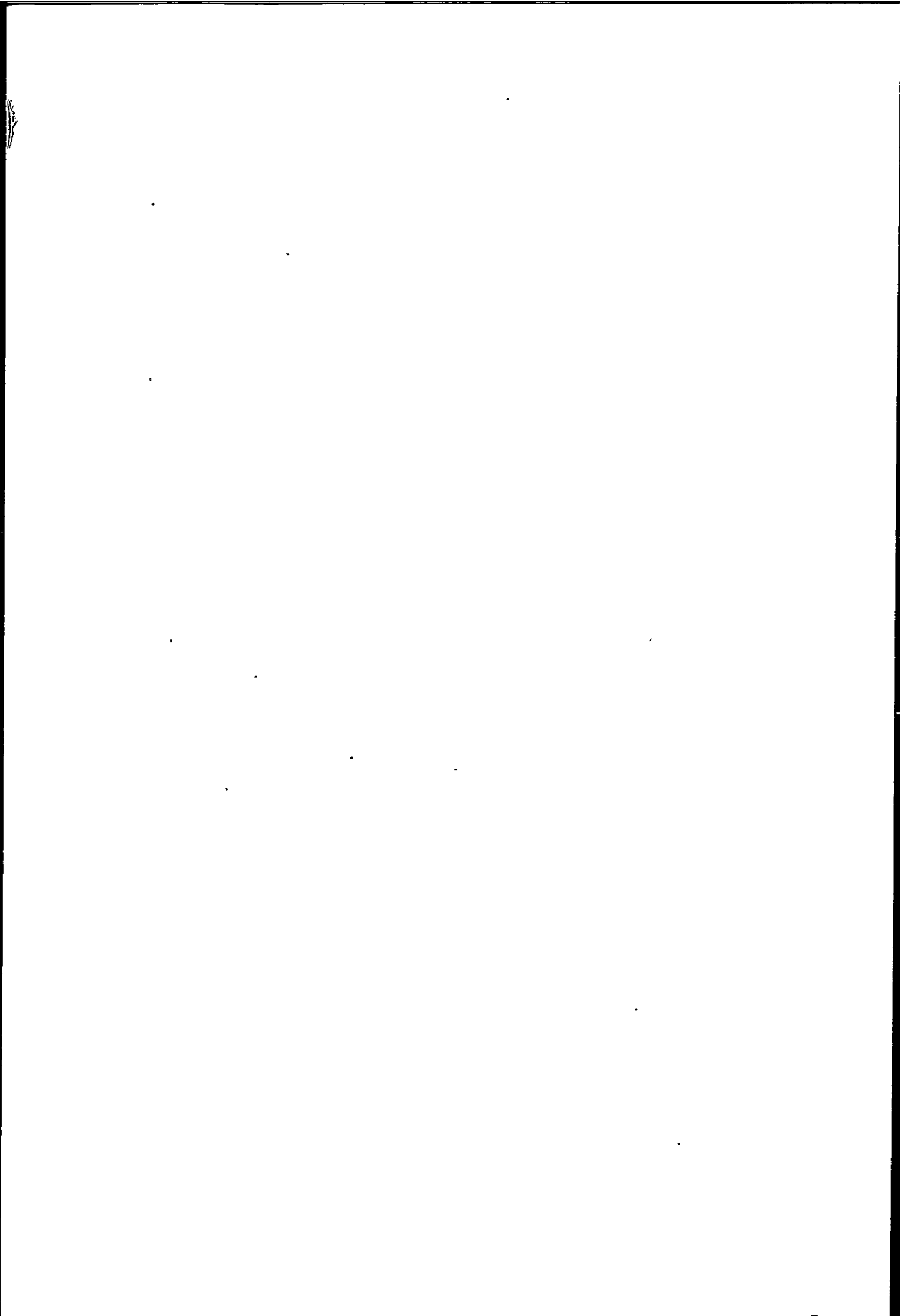
2. Different ways of using grids—

Included in this investigation were centripetal, centrifugal and framework grids, implied and hidden grids, and fragments of grids. It was shown that the grid is paradoxically rational/scientific/material and spiritual, and that it can either map the surface of the canvas and/or become atmospheric and veil-like. Its proportions can be explored and set off against or with the shape and size of the support. Also, a grid can be constructed from the combination of several separate panels.

3. The ways in which all the above can be read and the meanings that can be attached to them—

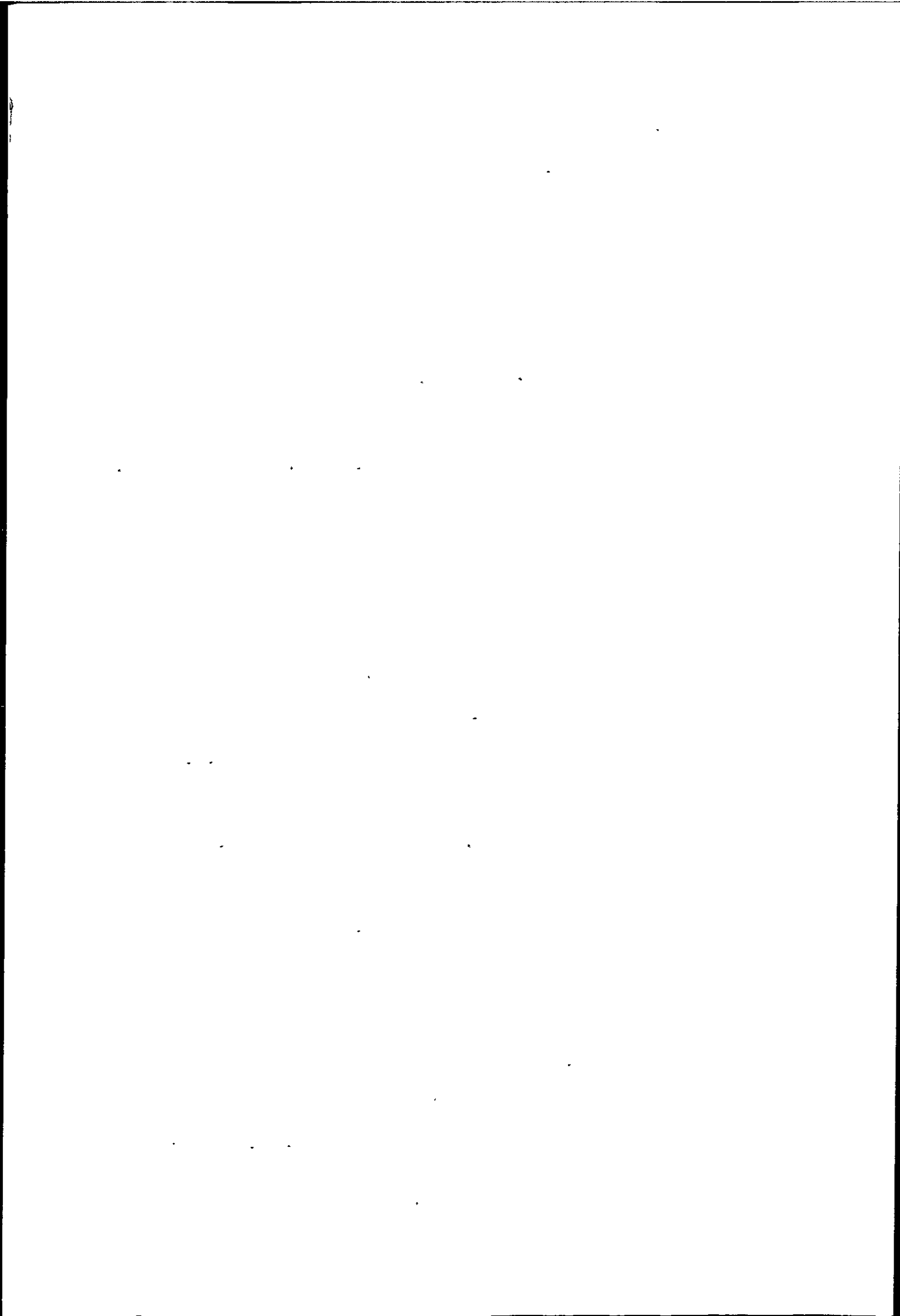
This part of the discussion looked at the array of meanings given to monotonal work, including formalist, spiritual, Minimalist, Expressionist, social/political and scientific readings. It also examined the borderline that divides paintings from sculptural objects, the activation of the surrounding wall space, and the figure/ground relationships that result in certain cases.

How did that research inform the practice? Clearly, it identified existing models of theory and practice, the meanings attached to them, and the critical responses they received. Having



documented this information it became possible to work with or against it, with an initial awareness of the historical connotations of particular visual strategies. This counterbalanced the aesthetic impulses; a clear context and an appropriate critical system provided the basis for evaluating decisions resulting from more intuitive methods of practice. But how did my practice proceed from there? The answer is that it took things a stage further. The findings suggested ways in which silence could be explored in a context that acknowledged both personal concerns and contemporary circumstances. Perhaps I should have drawn firm conclusions from the history that would have taken me straight to a clear solution for the work. Well to some extent I did; there were some elements that I rejected and others that seemed to offer the possibility of fruitful exploration, but I preferred to avoid being too formulaic. The investigations were carried out watchfully so that anything was followed if it appeared to offer a *possible* solution closer to my understanding of, and feeling for, silence. This led to the production of some paintings that might not have been silent but nevertheless gave me a better understanding of where I was going. The historical research initiated a process of evaluation, which the practice has completed. What follows is an account of my practice and an examination of the ideas and problems that it generated.

Initially, I tended to examine particular aspects of silence in turn, producing a number of similar paintings in relation to each one but retaining and accumulating elements from the previous investigations. I did not employ the methods associated with some forms of process and conceptual painting where the work is devised, executed and accepted for what it is. My pursuit of silence was concerned with the look and feel of things; it was necessary to intervene, manipulate, change and explore in order to make visual judgements. Where things failed or fell short, as they often did, they still proved useful, just as in early drawing classes where the advice was often to accept the wrong lines because they would prove helpful in



locating the right ones. Through the operation of this process the work gradually developed from the vagueness of a position where all kinds of things were possible to one where specific approaches became necessary, if only for personal reasons. I was eventually able to understand the nature of the silence that interested me with sufficient clarity to devise strategies for achieving it within the terms of this research.

In explaining my investigations I am aware that descriptions of individual paintings tend to be wordy and tedious for the reader, so I will focus mainly on my intentions, observations and evaluations in relation to each group of paintings, and only to specific works where necessary. The headings indicate the specific aspect of silence on which the work was based.

#### The juxtaposition of similar tones and colours

Painting began in the autumn of 1996 and the seven paintings in this series (see figures 50–56) were only completed by February 1998. Work progressed very slowly at first with some of the large canvases taking about 3 months to finish. At that very early stage I wanted to see what resulted in terms of silence when areas of almost equal colour and value were used. I wondered how similar they could be before they became invisible, and how dissimilar before the contrasts became too loud, and what the effects would be in each case. At the time, having recently moved from producing surfaces full of contrasting, glowing and occasionally explosive colour, I felt uneasy about pure monochrome, preferring to leave something to be discovered. If I had gone straight to monochrome my options would have been limited too quickly to the size, shape, type and nature of the support, choice of medium and method of application. Also, I felt that Reinhardt was a very central figure in all this and that his barely discernible changes of colour and tone could be almost felt as much as seen, in a way that emphasised one's awareness of silence. They certainly produce a sensation that is difficult to



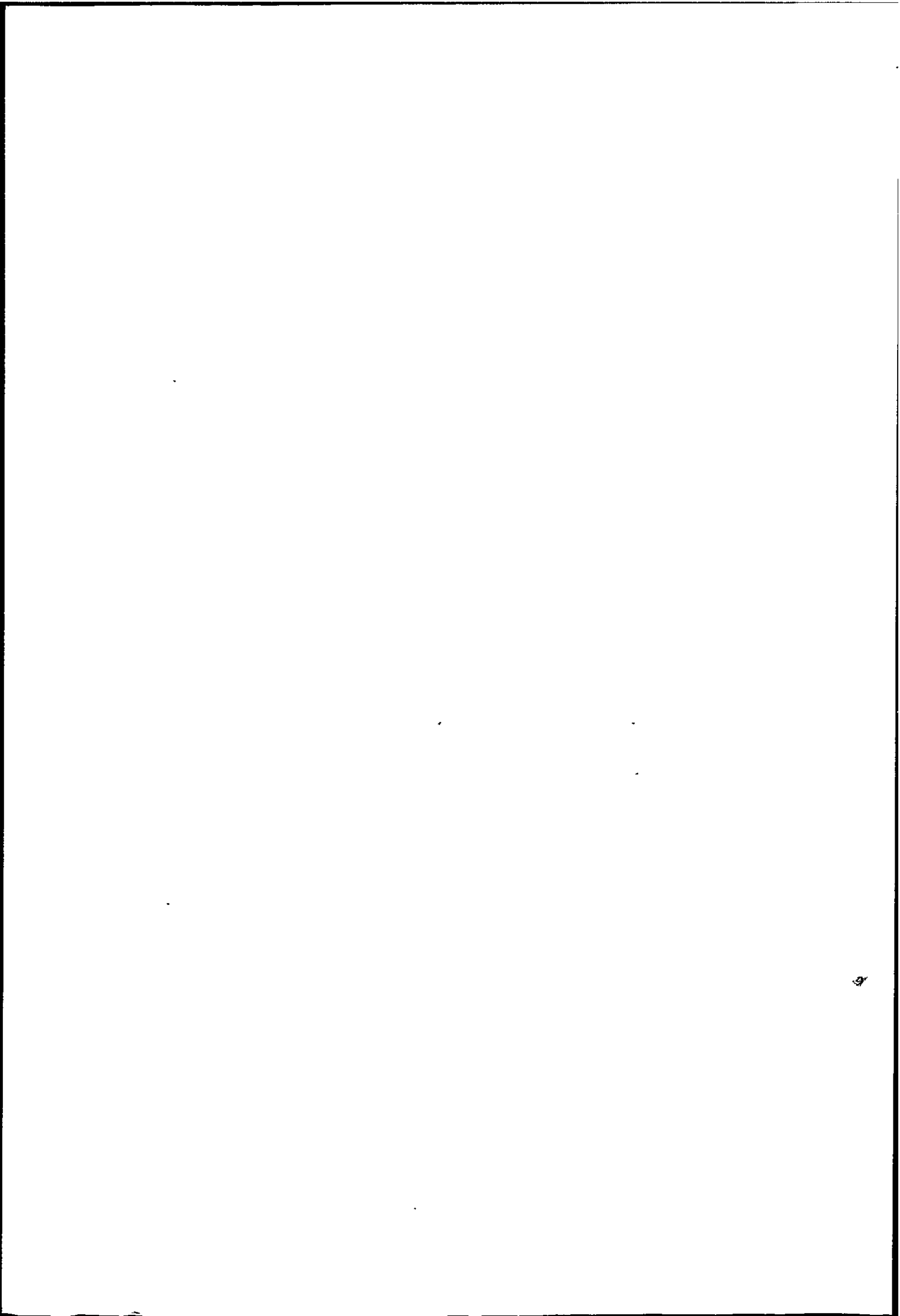


There is another step to add to this. Once the paintings have occupied the attention for a period of time, the act of looking, watching, or staring, elicits silence to the point where people have reported experiencing trance-like states. I have no interest whatsoever in trances, but I am interested in the purely visual and in the act of silently looking as a means of gaining a deeper experience of what things are. Perhaps I should make it clear that I enjoy noise, complexity and excitement as much as the next person; it is more a case of seeing and appreciating the need for the silence and space that makes more sense of everything else. That is not to say that silence is simply negative—the mere absence of something else. In music for example, the spaces between notes provide structure, which some musicians, Miles Davis for instance, exploit so effectively that it becomes as important as the sound. Toru Takemitsu's music seems to create a space for listeners' awareness rather than carrying them relentlessly through from beginning to end; notes are often allowed to fade slowly and naturally into silence.

These were some of the thoughts that occupied me and some of my reasons for beginning the paintings, but what of the results? The paintings were unsuccessful, but as tests they were useful. They were narrow and predictable in that they only investigated close colour and tonal values. Many of the surfaces were unsatisfactory because I tried out a number of different methods, and the structure of the paintings, which entailed the use of grids in a selective way, was arbitrary at best. But this is too crude an assessment; the fact that some paintings worked better than others and some parts were more or less successful is irrelevant at this point. It is only a question of what was learned.

The paintings were silent but in a very familiar way. They were certainly close enough in tone to make attempts at photographing them unsuccessful. (This kind of work is not ideal for publicity slides, but I already knew that from Reinhardt.). This investigation was by no means













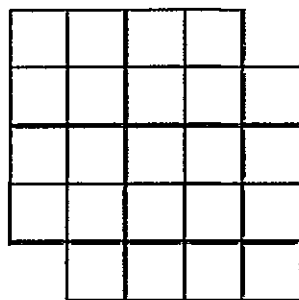




### Shaped format and separate panels

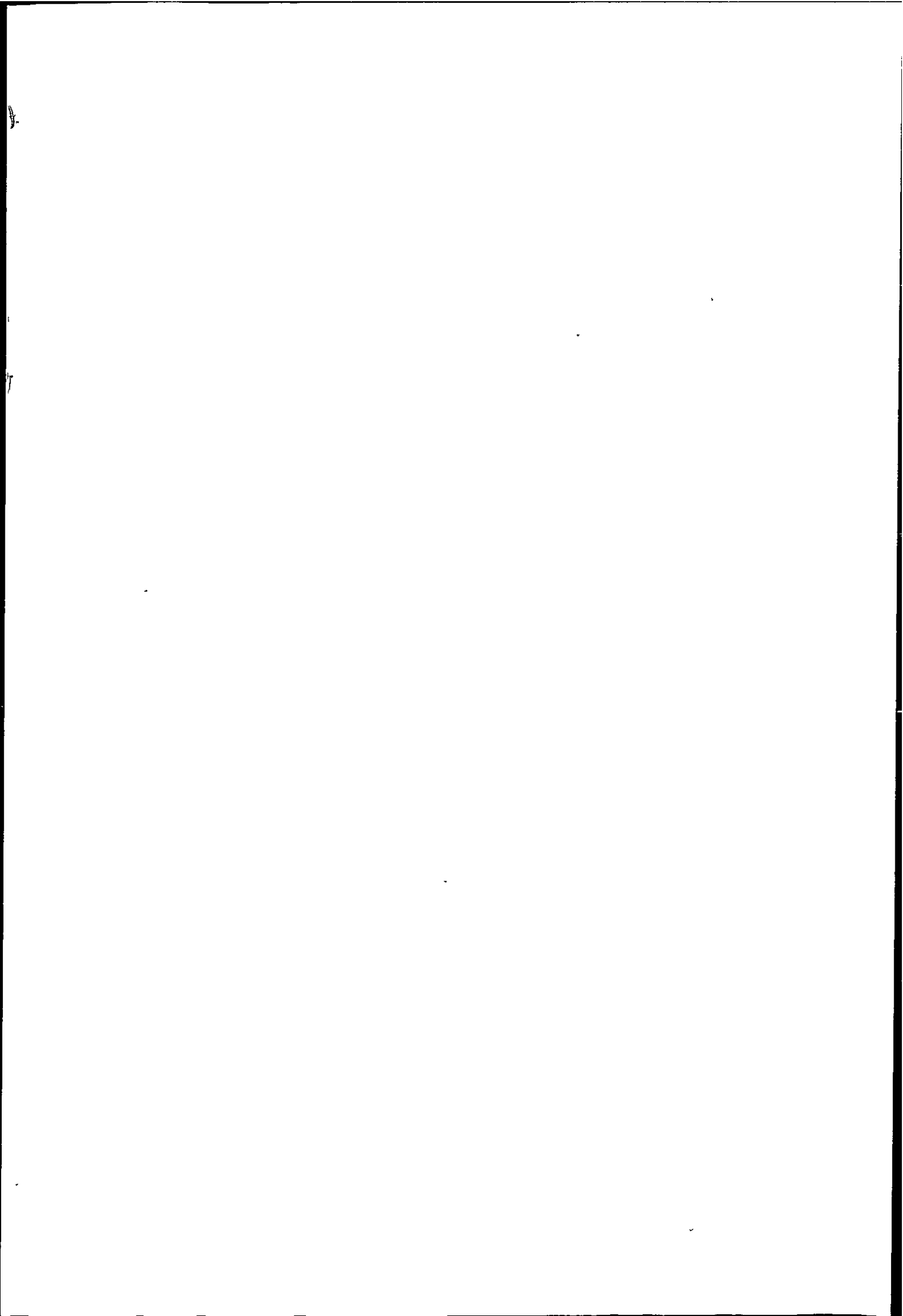
The next batch of work comprised drawings, computer generated images and paintings that were small in size and really intended as tests on which to base more ambitious paintings. The drawings and computer prints began in February 1998 and continued until August. The first small painting was made in September and four more were completed in July and August 1999 (see figures 57–60). At this time I was also making lithographs (see Appendix V figures 132-136, pages 244 and 245).

In an attempt to find another way of introducing something into a monochromatic surface without disrupting its unity I again brought in the grid, but this time in the form of actual divisions between separate panels. I used a shaped format derived from dividing a square into a grid of 16 equal squares and placing a second square of equal size onto it one quarter of the way down from the top and one quarter of the way in from the left. It then became a square divided into a grid of 25 equal squares with the top-right and bottom-left squares removed.



