Reinhardt, Martin, Richter: Colour in the Grid of Contemporary Painting

by

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Abstract

The objective of my thesis is to extend the scholarship on colour in painting by focusing on how it is employed within the structuring framework of the orthogonal grid in the paintings of three contemporary artists, Ad Reinhardt, Agnes Martin and Gerhard Richter. Form and colour are essential elements in painting, and within the "essentialist" grid painting, the presence and function of colour have not received the full discussion they deserve. Structuralist, post-structuralist and anthropological modes of critical analysis in the latter part of the twentieth century, framed by postwar disillusionment and skepticism, have contributed to the effective foreclosure of examination of metaphysical, spiritual and utopian dimensions promised by the grid and its colour earlier in the century.

Artists working with the grid have explored, and continue to explore the same eternally vexing problems and mysteries of our existence, but analyses of their art are cloaked in an atmosphere and language of rationalism. Critics and scholars have devoted their attention to discussing the properties of form, giving the behavior and status of colour, as a property affecting mind and body, little mention. The position of colour deserves to be re-dressed, so that we may have a more complete understanding of grid painting as a discrete kind of abstract painting.

Each of the three artists I have examined here employed colour and grid in strategies unique to their work and its purposes. Ad Reinhardt arrived at his 1960s "black" paintings out of a background that included strong political beliefs, resistance to the dominant strain of 1950s Abstract Expressionism, and a deep interest in eastern religions and Buddhism. Agnes Martin shared Reinhardt's interest in Buddhism and

eastern religions, but chose to move toward the light in the atmospheric colour of her paintings, speaking of the quest for perfection of the mind in her writings and interviews. Gerhard Richter's colour charts, a longstanding major subset of the vast range of this prolific artist's work, speak to a need to go beyond his love of painting to the ungraspable substance of colour itself.

Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been possible without the patience, enthusiasm and constant support of my supervisor, Katherine Romba. I am most grateful to her good humour and unwavering guidance, both of which were always there to bring me back to the central issues of my topic as I wandered off to explore the broad terrain surrounding it. I am also indebted to friend and Queen's colleague, Catherine Manning, who willingly gave much time and expertise in the midst of her own thesis work to guide mine into readiness for defense and submission. Early in the research process, I was graciously assisted by Joy Weiner, Archives Specialist, Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Art, New York. Joy introduced me to Ad Reinhardt's daughter, Anna, who generously agreed to speak with me about her father and his work. The libraries and archives of MOMA, the Whitney and the Pace Gallery in New York were particularly helpful as I explored the backgrounds of the artists chosen to exemplify my argument. I am also grateful to Yvonne Lammerich and Brian Grison for early advice and assistance as I began this journey, to the generosity and encouragement of many friends and Queen's colleagues throughout, and the steadfast support of my partner Stephen Handerek.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Topic

The topic of my thesis is the place of colour in relation to form in abstract painting; in particular, how some of the difficulties faced in this relationship since the birth of abstraction have been negotiated in the grid painting that emerged from geometric abstraction. Abstraction held the promise of freedom for colour from its traditional role in representation, but along with changes to formal obligations it also brought new restrictions, demands and prejudices. To investigate this topic I devote a chapter each to artists Ad Reinhardt, Agnes Martin, and Gerhard Richter as exploratory essays intended to examine the place of colour in specific bodies of their paintings in which the austere and minimal structure of the orthogonal grid serves as form. Although hundreds of artists have in the past, and continue in the present, to work with the grid structure and colour, I consider these three artists crucial exemplars of an understanding of the dilemma colour faced at a critical moment in the middle of the twentieth century, as witnessed by their strategies towards colour's use in their painting.

As an artist with a long career in painting, I have a special interest in this topic. My first experience with how colour could produce form came when I was an adolescent and asked a group of women if I could accompany them on one of their regular landscape painting outings. They had the usual oil painting paraphernalia at their disposal, and the appropriate skills. I had neither. For their subject they chose a fast-flowing river with clear white water that tumbled over large boulders. Like polished stones in a bowl of water, the colours of the rocks were a rainbow that ranged from soft pale greys and pinks, dark greens and browns, to the bright orange-ochre coating produced by iron-rich granite.

All was in constant visual motion under the water's refraction and the dancing highlights of reflection on its surface. Realizing I was not equipped for the challenge, I turned and chose the mountains and hills in the distance as my subject, and spent the morning engrossed in painting it. At lunchtime, I went home and set my small finished work down. When I next looked at it a few minutes later, I was shocked to see, instead of a painting of trees on hills and mountainside, a piece of paper taped to a board covered in an endless variety of green shapes. My painting was no longer even the memory of a landscape; it was magically transformed into something I recognized without being able to describe: a study of form and colour.