The reason for this was that the resulting shape could be subdivided in many different ways and reconstructed from separate panels. This introduced a structure into the panel that also brought in the outside edges as a form of drawing. The panels were made from hardboard rather than canvas. Again I had combined the two major devices for achieving silence, monochrome and the grid, attempting to inject something other than just colour and surface quality. The choice of a hard support would have pushed the work more towards Minimalist impersonality if I had stuck strictly to monochrome, but, apart from two paintings, I didn't.

















resemblance, albeit very superficial, to paintings made by Edwina Leapman in 1997, especially a grey-blue one titled *Early Blue 1997*. Since the resemblance was superficial, and because I was moving in a different direction, I decided to accept the similarity as a crossing point rather than a parallel course. I continued, but just to make the work less similar, decided to insert a different grid pattern in one small area of the surface. (I knew that the smaller area would inevitably have to become a blank silent area, but for a while it continued as a grid.) My way of working was to paint a mid-tone monotonal ground in a coloured grey and work over it with a translucent light tone; if it felt wrong I would repaint the monotone ground and begin again, which meant I was fairly free to try anything. After a number of re-paintings I noticed that the surface became more responsive to the translucent layer. Of the four paintings I made, (see figures 61–64) one felt too busy and contrived to achieve the quality I wanted (figure 62), but three were useful. Their silence was of a particular kind promoted by the use of monotone, grid, fairly high key, soft translucent marks and matt surfaces that could be looked into. The painted-in areas between the grid lines gave the surface an almost wall-like appearance that seemed to forbid access in some way. They were simultaneously soft and hard, open and closed, material and evanescent.<sup>207</sup>

These paintings raised questions, once again, about the use of brush marks. The marks were applied in a way that was neither mechanical nor concerned with expression though they were deliberately uneven. It was the nature of their unevenness that posed a problem. The surfaces appeared too animated and slight; they lacked a sense of gravitas. It was too early to assume that everything should be painted as flatly as possible and to reach for the nearest roller. Stillness could be approached without abandoning the idea of using paint more evocatively.

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<sup>207</sup> See also Appendix IV, Guide to the Exhibition, p. 221, for further discussion of Figures 61 and 64— numbered 3, (fig.94) and 4, (fig. 95) in the guide).















It also suggested ways of thinking about and dealing with silence, in this case silence took the form of an original state that was subtly revealed. The painting's silence was achieved through the balanced amalgamation of a square format, the use of monotone and the grid, closely related colours and values, a middle to high key, relative emptiness and stillness, and the balance between rationality and chance. All these observations were assembled for further exploration, but not in the same kind of painting; I felt this one was inert.

Some of the 1960s paintings that dealt with the 'cool absolute' were sometimes referred to as 'difficult' art. They confronted the viewer with an uncompromising emptiness that refused to be readily, if at all, interesting. Four decades ago the justification and significance derived from their ability to shock, placed them in the avant-garde. Ironically, they made an impact because of their emptiness.

'While dada, assemblage and pop art have come in for their share of ridicule and rage, the most venomous volleys have been reserved for those works or styles that seem "empty" rather than "ordinary" or "sloppy".'<sup>209</sup>

Uncompromising emptiness is now familiar, and, lacking the impact of a controversial new art form it has to be adjusted to reflect more specific intentions. It has to be detached from purely formalist endeavours to avoid being simply 'what you see is what you see' and thus losing 'the aesthetic point'. This is complicated by the fact that monotones are not necessarily empty anymore. From this point it will be more helpful to think of full-emptiness. This means that silence must be presented in a way that is simultaneously empty but interesting. Visual interest must be achieved without the attempt to solicit attention or entertain. Once again there are two edges to explore to determine where one thing becomes another i.e. where emptiness becomes impersonal and mechanical and where visual interest becomes entertainment.

I made one red monochrome (March 2000, figure 66) to test my theory about relative silence; is red noisier than white? The painting felt altogether wrong for the kind of silence that

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<sup>209</sup> Lippard, Lucy. 'The Silent Art', op cit.







effectively— form and content, i.e. the silence I wanted, were finally uniting. When the paintings were finished I concluded that from this point onwards it was possible to draw together the historical influences and references, and the visual concerns and theories derived from responses to the work produced so far. I was still concerned with pushing the idea of silence as far as possible; the uncompromising monochrome might be intrinsically silent but it could be understood in many other ways. I wanted to eliminate some of the other readings and thus emphasise the silent nature of the work. In addition to selecting quiet colours, tones, surfaces (matt) and sizes (small) I became interested in pursuing strategies suggested by some of the solutions arrived at in the ten small paintings, most of which employed the use of 'silent contrasts'. Three main considerations were of particular interest; I will explain them now. Once again it will not be necessary to describe individual paintings. The images reproduced below are grouped according to their strategies and will not appear in chronological order.

#### Silent Contrasts— Juxtaposed Areas of Silence

This explores the possibility of using two differently treated areas within one image; one flat but slightly inflected, the other completely flat (see figures 67-70).<sup>210</sup> The juxtaposition can imply the existence of a grid— (implied existence offers further scope for investigation as a strategy for silence). The contrast between the two areas is adjusted to be so slight that it only reveals itself at close range though the painting remains almost monotonal. Viewers inevitably find themselves staring into the totally flat, still and silent area placed within or against the slightly inflected surface. The area of flat colour can be slightly darker, lighter, warmer, or cooler, either creating a receding or indefinable space to be looked into, or remaining flat on the surface, or advancing. This strategy combines monotone, grid, a square format, coloured greys, close tones/colours, a barely inflected flat surface carrying traces of feeling, a

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<sup>210</sup> See also Appendix IV, Guide to the Exhibition, for further reference to Figure 67— p. 214, no. 9, fig. 100 in the guide; Figure 68— p. 226, no. 10, fig. 101 in the guide; Figure 69— p. 226, no. 11, fig. 102 in the guide; Figure 70— p. 224, no. 8, fig. 99 in the guide.



























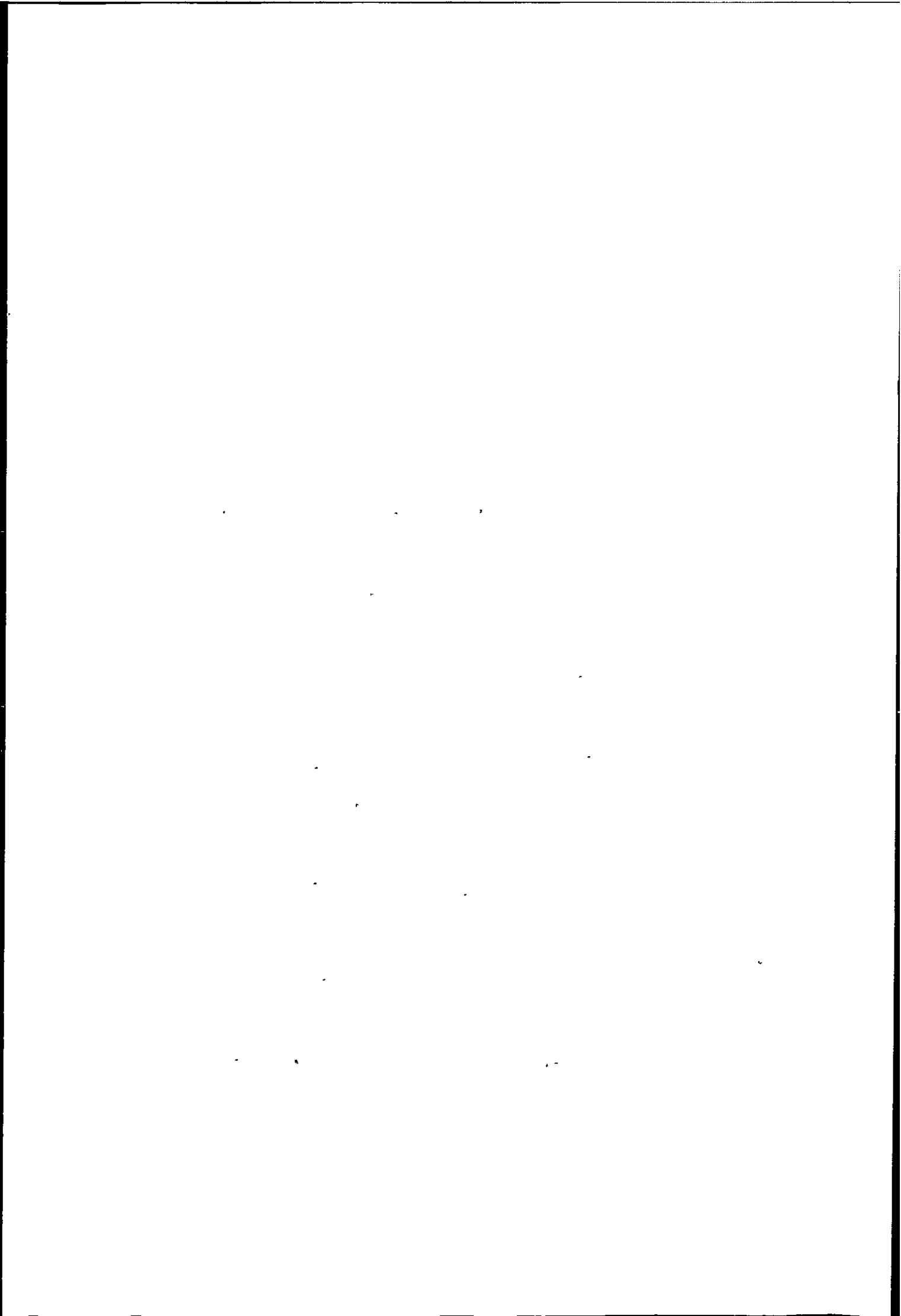
and concealment. In fact I am more concerned with a contemplative act of silencing, like gradually removing dust or polishing a mirror, and I am attempting to give the paintings that kind of feeling. I could lay down layers of paint and gradually remove them by scraping or sanding but prefer not to be so literal. The act of painting that also involves watching, feeling and responding is important.

Monotone, or to be more precise, near-monotone, again forms the basis of this strategy. The basic process is similar to the one described earlier where translucent grey or white (the white forms a coloured grey when it is painted over the ground) is added in layers over a coloured ground, only in this case it is a more considered approach to ensure that the marks bear no relationship to gestures or personal expression. The silence here can be felt in the application of the marks, the softness of the tone, the gradual quietening of the ground colour and the process of filling/emptying.

The paintings are treated either in the manner described, quite evenly across the entire surface, or the surface is divided vertically down the centre with one side painted as described and the other painted as a solid flat monotone in a closely matched colour. From a distance the painting appears completely monotonal. Subtle changes are silent; as the viewer approaches, the division of the surface becomes apparent almost imperceptibly, with the silence of a shadow falling on the canvas.

### Personal/Impersonal

The third strategy makes deliberately historical references. This research springs from work produced in a specific period, not a movement or category, but the space or transition between two movements, Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism, where the residual content of the





earlier one became embodied in the appearance of its successor. It was a particular kind of painting that reduced the medium to its absolute minimum yet by the very fact of being painting insisted on the difference between the hand-made and the machine-made object. Paintings, no matter how flatly brushed or rolled, carry traces of touch, thought and feeling. Presumably they do so intentionally since there are many other readymade surfaces to choose instead; whereas Minimalist sculptors would have seen aluminium, for example, as a surface complete in itself, painters see it as a useful surface on which to work, usually by adding evidence of personal decisions and leaving traces of feeling. It is this extreme edge between feeling and no feeling that interests me; it is the difference between the silence of an inanimate object and the responsive silence between two human beings; one simply reflects the way that things are, the other is deliberate and meaningful. It seems appropriate to refer to the historical context within which this notion of silence was identified by exploring small but meaningful differences in surface quality. Juxtaposing the qualities creates the 'silent contrast' that does not disturb monotonal unity.

I considered the possibility of combining painted surfaces with unpainted metal surfaces, which would be both expressively and inexpressively silent; the positive, eloquent silence of the painted surface being more recognisable in contrast to the impersonal nature of the industrial surface. The metal's slightly reflective quality would also act as a kind of ambient 'noise' in the manner of the Cage/Rauschenberg silence. However, after due consideration I decided to paint the whole surface rather than incorporate a dramatic contrast of materials. To retain a positive silence throughout, I would simply juxtapose inflected areas of paint with the most impersonal surfaces I could paint by hand. The use of both gloss and matt surfaces in







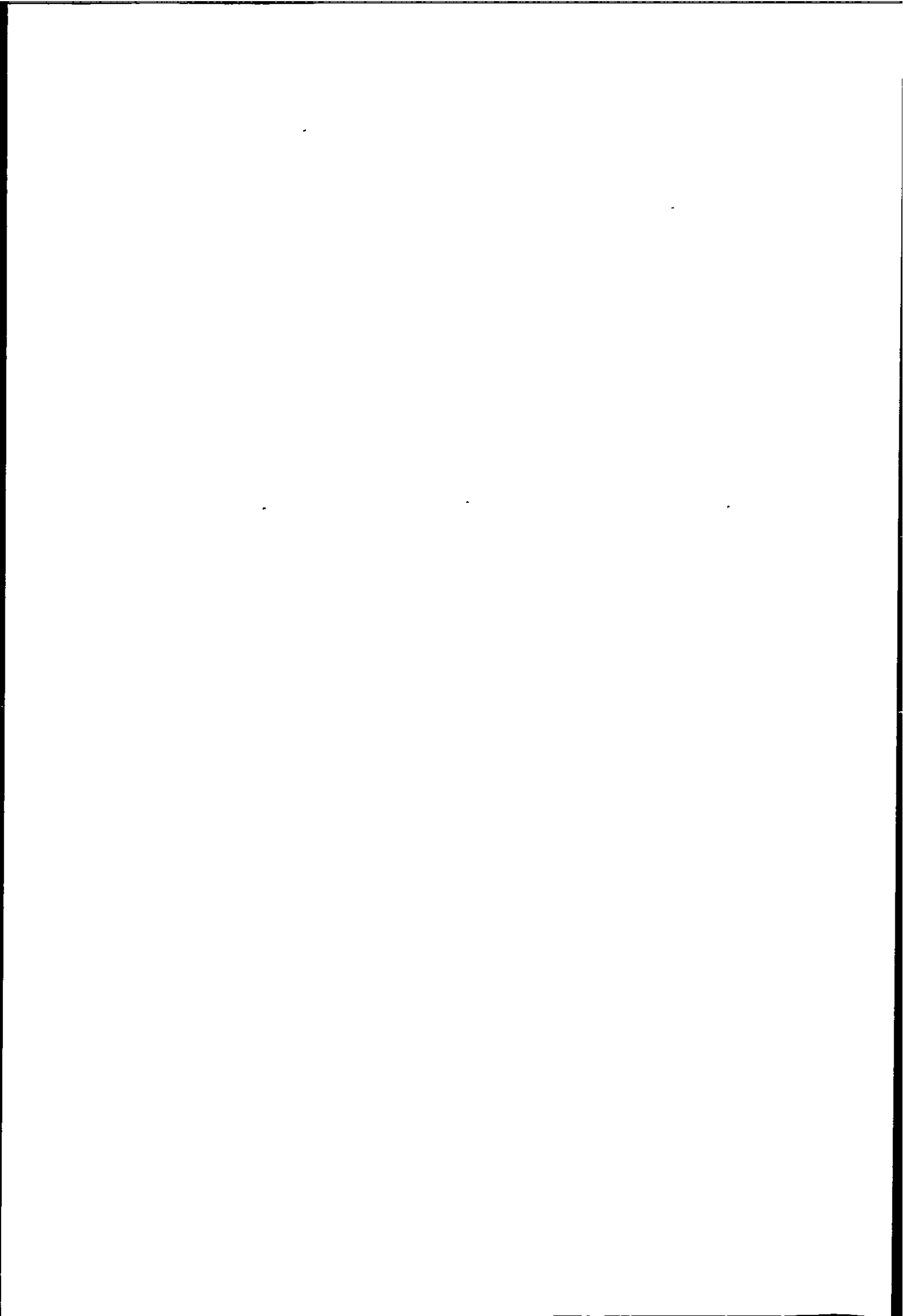


which seems an appropriate method of arriving at 'full-emptiness'. By using a high key I have avoided a sharp contrast with the surrounding wall and the danger of the figure/ground relationship that might occur. I have chosen small sizes to encourage an intimate one-to-one relationship with the viewer. The paintings identify with past theories about silence and are based on monotone and grid whilst having to be more deliberate in the attempt to present silence. The grids are either used partially, often as simple divisions of the square format, when they are hidden and appear only as edges between adjoining areas, or as fine linear structures overlaying all, or large areas of the format. They are normally centripetal, being held within the confines of the canvas by the other elements of the image. I use them for their rational associations, to counterbalance the looser qualities of broader areas of paint and because they provide a logical and consistent way of dividing the square. If some of its axes are selected the whole grid can be implied; its invisible presence can only help the silence. There may be far more ingenious ways to deal with silence in other media but I have chosen painting because it is by nature silent in an obvious sense of the word, especially in comparison to film and video. Its stillness invites contemplation, has physical presence and is self-sufficient; its size, shape and thickness are chosen and balanced with all its other elements, and most of all, the quality of the medium embodies the most subtle and refined traces of thought, feeling, and touch. The act of painting constitutes the image; it is repetitive, ritualistic, contemplative and revealing. In these respects my activity overlaps with that of other monochrome painters—

'As it presently functions, this type of painting is neither a means of representation of nature nor is its purpose the "self-expression" of the artist. It is, rather, a direct mode of thought by which the artist, using reason *and* intuition, works out (creates) meaning through his/her materials and through the process of using them. This approach represents a shift in the avenue of meaning and the source of an esthetic. Its purpose is not reduction or analysis for its own sake, but the development of a visual language, a personal and poetic language, not a parody of literature, science or industry.'<sup>216</sup>

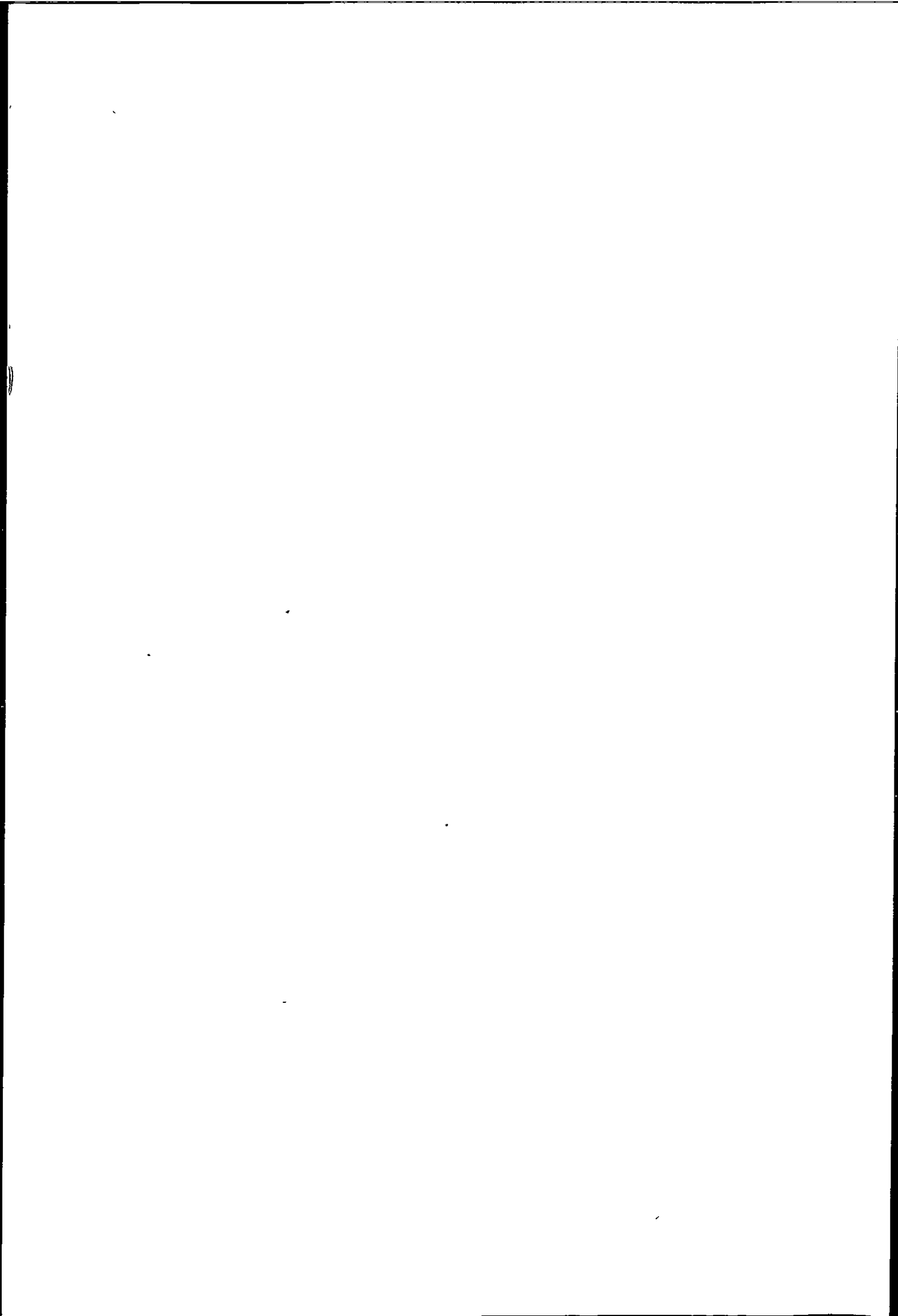
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<sup>216</sup> Hafif, Marcia. 'Getting On with Painting', *Art in America*, April 1981, p. 132-139.



Within all the monotonal painting that is taking place it is possible and sometimes very easy to recognise the work of individuals. The reason for this is that each artist has particular intentions, even where they simply involve ways of applying the paint. The pursuit of silence will result in a distinguishable monotone. There is no absolute silence or emptiness to be found in painting and there is no point in reducing further and further since that was in any case a formalist strategy. I accept the association of monotone with silence but feel the necessity to adjust it accordingly. I have had to look into the spaces between established modes of practice to avoid producing work that has already been classified as something other than silent, or has simply become a cliché. The work is not quite monochromatic, it attempts to present, reveal, and induce silence rather than attract the description conveniently through its absence of imagery.





## Chapter Nine: A Practical Response to History

The concerns and demands of personal practice have led me to re-evaluate the historical models of theory and practice and to reject or accept them where appropriate; the appraisal has also established fresh theoretical imperatives. I can now offer a critique of the original theories of silent painting to explain my own position.

I endorse Lippard's idea that monotone is silent, however, it no longer derives its silence in contrast to Abstract Expressionism; it has lost that particular context. What remains is the association between emptiness, blankness and monotone. I am particularly interested in the use of subdued colour: many painters in the 1960s used colour evasively or neutrally to avoid references to outside phenomena and the kind of decorative results that could be taken in at a glance. I have linked this with Agnes Martin's insistence that silence can be a feeling. If monotone is silent through its emptiness, it should also *feel* silent. In Section One I have already argued that a strongly coloured monochrome is completely blank in one way, but it does not necessarily feel, or evoke a feeling of quietness in the viewer that a grey monotone would. How can I prove this? Certainly not with scientific evidence, in cases like this I have to follow my own perceptions and inclinations and take the work in a personal direction.

Consequently, I have chosen to use coloured greys for their quiet, slightly sombre appearance, and to use closely matched tones. I find that when one area is painted into another of almost the same tone and colour, a feeling of silence results. The difference is recognisable only by a barely distinguishable change of colour, tone or warmth; Reinhardt demonstrated that. In some ways subtle contrasts introduce the notion of silence more effectively than no contrasts, because of the feeling they produce, and because they actually suggest it.

Returning to the notion of context, I cannot be involved with the formalist investigations that history has presented; a monotone is no longer a new proposition for what a purist painting might be, and in any case that consideration would override the concern with silence, as I believe it often did in the 1960s. Monotone is now a familiar and acknowledged art form, it has no automatic or intrinsic ability to shock, irritate or baffle. It is now a matter of deciding how and why to use it. In my case the why is clearly answered but the how presents a problem.

Concerning content, I have no interest in the sublime but I do take from history the notion of a painting that is neither expressive nor inexpressive, neither materialist nor spiritual. I want to engage the viewer within this ambiguity, by leaving only traces of feeling, but also by exploring the boundaries to find out where feeling becomes too expressive, and where the impersonal surface becomes purely material and object-like.

I have so far preferred to work with a square format though this is not a rigid rule. A square is symmetrical, makes no references to landscape or figure, and does not restrict, elongate or compress the internal shapes in the way that other rectangles do. It seems to provide a bigger, freer space in which to work. I have decided to work in sizes up to 48 inches square, possibly anything bigger starts to demand attention, and this is not the aim.

The surface that seems most silent is completely matt; it carries no reflections and appears soft and absorbent in relation to both light and sound. By appearing and feeling absorbent, matt surfaces seem to remain open to the gaze; they can be looked into but not through. They promote the detection of restrained feeling in carefully applied brush marks. I do not rule out the use of shiny, reflective surfaces, but these tend to move the work towards the material

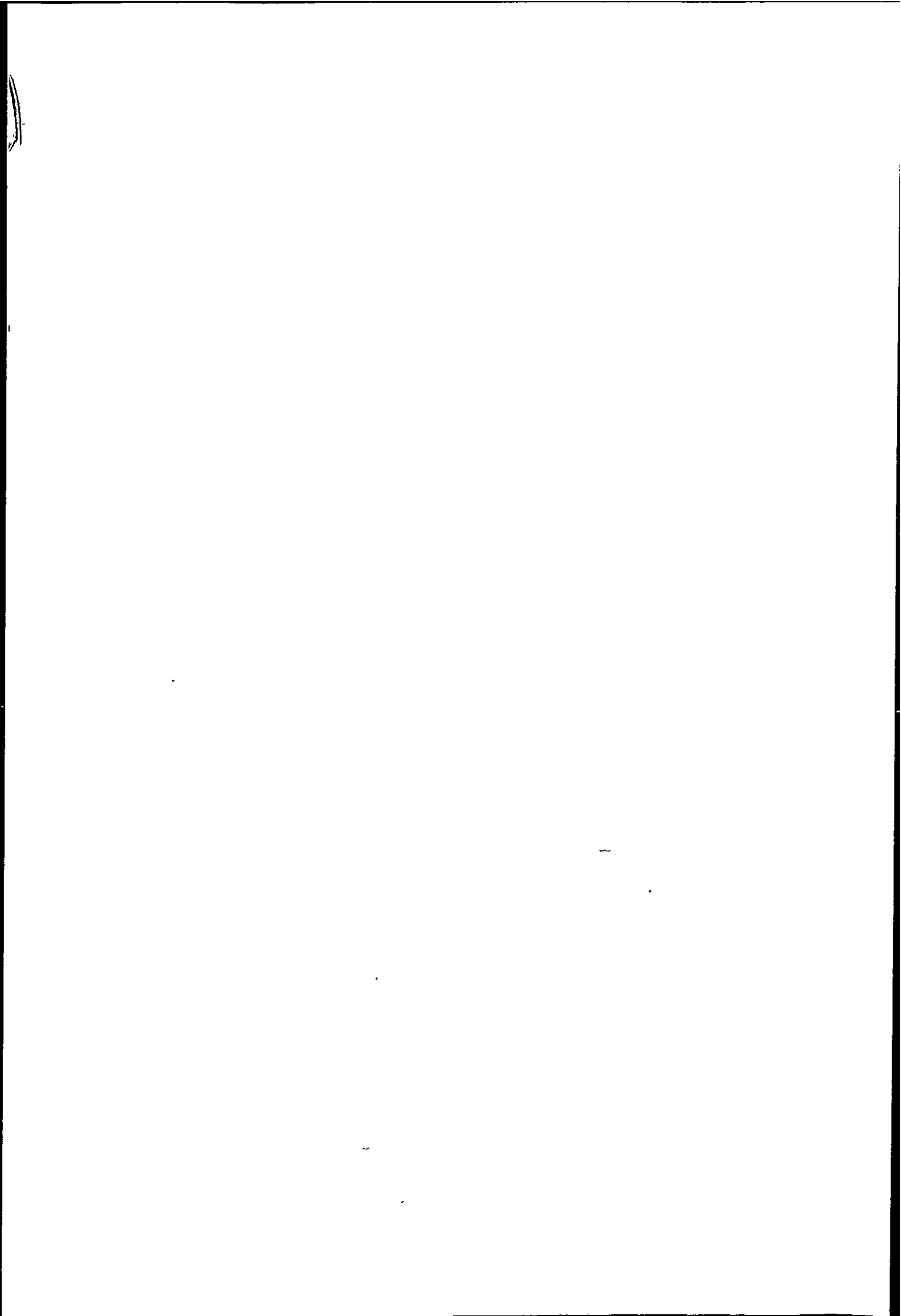
object, appearing harder, less personal, and closed. The surface reflections seal off the painting so that the viewer looks at rather than into the painting. Clearly this is a very useful property for many kinds of monochromatic painting, but it conflicts with silence and would be best used in simultaneous contrast to a matt surface to enhance both the material and spiritual qualities.

The choice of paint also determines the nature of a surface. Acrylics, oils and canvas can be used to achieve matt qualities. They are the most versatile materials permitting the thinnest washes and the thickest impastos and more readily accept the traces of feeling that distinguish e.g. Marden from Stella. Wood and metal supports used in combination with industrial gloss and metallic paints offer impersonal, flat, shiny surfaces. Also, industrial and household paints can be used in relation to the colour charts that accompany them, either to relate the work to social rather than individual aesthetic standards, or to exclude aesthetic considerations altogether by, for example, making random choices. Industrial materials and surfaces will not, on the whole, provide the kind of silence that concerns me, but they can be juxtaposed with more traditional surfaces to play feeling off against impersonality, and will thus create an echo of the Abstract Expressionist/Minimalist sympathies and antipathies of the 1960s.

In the early stages of this research, around the time that I was writing about Reinhardt, I thought ritual would play an important part. It will, where appropriate. Reinhardt employed the idea because he painted the same paintings again and again. Where the outcome is uncertain and one is watching and searching, the process is neither repetitious nor ritualistic. Of course there is a kind of ritual surrounding the making of any work; it can involve not just particular methods but also the organisation of materials and the studio space, and even the clothes one wears. I am discussing something more specific, in line with Reinhardt's Zen-like

one hand brushing with a one-inch brush, a contemplative ritual. I include the contemplative element but not always in a repetitive and predictable way.

The application of paint is important, but restricted by the need to avoid expressive marks. Even carefully applied marks can appear lively and expressive, which poses some problems in relation to method and content. If an area is carefully painted, leaving the marks to reveal, quite simply, the actuality of the process, the result is ambiguous. The surface provides evidence to support both 'matter-of-fact' and expressive readings. I want to keep this open for investigation whilst remaining aware of McEvelley's comments about Ryman's paintings, where, for example, the presentation of emptiness suggests a narrative of emptying. Even matter-of-fact marks could suggest a narrative of paint application, which in Ryman's case would be an accurate reading since his work is concerned with 'how to paint'. I need to make a distinction between Ryman's approach and my own. Silence must come first; my primary concern is not with an exploration of materials and methods. I have made a choice, informed by historical research, to work in a way that is neither totally impassive nor overtly expressive but this does not rule out the appearance of brush marks, it simply means that the marks must be consistent with the feeling of silence. A problem could only occur in relation to thickly brushed paint or fairly visible contrasts, but in all cases it will be the feeling of the surface that matters. This is not to imply that every painting will have the same or even the most appropriate surface; I do not want to establish rules about brush marks at this point because I believe they constitute a flexible and subtle area of investigation that should be evaluated through practice, and within the context of individual paintings. It will be necessary to try things out and to look at them over a long period.



Krauss's theories ensure the association of silence with the grid, but there is still the question of *how* it is used. It allows the surface to be divided and organised in a non-hierarchical way that excludes narrative and references to nature, but to avoid the 'Modernist emblem' it can be used in a more hidden and fragmented way, stressing either horizontal or vertical axes, or simply employing selected areas that imply its existence. Its divisions might appear as the edges between colour areas, though occasionally it could be lightly drawn in fine lines to map the surface. Its simultaneous properties of scientific/mathematical rationality and spirituality can be examined in combination with other devices and methods e.g. the use of separate panels, close tones, brushwork, and centripetal/centrifugal uses.

Various elements discussed above have been selected or rejected from the historical precedents in order to focus my thoughts. I have made selections where I felt they were in line with my ideas about silent painting, and rejected those aspects that are anachronistic, inappropriate or too general. The process of selecting and rejecting constitutes the bridge from theory to practice, but once underway the practice allows some elements to be discarded or changed, and new ones added.

Early in Section One I observed that silence and monotone were one and the same thing for Lippard. I questioned this in relation to the criterion of feeling and the degrees of noise produced by colours. Over the last 30 years however, things have moved much further on; it cannot automatically be assumed that monotonous are concerned with silence because so many of them are concerned with other things. In October 1988 an exhibition of monochrome painting 'La Couleur Seule, l'Expérience du Monochrome' opened in Lyon, it included 225 works by 100 artists from 11 countries. In an article discussing the exhibition Marcia Hafif links monotone and the grid because of their common non-hierarchical and frontal properties

but she has nothing to say about silence other than a description of the space containing a Reinhardt and four Rothko's as a 'silent room'. (In a different essay Hafif lists the various labels attached to recent monochrome painting—'real', 'concrete', 'pure', 'absolute', 'painting-painting'; there is no mention of silence)<sup>217</sup>. Whilst acknowledging the connection between monotone and the sublime within Abstract Expressionism, Hafif asserts that monotone—

'...has more often been used either pragmatically to make a statement about painting and color, or in aleatory work depending on chance, process or automatism.'<sup>218</sup>

Hafif discusses the works in relation to two basic categories, conceptual and perceptual. There are works that refer either ironically or conceptually to monochrome paintings rather than '*being* monochrome painting'; in these cases the artists maintain a distance from the work in order to comment on it. Paintings concerned more with perception have 'a sense of seriousness, of subjectivity and spirituality'. My work belongs to the latter category by virtue of its reliance on visual clues and subtle changes. Hafif also states that because monochromes can be very similar (as well as surprisingly distinctive), knowledge of the artists' intentions can be helpful to our understanding. It might be argued that silent paintings can, ideally, be experienced and understood through their appearance and without the necessity of statements and that the absence of verbal explanation could be a more effective aid to the viewer. However, the fact remains that whereas virtually all monotones could be referred to as silent in the 1960s, today the description can only be appropriate where an idea of silence has somehow been established in the work— which brings me to a more theoretical aspect of silence.

Having volunteered occasional comments in this and previous chapters about the role of silence and some of the different kinds of silence, I would like to draw together a few of the

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<sup>217</sup> Hafif, Marcia, 'Getting On with Painting', *op cit*.

<sup>218</sup> Hafif, Marcia, 'True Colors', *Art in America*, June 1989, pp.128-139 and p.193.

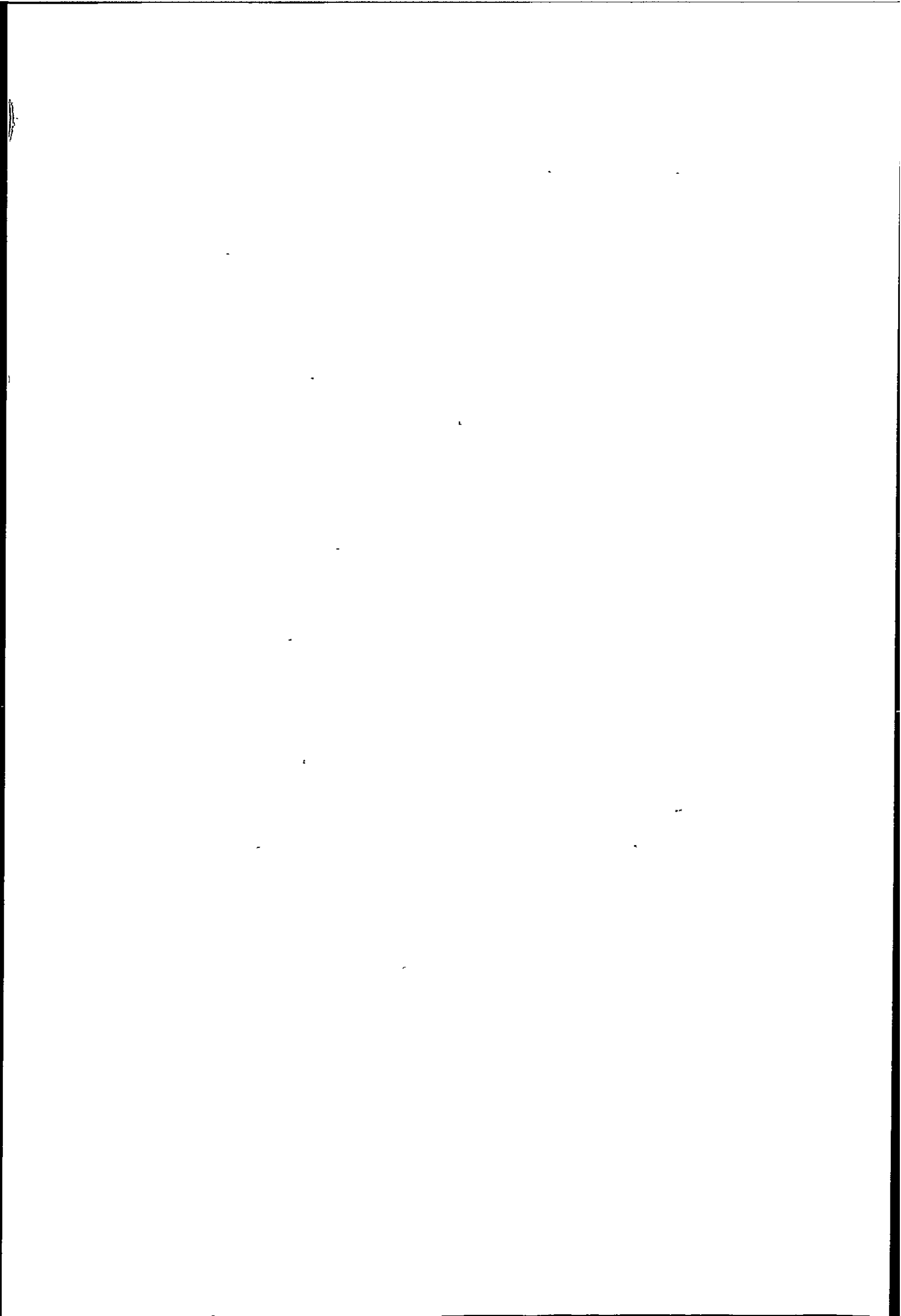


ideas in order to clarify my approach to the paintings, though I do not intend to offer anything as clear or as restrictive as a definition. As I have already indicated, I prefer an appropriate degree of ambiguity. But why say anything about silence? Perhaps it would be fitting not to discuss it since it is intended that the work be looked at and responded to quietly. This might sound rather outdated and Modernist but it is meant to go beyond formalism and retinal art; the silence is not simply the result of the work being about colour or form or shape or even 'how to paint', it is the purpose of the work and is meant to be apprehended. It is, as I said earlier, concerned with *saying nothing* rather than with *not saying anything*.

In earlier discussions I have commented on the kind of silence that concerns me. Ideally I would prefer the nature of silence to be determined simply in response to the work, but I feel obliged to discuss some of the ideas surrounding it in the light of Susan Sontag's profound analysis of its manifestations during the 1960s.<sup>219</sup> Whereas Lippard explained silent painting in formalist terms emphasising its unity of surface, subtlety and surprising variety, Sontag went further, describing the cultural significance of silence. Her essay provides the clearest evidence of a concern with silence at that time, she examines the idea in relation to novels, poetry, drama, music, film, and visual art, but the discussion deals with the ideas rather than their specific application in individual works of art. The only artists referred to are Duchamp and Jasper Johns, neither have particular relevance to this research, and whilst Sontag does examine the reductive impulse of the time she also cites some of Pop Art's imagery as silent. I suspect that Sontag made a similar judgement to Lippard, equating formalist reductivist paintings with a deliberate concern with silence. The fact is, as I noted in Chapter One, there have not been that many references to silence in relation to paintings, the work has usually been discussed according to other criteria. Also, later developments in the work of the artists

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<sup>219</sup> Sontag, Susan. 'The Aesthetics of Silence'. In *Styles of Radical Will*, (1994), Vintage, London. (In this publication the essay is dated 1967, in some bibliographies it is dated 1966; it is therefore difficult to tell whether or not it preceded Lippard's essay.



concerned, apart from Martin and Reinhardt, demonstrate their pursuit or other goals. Because the essay analyses the ethos of the time, Sontag, writing in the era of late Modernism, argues that art is an active metaphor for the spiritual project within which the myth of the absoluteness of the artist's activity becomes a leading myth. The move away from expression, she explains, has led towards a concern with the equivalent of something described by religious mystics as the absolute, a state beyond words, attainable only through silence. According to Sontag, pursuing a goal of this nature fosters an anti-art approach because the materiality of the medium inevitably clashes with the spiritual intentions of the artist. Many of the presentations of silence examined are manifested somewhat negatively in, for example, the Modernist artist's reluctance to engage in a dialogue with the audience, or as artistic suicide. Nevertheless, silence is associated with a high level of seriousness, as in the case of Duchamp, who became literally silent by apparently abandoning art and moving beyond it. Acknowledging that the discussion inevitably centres on silence as a symptom of Modernism, Sontag has some valuable insights.

For those artists who, unlike Duchamp, continue to produce art, there can be no such thing as pure silence—

'If only because the artwork exists in a world furnished with many other things, the artist who creates silence or emptiness must produce something dialectical: a full void, an enriching emptiness, a resonating or eloquent silence.'<sup>220</sup>

Sontag deals with the issue of attention, noting that our total attention is solicited by art presented as a total experience. She differentiates between looking and staring; staring is compulsive and fixed, offering no release of attention because none was sought. Silent art has no devices for attracting attention initially; it comes to life as the viewer engages with it.

'Silence is a metaphor for a cleansed, non-interfering vision appropriate to artworks that are unresponsive before being seen, unviolable in their essential integrity by human scrutiny.'<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

The less art offers, the less contaminated it is and the less it distracts the attention.

Contemplation involves self-forgetfulness, the viewer is not required to add anything. Sontag likens this to looking at landscape where it is the viewers absence that is important. We are reminded that all objects, if properly looked at, are full. (The continued practice of monotonal painting over the last 30 years has made viewers increasingly aware of nuances and subtleties just as Lippard predicted. Where there once appeared to be little to look at there can now be a colour experience, a rich surface quality, a process, and so on; monochromes have simply become more visible. There are also ideas to recognise, for example the critique of monochrome that motivates some of the work. Perhaps such developments have made the idea and feeling of emptiness more difficult to achieve.) However, the fullness is impenetrable and opaque, which is positive insofar as it is free from anxiety, timeless and enduring. Along with this, Sontag suggests that silence offers liberation— a perceptual and cultural clean slate.

(There is something interesting about a genre that is so often seen as both the beginning and the end of painting yet has continued to exist for almost a century.)

Marcia Hafif used monochrome as a way to 'begin again' in the 1970s, the *tabula rasa*, in Sontag's terms, still has significance but, I believe, is harder to achieve in painting.

From Sontag's analysis it is clear that silence was of great concern to recent artists, writers, film-makers, composers etc. It is apparent that there is no such thing as silence, yet indisputable that it is recognised as meaningful and encountered throughout our lives in a multiplicity of forms. I will attempt to explain my own position, beginning with the contradiction stated in the last sentence. John Cage demonstrated the impossibility of silence, but it does, nevertheless, exist in context. Silence that occurs in conversation is recognised and understood regardless of unrelated background noises. The silences in *Waiting for Godot* take place on the stage between the characters and, unlike *4' 33"*, would be best understood by not

paying attention to the audience shuffling. I have declared an interest in Agnes Martin's notion of the feeling of silence. On walking into a forest the silence experienced is not shattered by rustling leaves or the distant sound of a crow. This is not the antagonistic silence that Sontag described, it is rather an observable and observed quality that permeates our entire existence, giving it meaning as the pauses between words give meaning to a sentence. It is intended to be positive and even enriching; a way of perceiving and understanding openly. The cultural clean slate still has some significance.

I would like to broaden the discussion by noting some of the changes that have occurred since the 1960s. It is easier to be aware of the influences and pressures surrounding historical events than those currently operating, but it is worth attempting to identify some of them. Most obvious is the decline in the status of painting, which began with Minimalism but has accelerated rapidly with the flourishing of conceptual art, photography, performance, video, installation etc. At the same time Modernism became a target for criticism, and abstract painting with it. The development of 'issue' based art saw content reinstated as a concern with the social and political, often focusing on gender, race, sexuality and the autobiographical. The 'new spirit' reinstated painting more firmly for a while, before it took its current place within the pluralist ethos. Modernist painting has been re-examined, reworked ironically, subverted, given meaning where none had existed and fresh meaning where it did. Since the 1980s many artists have either embraced or accepted the commercialisation and marketing of works of art, a development that would have Ad Reinhardt spinning in his grave. Surprisingly, in the midst of all this, silence has remained a concern for some. It has continued in the work of artists whose activities date back to the 1960s, Carl Andre for example, stands by his early assertions that art 'is not a form of communication'. In his recent show at the Whitechapel Gallery (Summer 2000) he told Hugh Stoddart that his work is about silence. Stoddart referred to 'the

sheer simplicity of it, the humility of the materials, the silence of it.’<sup>222</sup> In ‘The Literature of Silence’, a catalogue essay for an exhibition by Nancy Haynes, Marjorie Welish (associating black with silence) states that ‘Her paintings neither rest nor sleep but are decidedly devoted to an aesthetics of, as she says, “emptying out”.’ Referring to a series of monotypes by Haynes that were inspired by the work of Samuel Beckett, Welish states ‘...the literature of silence remains a matter of conviction for a generation of artists.’<sup>223</sup>

This concurs with the entry under ‘Silence’ in the recent *Encyclopedia of Postmodernism*—‘Silence is a prominent topos for postmodernity because the power (or impotence) of *logos* to speak is a central issue.’<sup>224</sup> There are other examples, and as I have already observed, the practice of monochrome painting is very much in evidence though, quite possibly as a result of its proliferation, no longer particularly associated with silence.

Monochromes are being made for many different reasons. They are no longer within the narrative of Modernism nor associated with avant-garde gestures of defiance nor constrained by debates about the beginning or end of painting. (In 1993 Robert Storr organised a panel debate around an exhibition of Robert Ryman’s work, under the title ‘Abstract Painting: End or Beginning?’)<sup>225</sup>

‘In 1981 there was, if one cared to see it a certain way, evidence that painting had nowhere to go, that the all-black paintings of Reinhardt, the all-white paintings of Robert Ryman, or the sullen stripes of Daniel Buren, marked terminal stages of internal exhaustion.’<sup>226</sup>

‘...Ryman’s work takes on a very different meaning depending upon whether one sees it as the last stage of the modernist narrative...or as one of the forms painting began to take in the postnarrative era when its peers were not paintings of other sorts, but performances and installations and of course photographs and earthworks and airports and fiberworks and conceptual structures of every stripe and order.’<sup>227</sup>

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<sup>222</sup> *Independent*, July 7, 2000, source taken from the *Independent* web site 9.7.00.

<sup>223</sup> Welish, Marjorie. *Signifying Art, Essays on Art after 1960*, Cambridge University Press, UK, 1999, pp 212-216. The essay ‘A Literature of Silence’ was written for *Nancy Haynes*, an exhibition at the John Good Gallery, New York, 1993.

<sup>224</sup> McCullough, Lissa. ‘Silence’, *Encyclopedia of Postmodernism*, Ed. Victor E Taylor, Charles E. Winquist, Routledge, London & New York, 2001, pp366-367.

<sup>225</sup> Danto, Arthur C. *After the End of Art, The A W Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts 1995*, Princetown University Press, Princetown, New Jersey, 1997, p 153.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.* p 140.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.* p 148.

Until fairly recently then, abstract painting, especially manifested in the form of a white monochrome, was seen by some as either the last manifestation of an exhausted medium or, as Ryman himself claimed, a vital and relatively new form. However, though monotonal painting is no longer part of a historical master narrative it can and does employ an awareness of history to clarify its contemporary meanings, especially since it was a development that marked the end of Modernism, the ultimate reduction of painting, the logical extension of Greenberg's thesis and the beginning of Minimalism as a three-dimensional art form in opposition to painting. Contemporary monochromes, one way or another, either ally themselves with or dissociate themselves from silent paintings. The fundamental connection is emptiness. All monochromes are superficially empty, at least that was the position at the end of the Modernist narrative of refinement and reduction, but as Lippard pointed out, even by the 1960s viewers were becoming more perceptive through familiarity. A surface once thought to be completely without incident became more visible, revealing all its slight changes of texture, tone, colour etc. Now viewers are much more aware of these things, perhaps to the point where colour and surface quality can easily fill the surface. The emptiness can be filled in other ways; the process of applying paint can be so clearly demonstrated on the surface that it preoccupies the viewer with thoughts of how the work was made, or even with comparisons to other surfaces encountered elsewhere in the world outside art. Materials can be carefully chosen to evoke, through their associative properties, thoughts about a variety of other subjects, e.g. Marcia Hafif's use of household enamel and plywood in *Chinese Red 33x33"*, 1989, to contrast Renaissance practices with our everyday lives.

The pressure on painting to justify its relevance is offset to some degree by the freedom from any master narrative. History is available for examination or appropriation, there now exists a plurality of narratives within which art can be about anything, or nothing. Nevertheless,

Abstract painting has been viewed with immense suspicion because of its creation and development within Modernism. In comparison to art forms dealing with social and political issues it has been, and can still seem elitist and narrow in its concerns. However, silence is universal in all its manifestations, whether it is primordial, spiritual, respectful, angry, contemplative, affirming, nihilistic, denying, refusing, suppressing, censoring, comforting, too emotional for words, or simply a space between things. The silence in my work is not the result of formalist preoccupations, an emptiness resulting simply from the logical development of a master narrative. It is presented intentionally as a positive entity and as the main concern of the work.



## Chapter Ten: A Review of Section Two

In this section I have shown that the idea of silence was evident during the 1960s and seen to apply to the work of artists of all kinds, and that for the most part it was understood as a gesture of antagonism, rejection, nihilism, spiritualism or artistic superiority. However, whilst pauses in dramatic dialogues, and periods of musical silence (Cage) were clear evidence of the significant and meaningful incorporation of silence into art, I have not been convinced that painters (apart from Reinhardt and Martin) were specifically interested in silence. Abstract painting in general had severed communication in the narrative form, Abstract Expressionism had presented non-verbal emotional and spiritual content, but its gestures had become empty and artists were becoming suspicious of claims for painting's ability or need to deal with the metaphysical. The abandonment of personal expression and spiritual content in favour of the actual-paint-as-paint, surface-as-surface etc.-- did result in art that became silent, but largely as a side-effect of other, more pressing interests, including the exploration of new formal possibilities and of the influence of phenomenology disseminated in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945). In painting and sculpture there was a concern with the autonomy of the art-work, and in other fields, as Sontag noted, a seemingly deliberate attempt to be difficult to comprehend and even unintelligible. Artists no longer seemed to be communicating, they were either being obscure, or in the case of painters and sculptors, exclusively concerned with purely visual issues. Looking back on Lippard's essay and on the work of that period, Robert Mangold said he did not know why she had called it silent. In fact the essay attempted to alert the audience to the fact that painters had not antagonistically severed the links of communication; the paintings had to be looked at differently perhaps, the initial and apparent rejection suggested by emptiness had to be overcome, but then the experience could be rich and surprising. The painters were concerned with visual problems

centring on reductivist strategies that were often simply what they appeared to be— 'what you see is what you see'. In that sense the works were silent, but they did not actually deal with silence, Reinhardt and Martin were exceptions since their statements suggest it was an intentional part of their activity though not the major concern. I found the whole idea as interesting as it was elusive and wondered how painting might actually deal with silence, not as a negative silence left over from other concerns but as a positive quality recognised in other fields throughout our lives and valued in many different situations.<sup>228</sup>

To achieve this aim I have tried to demonstrate how my research into the theory and practice of silent painting in the 1960s has been evaluated and assembled to initiate and inform practice. I have tried wherever possible to explain the reasons for my decisions and indicated when they were intuitive. It is inevitable when theory is implemented through practice that intuitive processes will take over. The early work acknowledged the primacy of history/theory as a means of testing some accepted methods; later work reversed this order seeking to find some theoretical principles through and as a result of practice. I worked from the lessons of recent history until that section of the thesis had been fully researched. Armed with that knowledge and understanding I approached the work from a more personal point of view. To do this I needed to work freely but at the same time avoid directions that seemed too familiar, in the hope that the work would not be misread in association with well-established examples. Black and white, cited by Lippard as the most-silent monotones in the 1960s, were too obvious and saturated with meaning, and therefore difficult to open up to fresh understanding. Primary and secondary colours can create powerful monotones and in addition the colour acts silently upon the viewer because it is affective. The problem here was that colour would seem

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<sup>228</sup> The subject gets serious treatment in studies of speech and language behaviour, at the beginning of his detailed analysis of silence *The Power of Silence*, Adam Jaworski states—  
'In my view, the main common link between speech and silence is that the same interpretive processes apply to someone's remaining meaningfully silent in discourse as to their speaking.'  
See Jaworski, Adam. Op.cit.

to be the purpose of the work— many monotonies are titled with the name of the pigment used— in which case the silence would be overlooked. But what would be wrong with an unnoticed silence, would that not be an excellent solution, a silent silence? Well in some ways it would have been, but it would have missed the whole point, which was to make paintings concerned with silence, not paintings concerned with colour that happened also to be silent. This would simply have been a return to the premise that all monotonies are silent, which I refuted in Section One. Lippard disallowed hard and soft-edged colour paintings because they were often pretty and screamed for attention: over the last thirty years the thresholds have been lowered enough to include some examples of colour monotonies. Also, I had already committed myself to the idea that some colours stirred the feelings and others stilled them, and above all to the *feeling* of silence. Another problem was posed by the entertainment factor. Silent art refuses to entertain, which might sound in line with the 1960s antagonistic stance, but in fact there is a difference between art that entertains and art that simply wants to be viewed seriously. That position is far from antagonistic; it takes the audience seriously.

With these thoughts in mind I worked freely enough to allow something personal and unexpected to happen. The small 12" x 12" paintings that seemed to bring things into focus were perhaps too colourful, too dark, or too expressive, but they expanded the range of possibilities and the ways of thinking about silence. They offered visual evidence of the way I approached silence through feeling, and provided the strategies I would finally employ. I had rejected approaches to silence that were antagonistic, nihilistic, unintentional, religious, deliberately contrived to be mysterious, denying, refusing or censoring. I was aware of studies in other fields that treated silence as something meaningful in itself rather than a mere absence; I wanted a positive silence that connected with the act of painting. My approach centred on the notion of a full-emptiness, a quality almost inescapable in today's

monochromes. I wanted to investigate it as a process of building to emptiness in a manner relating to the gradual polishing of a mirror, or the patient removal of dust from an object, enacted, not in a literal way, but through an equivalent or appropriate painting process. In addition, I was well aware of the impossibility of absolute silence and the futility of searching for a point of ultimate reduction in painting. Instead, I chose to juxtapose totally flat areas and slightly inflected areas to put 'complete' silence into the context of silence. This allowed the use of silent changes, relating to the closely toned colour combinations I had first explored. This idea was also explored in a looser, more atmospheric form. The other strategy open to exploration was more deliberately concerned with historical references and entailed the juxtaposition of painting that allows traces of feeling with painting that attempts to eliminate them. This idea incorporated the roots of silent painting by referring to the transitional period, or gap between Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism within which the original paintings of the 1960s operated. Highly refined vestiges of feeling were the inevitable and deliberate consequence of the decision to paint, in spite of, or in opposition to the Minimalist use of industrial finishes, totally impersonal surfaces and three-dimensional work. I entertained the idea of using unpainted metal or wood surfaces in the work but decided instead to paint everything, which meant painting the most impersonal surfaces I could in some areas.

Making these paintings has become a contemplative activity; the intentional exploration of silence has permeated the whole process from the approach to practice, to the act of painting, to the nature of the image, and finally I hope, to the act of viewing, and to the viewer.

'One might ask why I talk here about the process of *making*. If this is the silence in painting, how is it relevant to anyone but the painter, what does the viewer care about the process when only traces are apparent? What does the silence mean, and how can the viewer share in it? When the painting is one made in the concrete reality of paint, the viewer participates vicariously in this painterly process. The viewer in perceiving the painting stands in for the

artist at this later time, enjoying a process of seeing similar to the one the artist went through during the process of making.<sup>229</sup>

The deliberate and conscious attempt to deal with silence has been based on the two devices identified in earlier theoretical accounts, neither of which seemed to be automatically silent anymore. Monotone had to be adjusted, and the grid has taken on a supporting role, being hidden or referred to only by the use of one or two of its axes (I do not want to use it as a safety net). I have not used it centrifugally, as a fragment of a far larger structure capable of extending infinitely in all directions, nor has it been employed to disperse matter into perceptual flicker in order to dematerialise the surface. According to Rosalind Krauss therefore, its effect is not spiritual. I have, nevertheless, used it as an intentionally rational element, not least as a logical system for organising areas within a square. I have often anchored it within the image, causing it to operate centripetally and work inwardly from its outside edges, separating the work from the world as an autotelic, materialist object of vision. However, it is not quite that simple; there is nothing material about silence. Krauss described the paradoxical nature of the grid; it is something I have never sought to exclude. I have tried to combine materiality and immateriality, perhaps not by thinking about the grid in both ways at once, but by balancing it with other elements of the work. The paintings have emerged, finally, from the combination of mid twentieth century theory and practice, more recent ideas and approaches, and current personal fields of interest.

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<sup>229</sup> Hafif, Marcia. 'Silence in painting: Let me count the ways' in Jaworski, Adam. (ed) , *Silence Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin : New York, 1997.

### Section Three:

#### Chapter Eleven: An Overview of the Research

This investigation originated from a response to the expressive colour paintings I had been making for several years. I felt very strongly that the quieter passages were of most interest and had the greatest relevance. It was a feeling, and that particular form of response has continued right through the research, becoming stronger and eventually playing perhaps an unexpectedly major role. Feelings can be difficult to explain and justify, but not nearly as difficult as the subject to which they have been applied. Silence is even more elusive. It is significant in all our lives, we appreciate it at times but more often fill it, we communicate skilfully with it, we recognise its relevance and meaning in many different contexts, but attempting to establish its role in painting is, to say the least, challenging. And so the work began with feelings about a phenomenon that seemed to prohibit discussion in the first place. If it had to be undertaken there had to be a solid base from which to proceed. The first contribution to the development of the idea was already present in my mind; years ago Ad Reinhardt's black paintings had worked their spell but the impression had remained dormant for lack of a motive to explore it. Thoughts about the nature of my own work had brought the feelings back to consciousness; now it provided access to the work of that period and to Lucy Lippard's article. I found her essay so perceptive and full of insight that at first it seemed to have summed up the entire topic and initially I used it as an authoritative statement, and even as a definition of silent painting. Section One is based largely on her assertions, though in the continuing search for solid ground I explored further afield for other sources that might question or confirm Lippard's theories. I found very few, and most of those seemed to derive from 'The Silent Art', nevertheless, I was able to assemble, in Chapter One, a range of opinion before examining Lippard's essay in detail.

The ideas espoused by Lippard had done far more than offer access to a recent occurrence of monotonal painting in New York during the 1960s, they had established the existence of a specific quality—silence. Her argument suggested that monotone and silent painting were one and the same, and that other equally abstract paintings—colour field, hard and soft-edged, and even juxtaposed monotonal panels of different colours—were not monotonal and therefore not silent. This could only mean that silence can be achieved with greater or lesser degrees of effectiveness and that monotone or near monotone as employed in the work of the artists she cited, provided the best examples. Of course the word must have been used often to describe the feeling discernible in paintings; it is sometimes applied to Vermeer's work, but this case involved a significant number of painters exploring formalist, reductive, monotonal strategies. Silence appeared to be the point. I was aware of Rauschenberg's white and black canvases and of John Cage's response in the form of 4'33", and of course of his book *Silence*. I was also aware of the work of Bergman, Beckett and Pinter; I knew that silence was an issue of some importance at that time. However, the main task at that point was to construct a solid understanding of the way silence had been painted. It was necessary to examine, in some detail, the work of a representative sample of the artists cited by Lippard. The questions arising included—

How was their work silent?

Why was it silent, was it intentional?

Were some paintings more effectively silent than others, and if so, how?

What was the nature of the silence, was it impersonal, hostile, mysterious, spiritual etc?

What else were the paintings about?

Chapters Two and Three examined the various approaches to monotone by six artists deliberately dealing with them in two groups. The three in the first group were closely

associated with Abstract Expressionism whilst the second group comprised three younger artists whose influences, whilst still including Abstract Expressionism, were broader and more closely related to Minimalism. It was clear, as Lippard had argued, that monotonous could be easily distinguishable. The approaches were distinctly individual, the range included—

- The creation of vast, overwhelming expanses of colour.
- A real concern with repetition evident in the act of painting, the one-size canvas, the subdivision of canvases and the use of colour as well as suggestions of infinity implied by mapping canvases with grids.
- Preoccupations with shape where subtle distortions of seemingly predictable shapes were used to question the viewer's perceptions and expectations.
- Uncompromisingly blank grey monotonous with carefully worked surfaces of oil paint and wax on canvas supported by thick stretchers that emphasised the work's physical presence.
- A thorough exploration of materials and methods including the overt use of wall fixings.

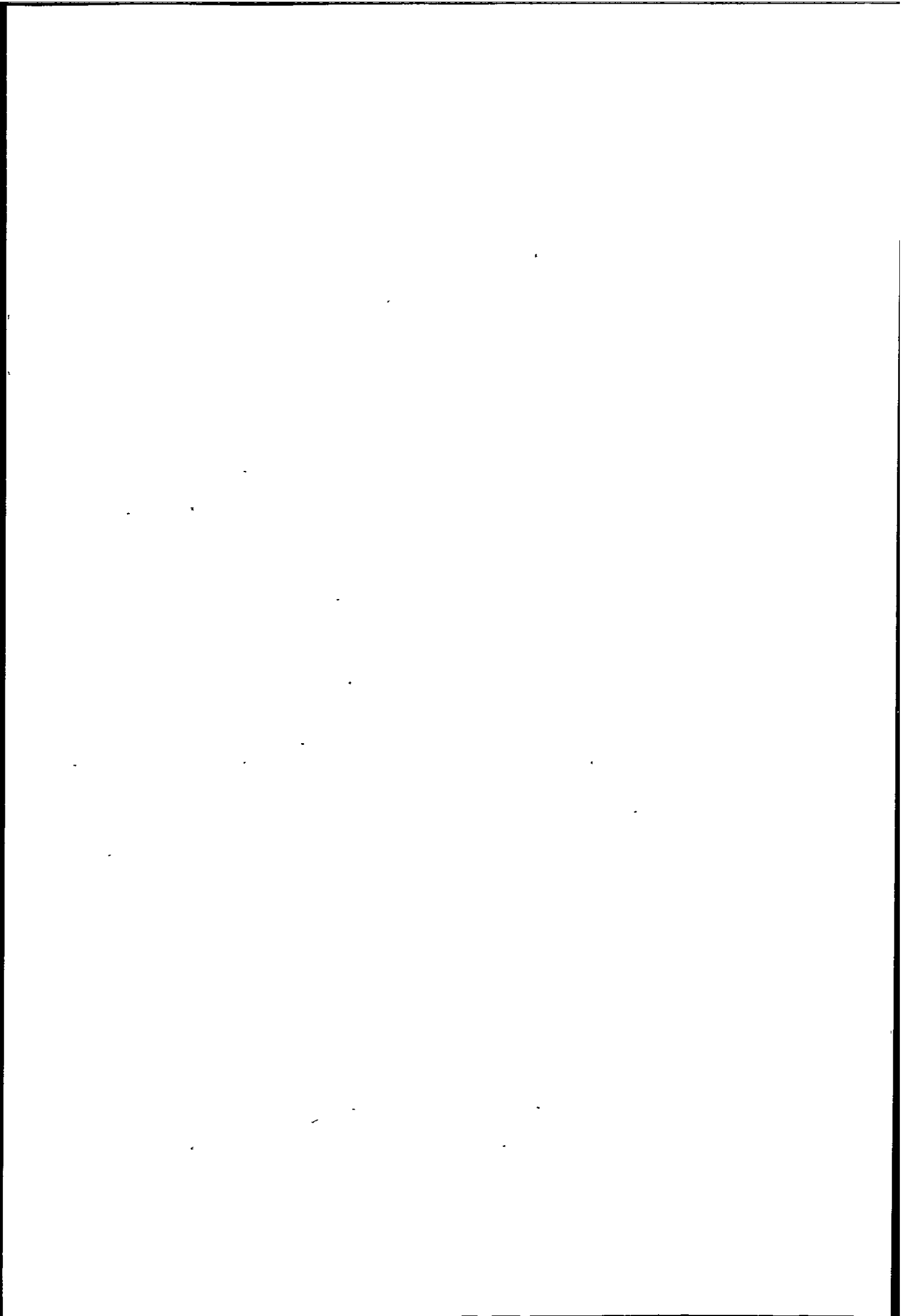
It is not my purpose to re-write the earlier chapters here, but I have listed just a few of the observations to illustrate the complexity. Were all these individual approaches intended as devices for the achievement of silence or were they formalist explorations that simply resulted in the appearance of paintings that did not seem to be attempting to communicate with the audience? Was it a Modernist, elitist lack of regard for the audience, or even an antagonistic rejection and a deliberate attempt to be difficult? This would match Sontag's account, but Lippard had already answered the question; the work belonged to the 'rejective, formally oriented strain'. It was certainly the case that painters were concerned with autonomous work, that all traces of narrative had been expunged and that the paintings worked visually and emotionally. If the silence was 'rejective' and only the result of preoccupations with purely



formalist investigations, it was at odds with my initial response to my own work, which had convinced me that silence could be positive and meaningful.

Inquiries into theories and uses of the grid in Chapters Four and Five made an important contribution to the research. Rosalind Krauss's analysis of the ways in which grids operate—their paradoxical nature, ability to simultaneously appear both rational/scientific and spiritual/immaterial, and not least their relationship to silence, brought a greater degree of awareness to practice. It seemed to offer an acknowledged device that was intrinsically silent and which offered the most appropriate method for organising monotone. The examples discussed demonstrated its range and perhaps most importantly led to an examination of Agnes Martin's work, which contributed two particularly important findings. First of all, it was not the case that all the artists I had selected from Lippard's examples made work that was silent only as a result of its concern with other factors. With Martin (and to some extent Reinhardt), the silence was intentional. Secondly, Martin spoke about the feeling of silence in a way which not only confirmed the existence of silence as a positive element in her painting, but also connected with the initial response I had had to my own work. It was clear that silence did not have to result from ignoring the audience or simply attending to formal problems, it could be, and indeed had been presented as an intentional, positive, meaningful non-statement.

The rather long exploration of content in Chapter Six was necessary for a proper understanding of the intentions and meanings attributed to silent paintings by the artists and those ascribed by critics and commentators. It emerged that silent paintings could be about many things, or that there are many kinds of silence. The word spiritual cropped up often but initially in relation to the sublime. The intention there seemed to be deeper understanding; the experience offered would be silent and emotional, but the silence in which one grasps the true



nature of one's existence in the face of 'the terror of the unknown' was not the kind of silence I sought. Like many of the generation of painters who came after Abstract Expressionism, I am not convinced of painting's capacity or need to achieve such grand metaphysical aims. Even where all such associations were dismissed however, it was clear that interpretations filled the silence, in some cases supported by good evidence taken from the paintings themselves or from private notes. On the whole, silence that resulted from attending to formal problems tended to leave the work open to interpretations, it was seen to be concerned with geometry, architecture, religious symbolism, materials and methods, or the essential nature of human experience. The paintings of most interest to me because of the nature of their silence, were Ad Reinhardt's in spite of the interpretations, Brice Marden's early monotonies before he began to produce constructions of colourful panels, and Agnes Martin's. Kasha Linville's description of the manner in which Martin's paintings work was particularly useful, i.e. revealing facture and touch (close up), breaking down into cloud-like formlessness (middle distance), and closing down into a solid monotonal surface (distance). Whilst it was clear that silence and emptiness could leave themselves open to interpretation, there was, by contrast, a purely factual, phenomenological reading of work that refused to perceive it as anything other than an object; this of course was a Minimalist viewpoint. The discussion of content emphasised its gradual disappearance between Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism but attached importance to the fact that paintings had the appearance of Minimalist works whilst retaining some, often slight degree of Abstract Expressionist feeling. The acknowledgement that traces of feeling were retained in seemingly flat or impassive applications of paint was important.

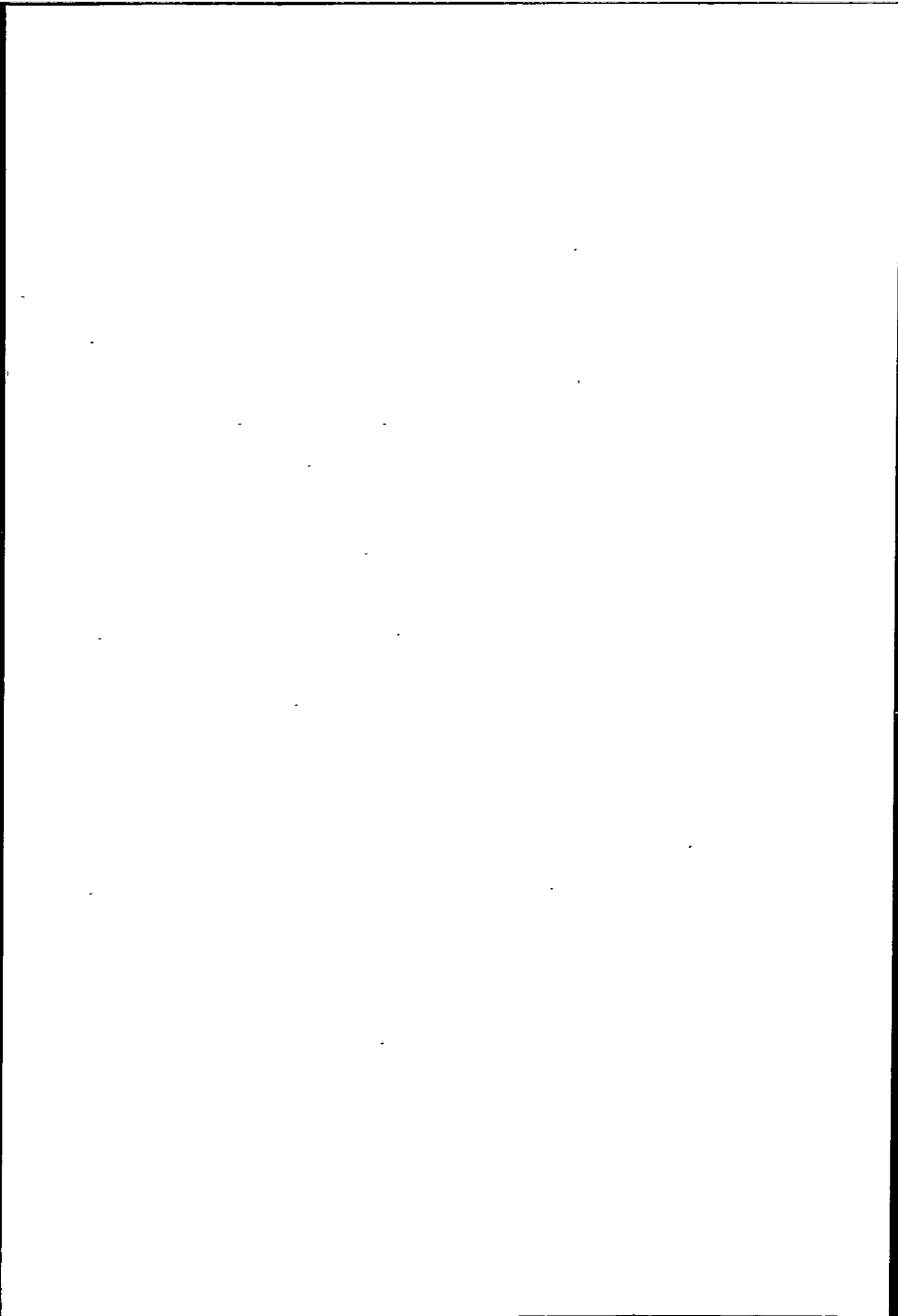
As well as examining the nature of the work's silence and the ways in which it was intended and received, I wanted to examine the paintings for other significant elements. What else were

they concerned with? At that stage it was useful to know how others went about things and what they considered important. Of course many factors of fundamental importance were carefully considered in the process of realising the work, and whilst there was evidence in interviews etc. of artists discussing these issues, there was no mention of silence as the work's ultimate goal. I found no evidence of the artists feeling antagonistic and actually wanting to alienate an audience. All were clear about how their work was meant to be apprehended; Brice Marden, for example, was unequivocal about his paintings being received emotionally and not intellectually; Newman wanted to change the world; Reinhardt wanted to exclude references to, and thoughts about, everything but the art itself; Martin was concerned with feeling and perfection; Ryman was concerned with the 'how' of painting. In some ways Ryman should be seen as the ultimate silent painter; the word silent is often applied to his work, though not in any significant way by him. His concern with materials and methods might be an effective strategy for silence; it was difficult to decide, but I eventually arrived at a few conclusions. The early work that incorporated large signatures and dates seemed not to qualify as silent. Whilst all his work celebrates its autonomy right down to the last screw, bracket and piece of masking tape, it also approaches 'what you see is what you see' and it does seem to offer a narrative of its own construction and making rather than one of silence. Paintings like those in the *Winsor* series employing a strategy of taking a loaded brush across the canvas until it runs out, then reloading and continuing, should be good examples of silent painting. Certainly in Lippard's terms they are, but again the process, which presumably rules out (aesthetic) intervention becomes a narrative of paint application and the silence that the painting undoubtedly has, becomes incidental. Arguments like these might seem pointless and hair-splitting but they were more significant from my point of view. Up to this point the research had existed securely under the title of 'Silent Painting' but as I completed Section One I wanted to emphasise the difference in the nature of the silence Lippard had identified

and that which concerned me. I came to feel that 'Silent Painting' referred to incidental silence, and that 'Painting Silence' implied a positive, intentional activity. It also acknowledged the shift of emphasis as I moved from historical research in Section One to practice in Section Two.

In Section Two I explained how the historical and theoretical findings had been employed to guide practice and noted approaches that had been selected as relevant and those I had rejected. In the critique of the work I described how the initial investigations of established strategies eventually opened the way to a more personal direction. Analysis of the work included theories about the role of silence in art, explanations of my own aims, and some contemporary theories of monochrome painting. I explained my reasons for pursuing a different kind of silence from that which I had learned from history, and emphasised the significance of feeling as a basis for recognising silence in practice. I described the strategies that I finally employed, explained how I arrived at them, and the ways in which they were intended to work.

The study of historical examples in the work of selected painters helped me to establish the differences between their approach and the one I wanted to take. It had also confirmed the importance of feeling as a criterion for assessing the nature of silence. Whilst it is possible to theorise about the role of feeling in art it only becomes possible to actually experience and examine one's feelings in response to particular marks, textures, surfaces, colours etc. in practice. Most of the artists I had studied had, sometimes surprisingly, declared their working process to be intuitive; the same is true for me. Theories and past examples are questioned once the process of painting begins, not intellectually, but emotionally and aesthetically in response to the marks as they appear. At the point of decision there is only vision and silence.



As the work becomes more familiar a different kind of theory emerges, applicable specifically to the aims of the working process.

When it was clear that there can be no absolute silence and that it would be futile to attempt to reduce painting beyond that which has already been achieved, silence had to be approached with knowledge and understanding but recognised through feeling. Furthermore, some idea of the nature of that silence was necessary. Reinhardt said art should not be confused with religion, and I agree; I did not want the kind of religious silence to which Sontag referred; neither did I want the silence that results from ignoring people, nor the hostile silence that resents the presence of an audience, nor an incidental silence, nor a 'rejective' silence, nor a silence of concealment, censorship or repression. Sontag suggested that in some cases the presentation of silence indicated the artist's superiority because—

'It suggests that the artist has had the wit to ask more questions than other people, and that he possesses stronger nerves and higher standards of excellence.'<sup>230</sup>

I am not aiming for that either, but my attempt to present silence as a positive and meaningful quality has certainly accepted from history the contemplative nature of silent painting. Marcia Hafif associates this property to greater or lesser extent with all monochromes.

'This work is quiet, contemplative, and, as I have suggested, even meditative. This is a most difficult quality to discuss. We are used to talking in terms of materials and formal elements, but not of subjective content. Perhaps we feel that too much discussion dissipates the fact of it. We are trying to talk about an experience which is essentially personal. All monochromatic painting has something of this in it.'<sup>231</sup>

Hafif's concern is not with silence but with the 'experience of being' and 'being as a way of doing'. She is referring to the act of painting monochromes, of accepting the limitations, exploring the possibilities and leaving traces of feeling. The manner in which the work is produced becomes part of its meaning. I find this completely relevant to my own approach,

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<sup>230</sup> Sontag, Susan. 'The Aesthetics of Silence', *Styles of Radical Will*, op cit. p 7.

<sup>231</sup> Hafif, Marcia. (1978), 'Beginning Again'. In Hertz, Richard. (ed) *Theories of Contemporary Art*, Prentice-Hall, New Jersey, 1993, pp. 11-15.

which incorporates contemplation and silence subjectively into the working process. The notion of painting silence requires, in addition to the organisational strategies described in Chapter Eight (Silent Contrasts, Painting-In and Painting-Out, Personal/Impersonal), a careful concern with the application of paint. In the discussion of Agnes Martin's work there were references to the importance of 'touch'; Martin's touch was delicate and sometimes almost fragile in the early grid paintings where the quality she achieved in the ruled pencil lines contributed significantly to the feeling of silence. Similarly, to realise the desired quality of silence I must apply the paint with the appropriate feeling. This requires a contemplative approach, by which I mean a fully aware, reflective process in which the feeling that controls the making of a painting is the feeling that is intended to accompany the viewing of the finished work. If, as I have suggested earlier, painting is a medium that retains and reveals traces of feeling, then I must ensure that my paintings retain only the intended feelings. Also, the prolonged viewing time required by seemingly empty surfaces makes it both necessary and desirable for me to have looked at the work for far longer than anyone else might, and to know it completely. Thus, the act of contemplation accompanies the making of the work and the establishment of its feeling during the actual painting process— mixing paint and brushing or rolling it onto the surface, as well as in the intervals of evaluation and decision-making that both precede and follow each application of paint. Not least, it occurs during the long periods of looking at the finished work. This is why the activity has to be defined as painting silence and not silent painting; it explains how *the intention to say nothing* can be differentiated from simply not saying anything.

I have shown that most 'silent painting' was not actually concerned with silence, which seems illogical, after all we would not refer to work as colour painting if it were not concerned with colour, or Op Art if it did not explore optical effects. Some recent and contemporary



monochrome painters are opposed to the idea of art as communication. Their paintings are often intended to be apprehended viscerally, or as pure sensation or emotion. These aims certainly accord with the pursuit of silence, yet if silence is not the criterion by which the success of the work is judged it is inevitably about something else. My work is not particularly visceral, it does involve feeling but is also concerned with the mind insofar as it seeks to induce a state of contemplative awareness in the viewer, an awareness of silence in which an essential but often overlooked aspect of existence can be apprehended. I attempt to achieve this by focusing the viewer's attention on minute and subtle changes of tone, texture, colour, surface, etc., sometimes on the edge of visibility. Whilst the paintings acknowledge and explore their object quality, they go beyond it in their concern with feeling, i.e. feeling silent. The feeling they embody is deliberately and quite severely restrained and operates on an edge in common with other elements such as colour/no colour, contrast/no contrast, personal/impersonal etc. It requires a very different sensibility from the one demanded and addressed throughout most of our daily lives.

In the research I concluded that silent painting in the 1960s was silent because, for the most part, artists were concerned with purely visual formal issues; they were searching for solutions that excluded the overworked Abstract Expressionist gestures and were engaged in a process of reduction and emptying, which they applied to content as well as imagery. However, it emerged that in two cases there was evidence to show that silence was considered more positively, and that the intentional presentation of silence could be achieved. It was then shown that absolute silence is impossible and that the goal of achieving an absolute reductive state in painting is now pointless. Once again an example from the 1960s offered an alternative route. If silence does not exist for us as scientific fact, it does have reality in our

feelings. This would be the appropriate way to proceed in painting but judgements would now be based on responses to practical explorations.

There were some ambiguities and inconsistencies in Lucy Lippard's text that suggested there were degrees of silence, that some paintings achieved it more effectively than others and that there were different kinds of silence. From this I concluded that it was necessary to look for the most silent solution for every element of the work and to have an idea of the kind of silence I wanted. Silence cannot be pinned down in an exact way, it is always blurred to some extent, but I wanted a positive, meaningful silence, which meant excluding hostile, antagonistic, rejective, concealing or censoring silences. I have avoided the word spiritual because it often has religious associations but I would use it in the sense of contemplative awareness. Not everyone is so guarded.

'...in the spiritual is found a quiet, a respect, a concentration which allows for centredness rather than dispersion. Painting can provide an opportunity to be alone, to shut out the chatter of the world, to go inside and rest – but with an open restfulness which allows the energy of the world to flow through peacefully and restoratively...  
The kind of silence that interests me in the end is not the literal or the social but the spiritual.'<sup>232</sup>

As for seeking the most silent solution for every element of the work, this was complicated by historical precedent and familiarity. The most obvious solutions were now too predictable and too clearly associated with particular painters and their ideas. The distinction between incidental and intentional silence proved helpful in negotiating the problem.

It was clear that whilst all monotone painting could be called silent in the 1960s, continued practice over the last 30 years has broadened its scope to the point where that silence can no longer be assumed. There is an intrinsic level of silence in their apparently blank surfaces but

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<sup>232</sup> Hafif, Marcia. 'Painting silence: let me count the ways', in Jaworski, Adam. *Silence Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, op cit.

we have come to see them as full, and learned to deal with their nuance and subtlety.

Monotones are made for many reasons and in many different ways; they deal with a range of interests including colour, pigment, paint, the nature of surfaces, the process of their manufacture, shape, light, the critique of monotone, the act or ritual of painting, and subjective content. To illustrate the breadth of activity within contemporary monochrome painting I will briefly discuss some examples.

In the case of monochromes largely concerned with the process of their manufacture, examples can be found in the work of artists such as Ian Davenport, Jason Martin, and Torie Begg. Work of this nature is made by carrying out a particular process sometimes with little, if any, obvious aesthetic intervention, though Jason Martin manipulates his paintings more than might sometimes be apparent. Reference to the method of their manufacture is clearly important to the way in which these works are read; in some cases, Ian Davenport for example, the paintings have an object-like quality that renders touch or traces of feeling irrelevant. They can, however, be more expressive records of activity revealing the body's movement; Jason Martin's work provides examples. His work explores the spatial qualities that can be achieved by using translucent and opaque paints on a variety of supports, including steel, aluminium, and perspex. In some examples his canvases create dramatic, painterly illusions of space and movement, though the surfaces of his very recent paintings have become less active and far less loaded with paint. In contrast to the approaches of both Ian Davenport and Jason Martin, Torie Begg exploits the tension between the clean and controlled concept and its less predictable though pre-determined, hand-made realisation in paint. The translucent layers of 'mechanically' applied colours in her apparently identical groups of paintings retain indexical traces. Monochrome paintings based on process often focus on the conceptual, the literal, the gesture, or even the unconscious; they have no concern with silence

and are not discussed in such terms either by critics, reviewers or the artists themselves. There is some degree of common ground between my work and process art, even if it is only the desire to paint, and to paint monochromes. Much closer however, though still different, is the work of artists such as Joseph Marioni, Günter Umberg, Marcia Hafif, and Peter Tollens.

Apart from Umberg, the work of these artists centres on colour, something I have rejected—having worked for years with its expressive qualities it seemed an unsuitable vehicle for silence. (I explained the reasons for my decision earlier.) Nevertheless, there are basic intentions underlying their work that connect some aspects of our individual endeavours. Having already established positive links with the work and ideas of Marcia Hafif, I will discuss Tollens and Marioni and then Umberg. The points raised in the discussions are ideas and approaches that I either share or respect and which help to define the context within which my work operates.

Peter Tollens takes a contemplative approach, using the early stages of his painting, including the preparation of the paint, to get to know the work and what it can be. His finely worked surfaces register traces of feeling and above all embrace subtlety and nuance. His use of materials, egg tempera and oil, refers far back into history, (this is something I have not explored) but I was interested to discover that we both had early and influential experiences as printmakers, and lithographers in particular. He attributes the development of a high level of visual acuity to his knowledge and use of lithography; this is essential to the discipline, as is the ability to think in translucent and opaque layers and to build the work in often unexpected ways. His work is ultimately about colour, and he even treats some of the paintings, based on the favourite colours of people close to him, as monochrome portraits. However, in spite of his different aims, there are significant connections with my work in his method of making the

paintings, the importance he attaches to perception, the restrained but discernible feelings he works into the surfaces and their effects on the viewer.

Joseph Marioni has been painting monochromes for more than thirty years. His concern is with colour which he arrives at through layers, not in the predetermined sequences associated with process art, but in a manner described by Barbara Rose as a 'consciously structured, complex build up of the superimposition of many colours which are visible at different points of saturation through the final layer of paint.'<sup>233</sup> Marioni approaches monochrome with a clear set of values; acknowledging figures such as Reinhardt, Newman and Rothko rather than the purely literalist artists associated with objecthood. The paintings are intentionally serious and could perhaps be called elitist. In common with some current monochrome painters (and in line with the values of the 1960s American painters discussed earlier) Marioni rejects art's recent incorporation into the entertainment industry. Working on the edge of the personal/impersonal he allows his paintings to look and feel as though they are the result of a natural event. He uses acrylic, applied with rollers so that it flows down the canvas—the stretcher is tailored to accommodate a tendency for the flow to taper towards the bottom of the canvas. The employment of rollers counteracts a tendency to draw. He sees all the elements of the painting—stretcher, support and paint as important and restricts the width of his paintings to the field of view, though he does not use a square format. His work is a confirmation of the necessity, first voiced by Brice Marden, for certain kinds of monochrome to achieve a 'serious surface'. His investigation of the use, understanding, and redefinition of the monochromatic colour painting provides a valuable model. Again, he is pursuing goals different from mine but there are clear connections which are best understood in terms of the distinction made by

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<sup>233</sup> Rose, Barbara. 'Man as Measure', *Joseph Marioni-Paintings-A Survey 1970-1998*, Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts, 1998.

Marcia Hafif between conceptual and perceptual monochromes. It will be useful to quote her words again—

‘A sense of seriousness, of subjectivity and spirituality, attaches to the purely perceptual, while the more conceptual the art, the more the artist appears to stand outside the work and comment on it.’<sup>234</sup>

Clearly the current context for my work is provided by the perceptual approach to monochrome painting. It has developed from ‘Radical Painting’, the name that became attached to monochrome paintings produced in the early 1980s first in America and then in Europe. The group of artists producing this work included Marioni, Günter Umberg and Marcia Hafif.

Günter Umberg’s work has clear connections with the 1960s and especially with Ad Reinhardt. All the work discussed here as ‘perceptual’ seems to endorse Reinhardt’s art-as-art theory insofar as it refers to little, if anything, beyond the painting itself. Umberg goes even further towards Reinhardt however, with his use of carefully produced, matt black surfaces that damage very easily, though his method of creating them differs significantly. Reinhardt soaked his oil paints in turpentine to leach out the binder, leaving paint that produced a black velvet finish; Umberg sprays damar resin onto his surfaces before brushing dry, mostly black pigment into the moist coating (the underlying layers include blue, green and red pigments). A single painting can get as many as forty coatings; the result is a black velvet surface that is damaged if touched— the fact that the paintings cannot be easily handled mitigates their object quality. The paintings’ dense black surfaces invite the viewer to look into them whilst being difficult to see, especially when the works are seen in contrast to a white wall, as they usually are. Umberg works on the edge of perception and on the borderlines between opposites; the seductive surfaces cannot be touched without damage occurring, the works are neither pure

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<sup>234</sup> Hafif, Marcia. ‘True Colors’, *Art in America*, June 1989, pp. 128-139, 193.

objects nor emotionally expressive. His refusal to adopt clear positions has something in common with the attempt to deal with silence, which, ultimately refuses definition.

The current context for my work clearly stems from 1980s Radical Painting and pursues a perceptual approach to monochrome painting. The conceptual approaches generally result in an *unpainted* silence because the paint is applied with a much lesser degree of feeling, contemplation and awareness. Where the process is pre-determined, each stage in the procedure is by definition, known in advance. The perceptual approach is based on careful looking and considered responses that allow the contemplative nature of the painting process to elicit a similarly contemplative form of attention from the viewer. Tollens, Marioni, and Umberg, along with Hafif, pursue ideas, interests and methods that have clear links with my own. Although there are many significant values common to perceptual monochromes, each artist arrives at a recognisably different solution by means of a recognisably different ultimate intention. Although most of the work by these (and other) artists achieves a certain kind of silence, their processes of decision making and contemplation focus on other factors, often involving colour. My decisions, guided as they all are by the feeling of silence, take me to a different final destination: hence my assertion that if monotonous are to be recognised for their silence it is necessary to ensure that they are, first and foremost, about silence.

My research practice has explored ways in which silence could be painted. It was based on responses to paint, colour, tone, mark etc. and the feeling of silence they produced. Sometimes they went in the wrong direction but that was usually an indicator of the right direction. To achieve silence I made the feeling of a positive silence the criterion for all my decisions. I allowed and even encouraged it to become part of the working process; there is no point applying paint in an expressionist manner if it is intended to be silent, unless, like Brice

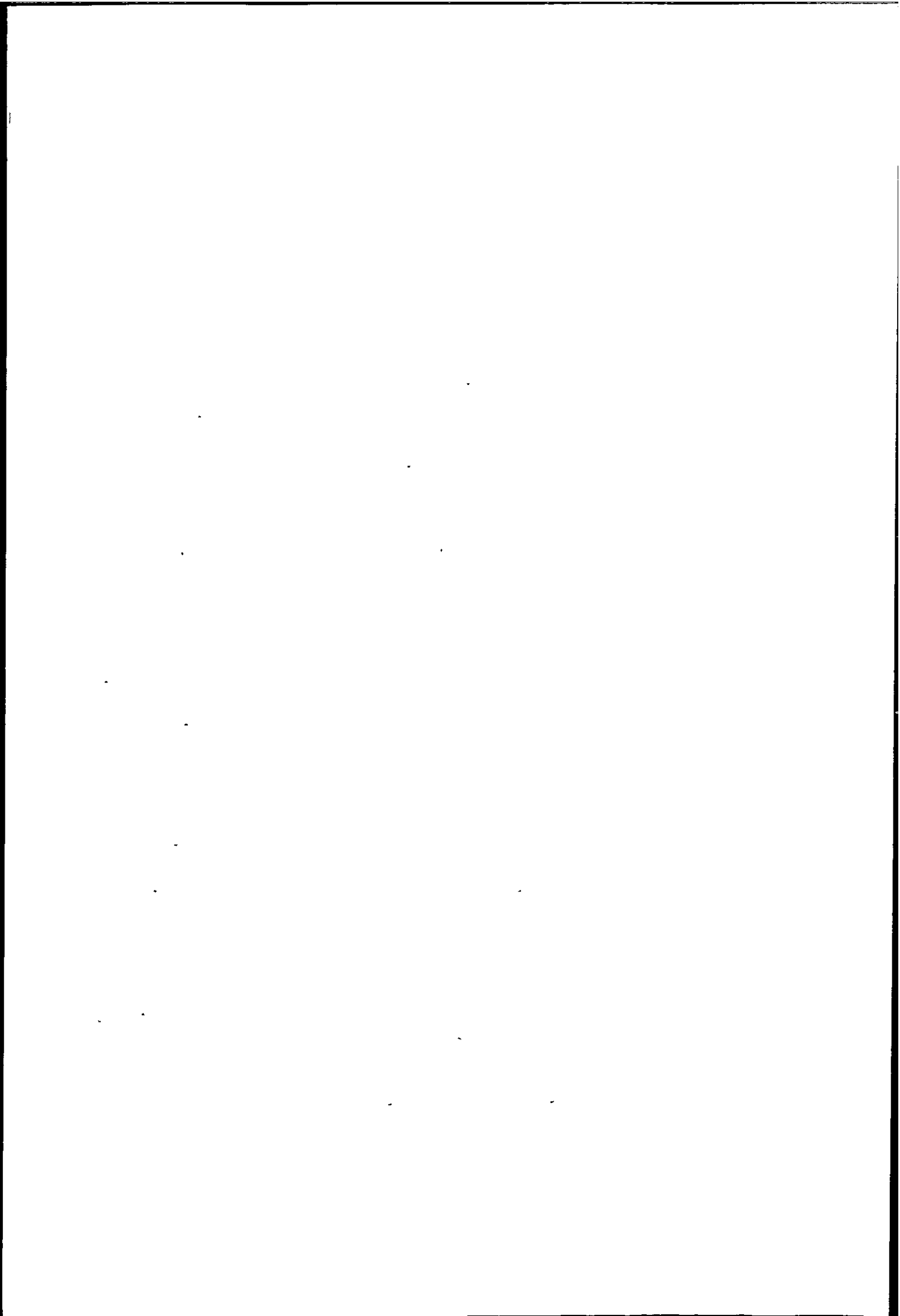
Marden, you want to spend hours patiently and quietly smoothing it down to silence. In the end I adopted strategies based on the idea of building to emptiness, gradually removing the unnecessary—polishing the mirror—and placing empty silence within or against a slightly inflected silence, rather like a rock in a Japanese garden. This made use of subtle changes or ‘silent contrasts’ to evoke the feeling of silence.

I was encouraged in my pursuit of a positive silence by work in other disciplines, linguistics and communication for example, where silence is indeed viewed as a positive and essential part of our experience. The silence I have attempted to present is an open, apparent, accessible and aesthetic silence. It is intended to be contemplative and meaningful. I have tried not to contrive enigmas or mysteries, nor to be antagonistic. In their refusal to communicate anything other than formalist ideas the 1960s monotones were seen to be approaching the cool absolute. There is an inevitable element of this in silence; Jaworski points out that in McLuhan’s terms, ‘If speech is a relatively cool medium, then silence must be even cooler.’<sup>235</sup> He also notes that silence requires a higher level of participation than speech. Nevertheless, silence in painting is generally seen as absence, turning away, refusal, withdrawal, or a lack of communication resulting from a concern with other things, and although it is often accompanied by an aesthetic experience, the silence itself is overlooked. A Robert Mangold canvas provides an example, one of his elegant, flatly painted monochromes with a few sharp lines crossing its surface; it provides an experience that is purely visual, the viewer is aware of the size, shape, colour, value, division of surface, surface quality, the balance that exists between them all, and their aesthetic effect, but not of an aesthetic silence, which was no part of Mangold’s strategy. Aesthetic silence is more clearly evident in Agnes Martin’s statement— ‘When you walk into a forest there are all kinds of sounds but you feel as though you have stepped into silence.’

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<sup>235</sup> Jaworski, Adam. *The Power of Silence*, op.cit. p141.

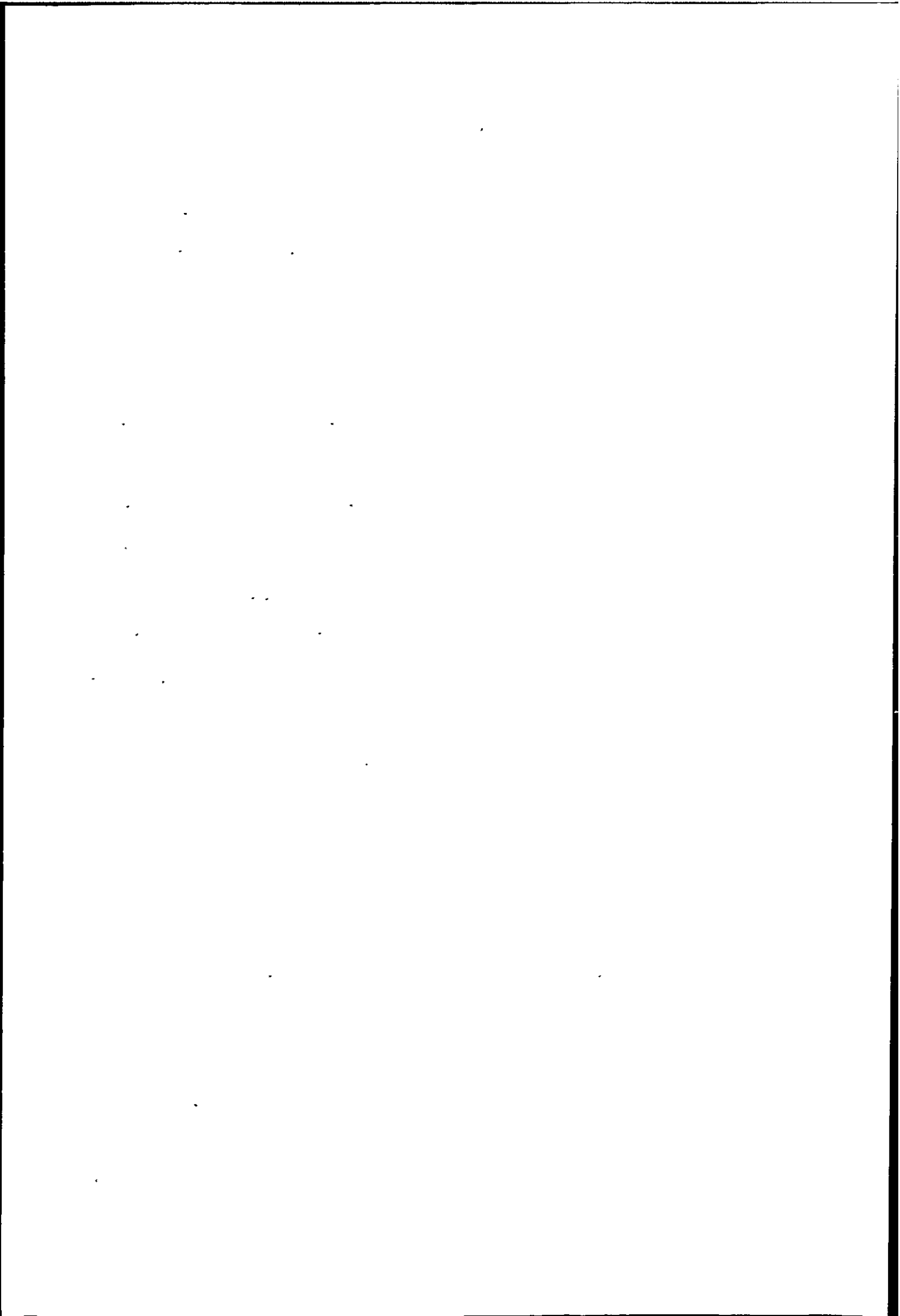




Time and familiarity have eroded the inherent silence of monochromes; it was in any case, often a quality detected by critics rather than consciously sought by artists, but if art makes order out of the chaos of life, as it does for some, the silent monotone seems an altogether appropriate response to today's world. Mine has been a conscious, intentional and positive endeavour to investigate the characteristics and potentialities of silence.

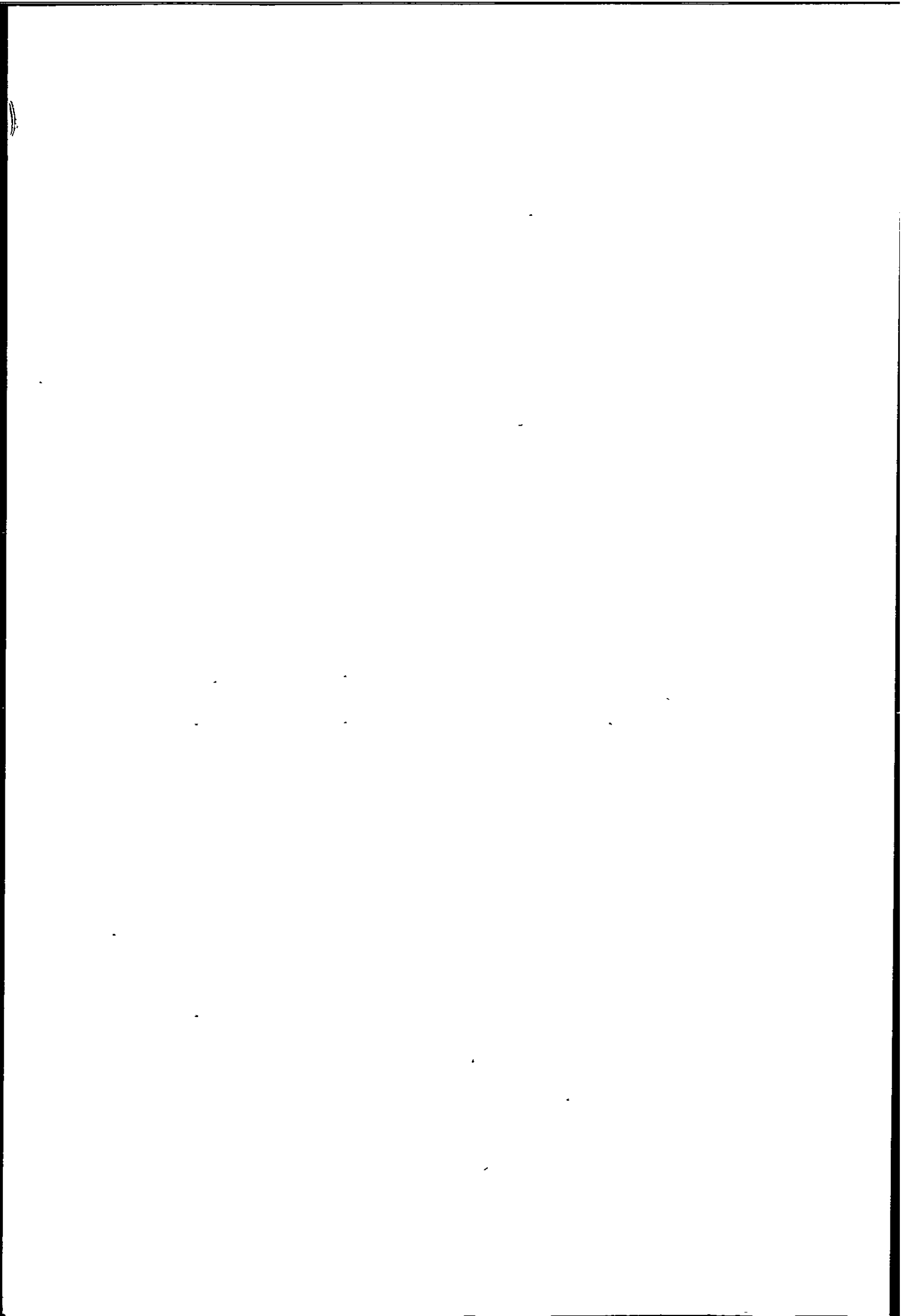
I have produced work that has been guided and informed by an understanding of its origins and development, directed by feeling through the process of realisation, and finally redirected by theories of a more personal nature. I have explained my methods and given reasons, where reason was appropriate, for my decisions. I have described, as far as possible, the quality of the silence that concerns me, though perhaps more in terms of what it is not than what it actually is. That is the nature of silence; it remains ambiguous and elusive. The final chapter must be found in the silence of practice, for whilst the practice I have discussed constitutes a major part of this research and fulfils its role within the terms of the research by demonstrating and exploring the ideas and questions raised in the text, it is not the end of the endeavour. It is in the very nature of this work that one painting generates another; there is always the need to develop and explore, and this research if successful, has provided a solid, clear and well informed basis for future practice. To demonstrate the continuity from research to future creative practice I will finish by outlining some of the problems I intend to deal with.

Future practice will continue to centre on the *feeling of silence*. With no time limits or deadlines I will explore for as long as is necessary the effective use of supports, surfaces, materials, size and colour. For a painting to be successful these elements should all work together, which means that each one can be varied so long as its effects are balanced with everything else. On the subject of supports, I have so far used two kinds of wooden supports—



plywood and MDF, as well as cotton duck and linen, but there are still things to be learned about their qualities and their possible effects on the feeling of the work. Nothing is unimportant in monochrome painting, by which I mean that with some work the image on the support can be complete in itself; the nature of the support does not *seem* to intervene in the process of apprehending the work. With monochrome everything is an active part of the work's 'meaningful existence'. It would be insensitive to achieve the same feeling on linen, plywood, metal, etc. by ignoring or failing to acknowledge and incorporate the specific qualities they offer. My work will, therefore, make effective and specific use of the supports in relation to surface-tension, absorbency, texture, hardness/softness, weight, and responses to different levels of priming. Also, I will investigate the properties of metal surfaces, something I discussed and rejected in the research because metal seemed somewhat inimical to the kind of silence I wanted. I will be particularly interested in making further investigations into the visual qualities attainable by using supports of different thickness, i.e. from thin metallic planes to weighty stretchers. I have already examined the uses of hovering surfaces, i.e. thin surfaces hung one or two inches in front of the wall, and different depths and weights of stretcher bars, but there are many ways of using them especially in relation to size and shape.

Surfaces can be explored indefinitely. I am referring to the treatment of the painted surface which is clearly influenced by the nature of the support but even more by the use of materials. Most of the work produced within the research was painted with acrylics in order to achieve the 'silent' matt surface. I used some oil paint and household gloss either for technical reasons, historical reasons, or to create a particular kind of contrast. I will make greater use of oil paint and house paint in future work, and I will introduce the use of dry pigment. Also, I will be exploiting the fluidity and thickness of paint, and especially where linen and canvas are used, its application, both into and onto the supports. Work outside the research has the advantage,



if necessary, of being painted over long periods or being left for months until its solution becomes clear; this will allow a greater involvement with materials and a greater range of experimentation. I will continue to explore matt and gloss surfaces and to contrast them, though I will be most concerned to achieve an effective matt surface, which, as I have indicated, might entail the use of dry pigment. Above all, my examination of the ways in which paint can be applied to surfaces will be guided by the notion of a 'serious' surface.

Size has a direct relationship to surface. The research practice has restricted size to a maximum of 48 x 48" and many of the paintings are only 24 x 24". I employed the principle that they should not exceed the field of vision, an approach I share with others including Marioni, it would appear. The question that arises however, is from what distance is the field of vision calculated? My research work tended to appear monochromatic from a distance but reveal subtle events on the surface when seen from about three feet away. I based the size on the field of vision from that distance. Future work will continue this approach; there will be no vast canvases, but the field of vision and therefore the size of the work will be increased or decreased according to the treatment of the surface and, since there might be two or three viewing distances (as with Agnes Martin's work), the size will normally be based on the one closest to the work.

Colour was restricted in the research for reasons that I explained. Grey felt like the most suitable colour, black and white had too many associations, and colours, especially primary and secondary colours, were seen to be too loud. I have no reason or need to question this approach at present; there is still much to explore within the range of greys I have identified as most relevant to the pursuit of silence. However, because I work in translucent and opaque layers, more strident colours could be used in the earlier stages and then silenced with

successive neutral layers. This would continue my current investigation of coloured greys. The initial or early layer of colour would remain faintly detectable, giving the painting a particular character.

There is one final point to be considered. Some of the contemporary monochrome painters I have discussed install or exhibit their work in ways that isolate individual paintings on vast expanses of wall and articulate the spaces within the gallery. Günter Umberg often places a single small painting on a huge wall, and all the artists cited tend to place their work in ways that make effective and specific use of different viewpoints, through doorways etc., to allow particular paintings to be seen in relation to each other. Installations of this kind are dependent on the artist being fortunate enough to exhibit in generous spaces and in ways not constrained by other (commercial) demands. Perhaps, eventually, I might have the opportunity to examine the ways in which my work can operate in an architectural context.

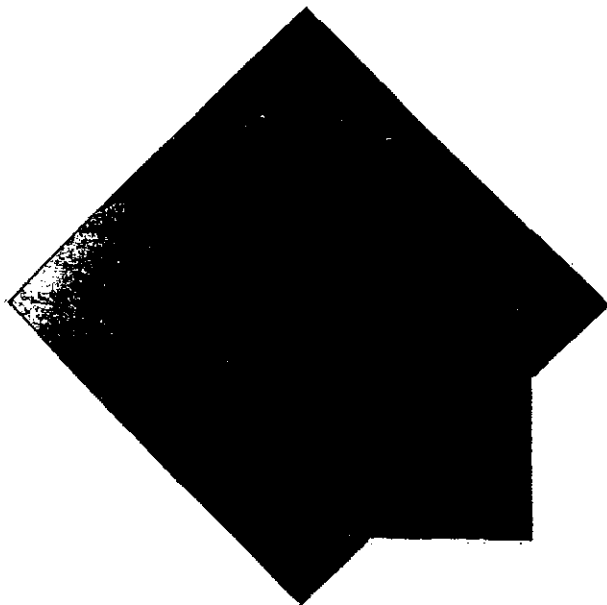
Appendix I: 'The Silent Art', article by Lucy Lippard from *Art in America* Vol. 55, Number One, January-February 1967.

Kasimir Malevich: *Suprematist Composition—White on White*, oil, about 1918. Museum of Modern Art, N.Y.

## THE SILENT ART

*Monotone painting may seem empty and boring, but to those willing to contemplate a "blank" canvas, the silence to be found there is an eloquent one. The Jewish Museum in New York is presenting retrospectives of two masters of monotone: Ad Reinhardt, through January 15, and Yves Klein, January 25 to March 12*

Lucy R. Lippard



Peter Tangen: *Red-Red*, acrylic, 1965. Bertha Schaefer Gallery, New York.

The art for art's sake, or formalist strain, of non-objective painting has an apparently suicidal tendency to narrow itself down, to zero in on specific problems to the exclusion of all others. Each time this happens, and it has happened periodically since 1912, it looks as though the much heralded End of Art has finally arrived. The doom-sayers delight in predicting an imminent decrease for any rejective trend. While dada, assemblage and pop art have come in for their share of ridicule and rage, the most venomous volleys have been reserved for those works or styles that seem "empty" rather than "ordinary" or "sloppy." The message of the Emperor's New Clothes has made a deep impression on the American art public. "Empty" art is more wounding to the mass ego than "sloppy" art because the latter, no matter how drastic, is part of the esthetic that attempts to reconcile art and life, and thus can always be understood in terms of life. There is nothing lifelike about monotonal paintings. They can not be dismissed as anecdote or joke; their detachment and presence raise questions about what there is to be seen in an "empty" surface.

The ultimate in monotone, monochrome painting is the black or white canvas. As the two extremes, the so-called no-colors, white and black are associated with pure and impure, open and closed. The white painting is a "blank" canvas, where all is potential; the black painting has obviously been painted, but painted out, hidden, destroyed. Both are eminently adaptable to the three types of monotone art: the evocative, romantic or mystical; the formally rejective and wholly non-associative; and the gesture of defiance, absolution or comment. Within the past fifteen years a small but diverse group of artists has independently concentrated on monotone and monochrome painting. Until recently they appeared as isolated figures, usually discussed, or dismissed, as aberrations in the historical scheme. However, for some five years now it has become apparent that monotone is one of the diminishing possibilities open to a painting that might be called color painting or light painting, even when it eliminates all color variations or even all color. Monotonal painting can also reinstate an almost imperceptible surface inflection that provokes a new kind of surface emphasis unrelated to the emotive qualities of expressionism. One of the curious and interesting facts about monotonal art is the extraordinary variety possible within its ostensible restrictions. Each minute variation of brushstroke, sprayed layer, or value change takes on a highly charged importance in the context of the whole. Even the flat white or black canvas insists upon the canvas itself or upon the paint that covers it. The artists discussed here share only the fact of their monotonal or near-monotonal surfaces. Their intentions, attitudes and methods are dissimilar, and only the broadest analogies can be drawn, usually within age or stylistic groupings.

Instances of single-color, single-surface paintings during the past fifty years are few. The first and best-known monochrome painter was of course Kasimir Malevich. His *White on White* series, executed as suprematist studies around 1918, was paralleled by Alexander Rodchenko's black-on-black canvas, also sent to Moscow's Tenth State Exhibition in that year, apparently as a reply to Malevich's white works. Rodchenko's manifesto at that time consisted, coincidentally, of a list of quotations: a device used thirty years later by Ad Reinhardt: "As a basis for my work I put nothing"; "colors drop out, everything is mixed in black." Malevich, who was something of a mystic, equated white with

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extra-art associations: "I have broken the blue boundary of color limits and come out into white. . . . I have beaten the lining of the colored sky. . . . The free white sea, infinity lies before you." Actually, the square in the Museum of Modern Art's *White on White* is diagonally placed to activate the surface by compositional means. This concern with dynamism separates Malevich from later monotone developments, although a series of absolutely symmetrical drawings from 1913 predicted the non-relational premise of Ad Reinhardt and the younger artists of the sixties. He also emphasized, like today's painters, the art of painting as painting alone, a medium sharing none of its particular properties (two-dimensionality, rectangularity, painted surface) with other media: "The nearer one gets to the phenomenon of painting, the more the sources lose their system and are broken, setting up another order according to the laws of painting."

In retrospect, it is clear that Malevich and Rodchenko were not making monotonal paintings, but they undoubtedly looked more extreme then than they do today. The education of the spectator's eye must be taken into consideration. The history of abstract art has been punctuated not only by an increasing intellectual acceptance of extreme solutions but also by an increasing optical acceptance. In 1918, and in fact until the late fifties, a monochrome canvas in which the values were fairly close looked monotonal or blank to many people. Now our eyes are accustomed to the gloom of Rothko's and Reinhardt's black and blacker canvases, and our perceptual faculties have been heightened in the process. Work that once looked radically uncolorful or invisible now seems nuanced and visible. Similarly, several of the monotonal canvases mentioned here have more than one color in them and are not, therefore, monochromatic; but they appear monochromatic until all the senses have been adjusted to the area within which these subtle colorations operate. The ultimate in a no-color object that is still a painting might be a square (the only undistorted, unevocative shape) with a sprayed white surface (not white formica or any other absolutely smooth ready-made material, for if a surface is not painted, it becomes "sculptural" no matter how the edges are treated). Would this be an empty canvas? Probably not, if it were done right, for as the rejection becomes more extreme, every mark, every absence of mark takes on added significance. As Clement Greenberg has pointed out, an untouched "stretched or tacked up canvas already exists as a picture—though not necessarily a successful one."

Reinhardt, Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko and, to a lesser extent, Clyfford Still are the major American precedents for the current monotonal art. All four, in virtually opposing manners and degrees, stress the experience of the painting above all surface incidents; and all, since around 1951, have more or less consistently dealt with nearly monochromatic or nearly monotonal art. In its denial of compositional balancing of forms, monotonal art is, in fact, an offshoot of the all-over principle of much New York School painting in the late forties. But monotone is all-over painting par excellence, offering no accents, no calligraphy, no inflection. Around 1950 Newman, a strong influence on the younger generation now concerned with monotone painting, made several only slightly modulated, single-color, single-surface canvases, such as the tall vertical *Day One* and an all-white painting of 1951-52. His *Stations of the Cross* series (1958-66) concludes with a precise, pure, white-on-white work that was unavoidably interpreted as representing transfiguration. Newman's titles indicate that he welcomes such symbolic or associative interpretation; most of the younger artists, on the contrary, are vehemently opposed to any interpretation and deny the religious or mystical content often read into their work as a result of Newman's better-known attitude, and as a result of



Bruce Marden: *Untitled*, oil, 1966.  
Bykerk Gallery, New York.

Yayoi Kusama: *Number 4*, oil, 1959.  
Collection of the artist.

Barnett Newman: *Fourteenth Station* (from  
*"The Stations of the Cross"*),  
acrylic, 1966. Collection of the artist.













of current monotone painting rather than to the almost tangible gloom of Reinhardt's structured blacks.

Monotone painting can be said to exist in time as well as in space, for it demands much more time and concentration than most viewers are accustomed or, in most cases, are willing to give. Among the most extreme examples are the recent white paintings of Robert Irwin. After an interval of time the patient viewer begins to perceive in Irwin's "blank" surfaces tiny dots of color which form a haloed, roughly circular form. The square canvases are ever so slightly bowed so that the surface slips away into the surrounding space, and they stress the atmospheric central area rather than the traditional properties of the rectangular support. But the atmospheric effect is no more permanent than the initial whiteness; the color dots in the center are more and more obvious and, when seen up close, become as uninteresting as Signac's pallid color bricks. Irwin does not—with good reason—allow his paintings to be reproduced. Instead, he insists on a directly "hypnotic involvement" between painting and viewer. By re-introducing energy and illusionism and by de-emphasizing the picture support, he deliberately breaks the rules of the formalist academy. But since distance from the canvas is necessary for maximum enjoyment, and since the viewer's optical experience is finally one of amorphous light-energy, Irwin's effects might be better achieved by the use of actual light.

Robert Mangold's work also induces near monotonal atmospheric effects, but it foregoes the impression of glimmering depths that make one query the necessity of Irwin's work being painted instead of projected upon by some outside light source. Mangold's faint gradations, consisting of two pale, closely valued colors are sprayed on smooth masonry; the formats are shaped, though only at one corner or edge, sliced or curved to destroy any concrete object effect. At the same time such a particular shape emphasizes the surface, further avoiding its destruction by light. Mangold's colors are hard to pin down. They fade and intensify into and away from monotone as they are watched. His earlier *Walls* were monochromatic but radically silhouetted and relieflike. When he rejected the apparently inevitable move into free-standing structures, Mangold's entire attention returned to the surface. The lightly atmospheric *Areas* reach a successful equilibrium between the shape of support and the strong assertion of flat, elusively colored plane, presenting the notion of a partially contained space which "continues" unseen, but which also operates within a structural and eminently *seen* framework.

William Pettet works with highly controlled sprayed surfaces that first appear monochromatic, then reveal evenly flecked undercoats of other hues. His grainy "green" paintings touch on a sensuous aspect of intense color disregarded by most of the younger painters, but he avoids the elegance of Klein's royal blues and the vagueness of other European monochromists. Pettet's canvases bear highly generalized affinities to natural phenomena and are similar to, but far more rigorous and single-surfaced than, Jules Olitski's multicolored and illusionistic extravaganzas. Pettet now intends to do a series of paintings sprayed on plastic so that the translucence of his light-filled color will have more scope; the plastic surface may take these works into a quasi-sculptural area.

The shaped canvas, even if two-dimensional, is usually an imperfect vehicle for monotone painting. Rather than altering the rectangle and continuing to stress the surface, as Mangold does, most adherents of the shaped canvas (such as Peter Tangen, Ron Davis and David Novros) depart more radically toward a relief or sculptural concept. They do not go beyond painting so much as they ignore painting and establish a "third-stream" idiom. While obviously irrelevant to the quality of the work, the whole

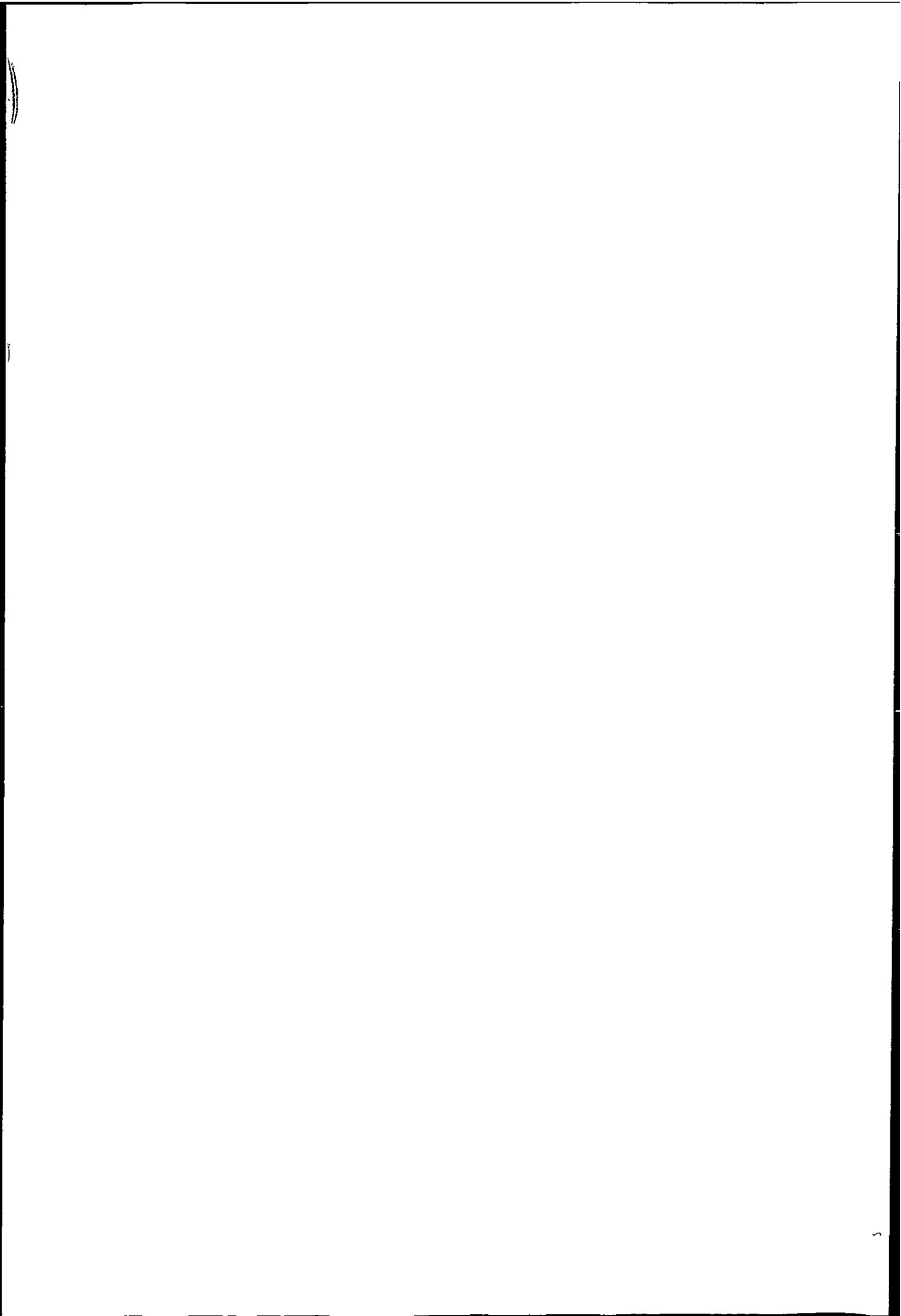
point of a large monotone surface is denied by the use of exaggerated shapes, which de-emphasize surface in favor of contour. When the expanse of an uninflected single surface gives way to the silhouette, the wall becomes the ground, or field, and the canvas itself becomes an image, a three-dimensional version of the hard-edge painted image. Similarly, works like Ellsworth Kelly's monotone (but differently-colored) canvases hung together as one, become a three-color painting, not a monotonal unity. Paul Mogenson's spaced modular panels—of the same height and same iridescent blue but of different widths—also approach sculpture rather than retaining the single surface of true monotone.

An absolutely monotonal and monochromatic art is by nature concerned with the establishment and retention of the picture plane. Three New York artists, Ralph Humphrey, Robert Ryman and Bruce Marden, have been working with surfaces that do not relinquish the controlled but improvisational possibilities of the paint itself. They have stripped the impasto of its gestural, emotional connotations. Their canvases emphasize the fact of painting as painting, surface as surface, paint as paint, in an inactive, unequivocal manner. Humphrey has had three monotone exhibitions at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery in New York (1959, 1960 and 1961), in which a dark, heavily worked surface avoided virtuosic expressionism as well as a mechanical or delicately mannered effect. Humphrey's 1965 exhibition was no longer monotonal, but added a contrasting framing band, which also indicated the non-emptiness of a "blank" center. Marden's palette is related to Humphrey's, consisting of neutral, rich greys and browns. A flat but rather waxy surface with random, underplayed process-markings covers the canvas except for a narrow band at the bottom, where drips and smears and the effects of execution are allowed to accumulate. He seems to exclude emotion entirely, whereas Humphrey claims neither an expressionist nor an anti-expressionist point of view.

Ryman's concern, on the other hand, is entirely with paint; he has gradually rejected color since 1953, and his square, irregular, but all-over white paintings of that period have since become regular, monotonal white paintings in a logical sequence of exclusion. In 1965 he made a series of totally flat, square white canvases (some in oil, some in acrylic, some in enamel), which were still subject to variation, in that even the enamel had a quality of its own, no matter how flatly it was applied. In 1966, Ryman evolved a system of monotone based on an almost imperceptible, impassive, horizontal stroke (made with a thirteen-inch brush) on a "solid" white surface, the only irregularity being a faintly uneven outer edge.

It should be clear by now that monotonal painting has no nihilistic intent. Only in individual cases, none of which is mentioned here, is it intentionally boring or hostile to the viewer. Nevertheless, it demands that the viewer be entirely involved in the work of art, and in a period where easy culture, instant culture, has become so accessible, such a difficult proposition is likely to be construed as nihilist. The experience of looking at and perceiving an "empty" or "colorless" surface usually progresses through boredom. The spectator may find the work dull, then impossibly dull; then, surprisingly, he breaks out on the other side of boredom into an area that can be called contemplation or simply esthetic enjoyment, and the work becomes increasingly interesting. An exhibition of all-black paintings ranging from Rodchenko to Humphrey to Corbett to Reinhardt, or an exhibition of all-white paintings, from Malovich to Klein, Kusama, Newman, Francis, Corbett, Martin, Irwin, Ryman and Rauschenberg, would be a lesson to those who consider such art "empty." As the eye of the beholder catches up with the eye of the creator, "empty," like "ugly," will become an obsolete esthetic criterion.





Appendix II: A Letter from Robert Mangold to the author dated July 15 1998.

July 15, 1998

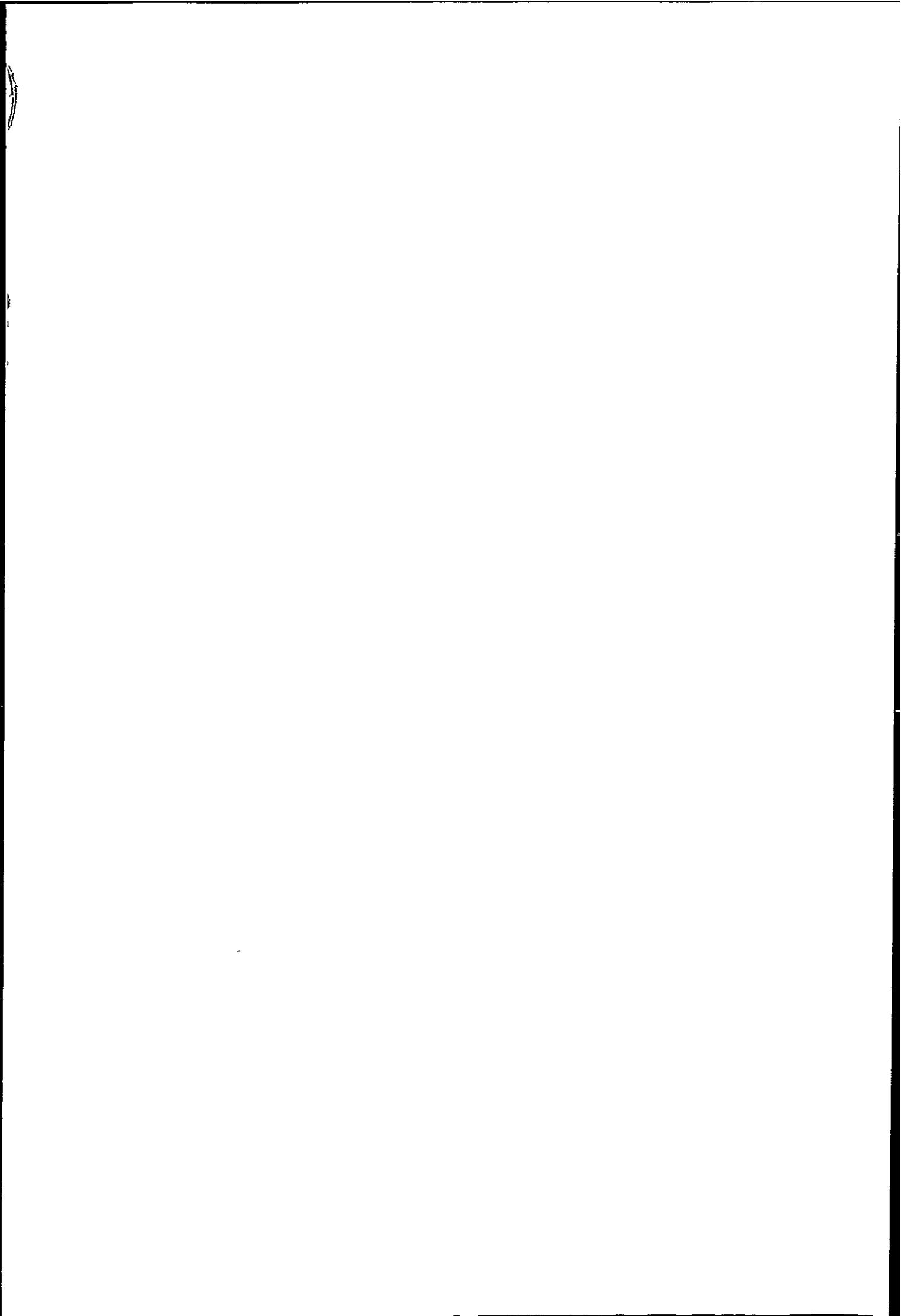
R. Mangold, 155 BULL RD WASHINGTONVILLE  
N.Y. 10992

Dear Graham Lucas.

I will try to answer your questions despite the fact that it requires a fair amount of time, I respect your project and I am pleased to be linked with the other four artists you are focusing on.

I recall the article Lucy J. wrote but cannot quite remember the reasons for calling our work "Silent Art". I'm sure I was pleased to have my work written about by someone with insight. Lucy and Bob Ryman were husband and wife at this time and they lived and worked in the same building on the Bowery in N.Y.C. where my wife and I also had studios. I think that Lucy was trying to describe or give this title to work which shared certain characteristics and which had not been discussed in the publications.

I think that there was this general feeling in the 60's, that there was very little to be gained from looking to Europe, in fact European art eyes seemed to be on New York. The American or to be more precise the New York situation was very vital and the idea of separation from the cubism/surrealism based European abstract easel painting tradition seemed paramount.



As for ~~our~~ feelings of commonality with the other four artists - Newman is for me my most important mentor, as an artist his work has been and is still immensely important to me. He was the only member of the A.E. group that I knew personally.

As to Reinhardt's work, I admire greatly but was less personally connected to it. In a sense it seemed more traditional than Newman's.

Agnes Martin's work is wonderful, it is very different than mine and I think her work most perfectly fits 'Silent Art.' I do not think you are correct to place her in the Abstract Exp. movement. Her work came to the forefront in the early sixties. An exhibition at Dwan Gallery, I think it was titled to link her properly with the growing area to later be known as minimal art, and her shows around this time at Robert Glouven Gallery were also memorable.

Brian Warden has been a friend since we were students together in graduate school at Yale 1960-61. I have nothing but affection for him and ultimate respect for his work.

Abstract Exp. certainly influenced my thinking. As I have expressed often after seeing seeing A.E. painting in 1957, I literally was a changed

person. I saw for the first time the possibilities for abstract painting, that it could have great expressive power and that it could be something other than abstract nature or a designed surface.

In the early sixties however painting came more and more 'under the gun', the feeling was that it was finished and young artists were giving it up for other positions in sculpture, film whatever.

~~I was strongly drawn to the continuing possibility of flat art,~~ and I felt that I had to pare painting ~~at~~ down to its basic components, which for me were edge/shape and surface/color and internal structure/figure.

As for ~~of~~ Greenberg. I'm sure some of his ideas influenced me but generally I saw him as the promoter of color-field painting, Frankenthaler, Olitski, Noland etc. and none of this interested me very much, although Morris Louis was not without interest. ~~I think Greenberg's ideas of flatness etc~~ were important but the examples he used were faulty.

I'm not sure when my next exhibition will be in London, although I am working with the London publisher Phaidon on a book covering ~~the~~ <sup>my</sup> work from 1960 - the present, it should be out sometime in late 1999.

Best Wishes

Robert Mangold

**Appendix III: A note from Robert Mangold sent to the author in September 2001 in response to a question from the author.**

GC

In the 1960s were you actually concerned with the idea of silence, i.e. did you have the intention to make paintings that were about silence?

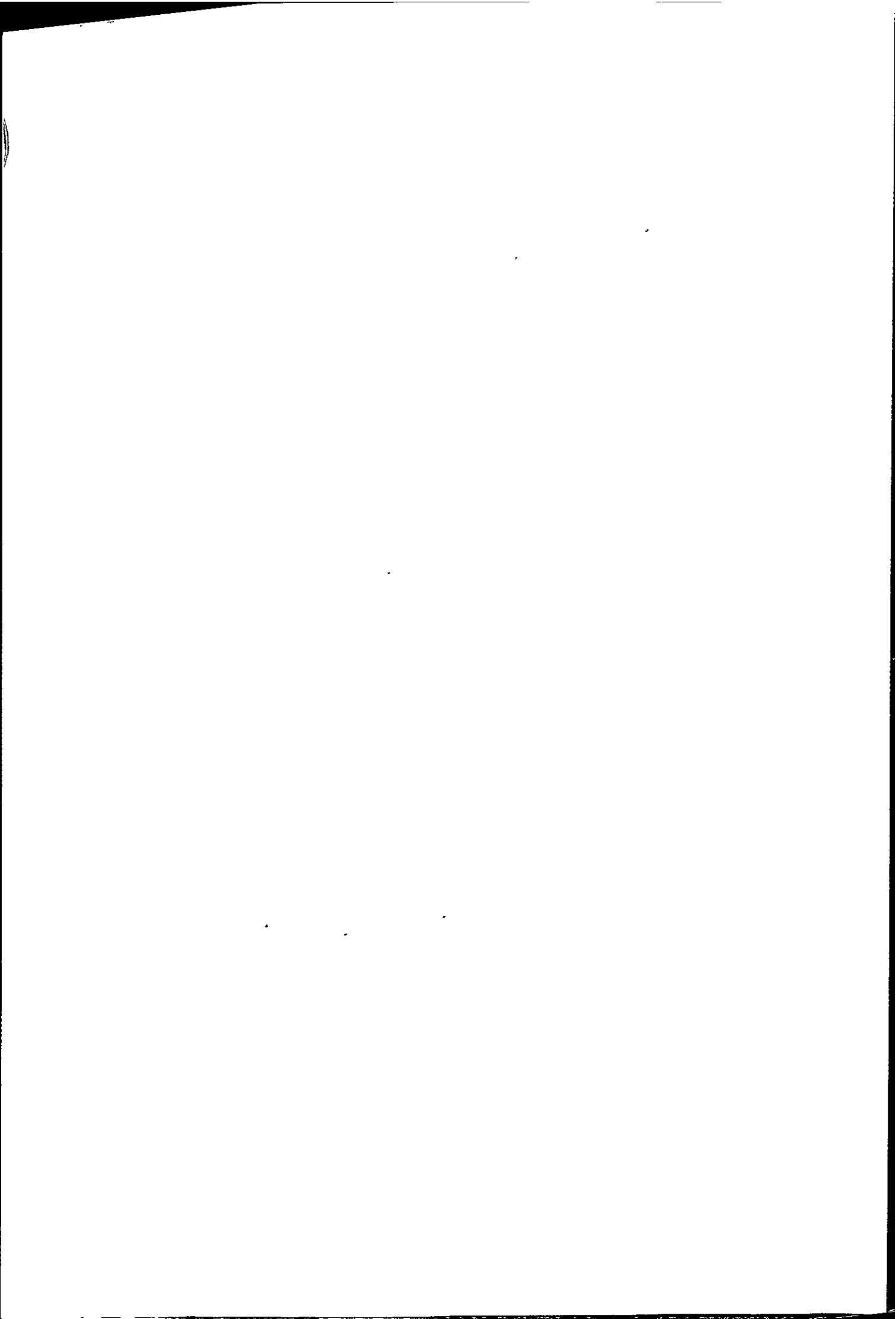
RM

No it was not my intention to make paintings that were about silence. I think this was used to describe the art because it was so different from Pop art and Op art, etc. That were so active and image filled.

Thank you for your help

Robert Mangold

Graham:Clucas:



## Appendix IV: Exhibition of Work – Practical Component of PhD Submission

### Guide to the Exhibition

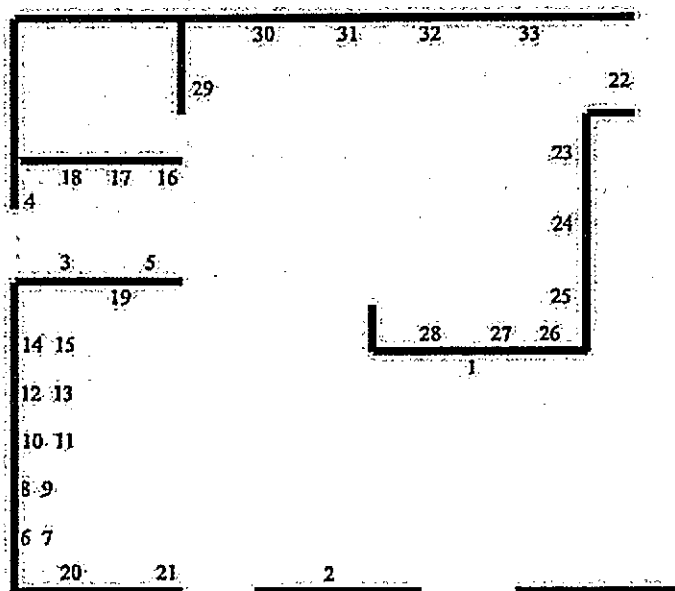


Figure 80: Exhibition Plan

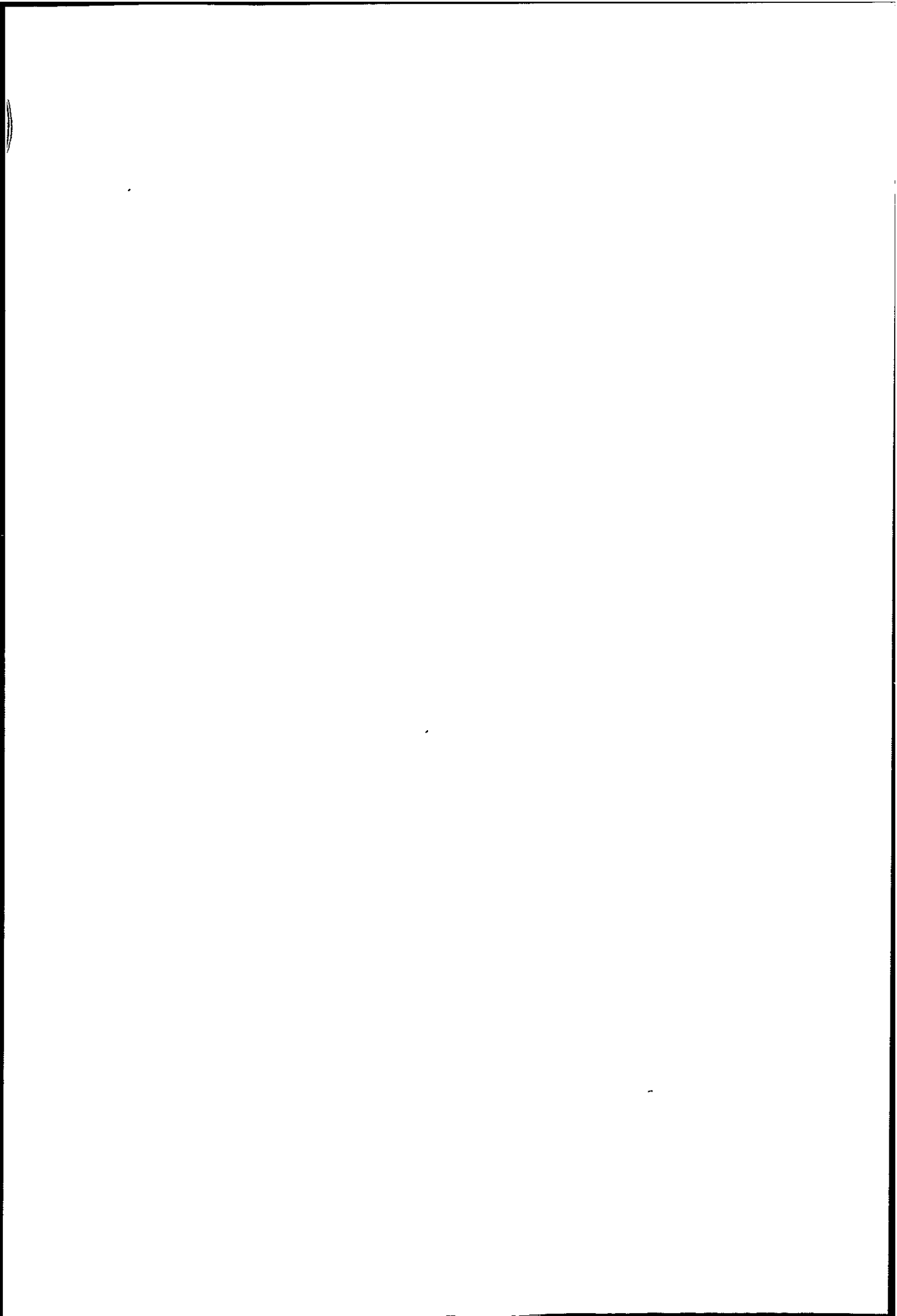
The paintings are numbered in relation to the various approaches discussed in the thesis. It was not possible to hang all the work, but (with one exception) the exhibition represents all the points made in the text. Work not hung is nevertheless available for inspection.

I have chosen not to stick numbers, titles and other explanatory material around the paintings because the space offers enough distractions. I thought it best to keep the walls empty of everything but the work itself.

With spaces of this kind there are advantages and disadvantages. The raking light from above creates bold shadows and sometimes gives too much importance to surface details. The paintings were made, often at night under a bright light, but because I work on the floor so that the marks remain where I put them no matter how fluid the paint, the lighting spreads evenly over the surface from the front. Clearly, it would be better if they were lit from the front in this exhibition. Also, as the work was being hung it was apparent that some paintings were better lit at different times of the day.

All the work is based on explorations of monotone, or near monotone, and the grid in accordance with the theories examined in the thesis. The surfaces are generally matt (except when gloss is used as a contrast to test its effect) for reasons also explained in the thesis. The formats are square to preserve a sense of stillness, they are generally mid to high key; middle tones being neutral and higher ones having a revealing rather than a concealing quality. Grey











































































































































































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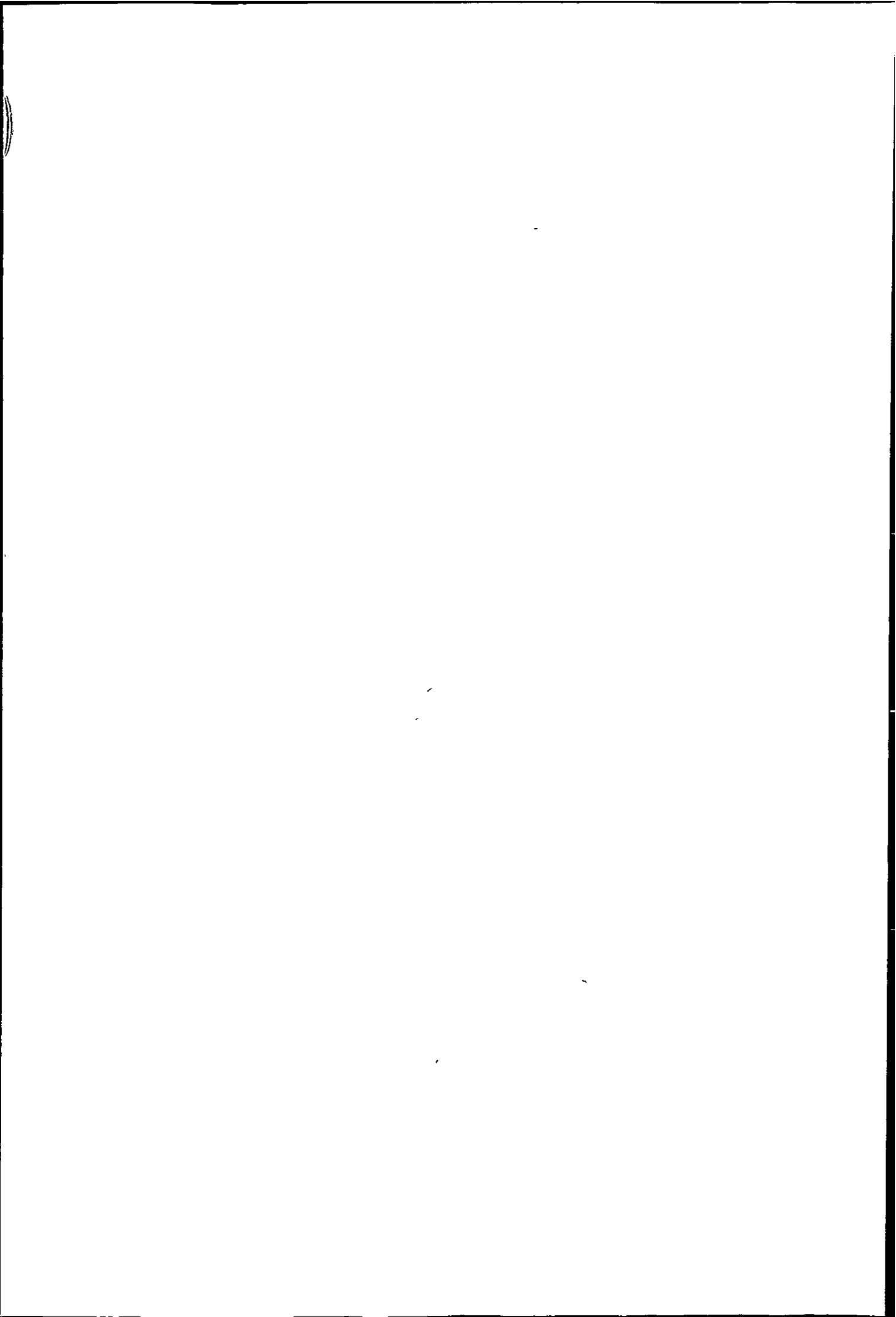
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