Painting has been a personal voyage of discovery since that early experience, and most often centered on the exploration of colour's expressive possibilities. For the past two decades, variants of the orthogonal grid have constituted my work's formal shape. I consider my approach to colour and its expression to be less complex and quite likely more naïve than the strategies of the three artists in my study; however, such comparisons are irrelevant to my topic. I propose that Reinhardt, Martin and Richter understood and responded at crucial moments to the philosophical and theoretical climates surrounding both painting and colour when both were under siege in the art world. My thesis will examine their strategies with colour in the grid of abstract painting, in an attempt to help us understand both the recurring prejudice against colour, and the impartiality of the grid used in its defense.

Terms

In painting, **form** is the idea, design, shape or structure of the picture plane. Form defines and measures space and coordinates elements of painting such as line, space,

surface, texture and pattern, in a way that has long satisfied the hierarchical structuring of a rational Platonic and neo-Platonic order, in which pure reason is superior to form and form is superior to colour.[1] All four meanings – idea, design, shape and structure – are important. While there are shifts in emphasis as I use the term form, "grid-form," or speak directly of grid structure, the idea of a simple orthogonal grid of horizontal and vertical lines across the painting surface is central to my subject, and typical of the works that are part of this discussion.

Form as idea implies that colour resides at the base of a hierarchy, a presumption based on Plato's hierarchy which gave priority to reason and idea, and then to language, before image or pictorial representation. In her account of Plato's influence, Jacqueline Lichtenstein argues:

> What was originally a confrontation between discourse and image soon became an affront that forced painting to assume a strangely theoretical role to which it was not inherently destined. But the contest was unequal, for it took place on the territory of language; language invented the game, set the rules, and played according to its own stakes.[2]

It is, however, also possible to see colour as the origin of form. David Batchelor relates the early myths that tell us the order in which the gods made the world are of two basic types: in one the world begins as colourless form, and in the other, as formless colour.[3] In the formless colour version, colour is substance, therefore information. If colour can be information, it can also be idea. I suggest that we should at least reverse the order implicit in "form as idea," and accept that the idea contains form and colour.

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[1] Jacqueline Lichtenstein, *The Eloquence of Colour: Rhetoric and Painting in the French Classical Age*, trans. Emily McVarish (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 3: "The hierarchies imposed by Platonism allowed color to become the locus of an anti-Platonism *in* painting, which in fact, expressed the anti-Platonism *of* painting."

[2] Lichtenstein, *The Eloquence of Color*, 2.

[3] David Batchelor, ed., *Colour* (London and Cambridge: Whitechapel and MIT Press, 2008), 19.

For the purposes of my argument, the **grid** is the idea of form realized as a pattern of equal spatial divisions repeated across the picture plane. In this thesis I will be considering the simple or regular a-compositional, orthogonal grid, a form characterized by the pattern resulting from the repetition of equally spaced horizontal and vertical lines. These lines and spatial divisions mirror the borders of the plane's square or rectangular surface, and contain internal shapes, also square or rectangular, as equal integers of its structure. This structure is a symmetrical image or pattern without any differentiating focal points, and thus a-compositional.

Quite apart from its use as a "perspective lattice" in the art of earlier centuries, the grid of abstract painting since the early decades of the twentieth century functions as an armature, graph, organizing structure, and, finally, as a form. As a form, the extent of the all-over regular grid in a two-dimensional painting is determined by the length and breadth of the painting surface. The grid I most often refer to engages or covers the entire painting surface. Although often also called a modular grid because of its patterned division of the picture plane, I will use the term 'modular grid' to refer only to works that consist of multiple discrete units that together form a grid pattern. The grid cells in a modular grid work can be contiguous, thus forming one discrete grid form, although often the surface of the wall becomes part of the work, acting as variable interval between grid cells and rows.

Throughout my thesis, I most often refer to the orthogonal grid alternately as an organizing structure or form. The orthogonal grid in painting is a notion of the twentieth century mind, a result of a veritable tidal wave of grid use in painting set loose as a

consequence of the birth of abstraction. And as we will see, there are no two orthogonal grids alike, just the idea of one.

The language used to describe the form found in the work of artists working with the grid underwent subtle changes over the course of the twentieth century reflecting changes in perception. The same regular orthogonal grid that served as form in two of Piet Mondrian's 1918-19 paintings have always been referred to as "checkerboards"; conflating them with a familiar cultural object instead of the grid, the discrete abstract form of these paintings. This is particularly remarkable considering that, instead of the standard square configuration of the checkerboard, both paintings consist of rectangular grid cells in a horizontal format (Figure 1).

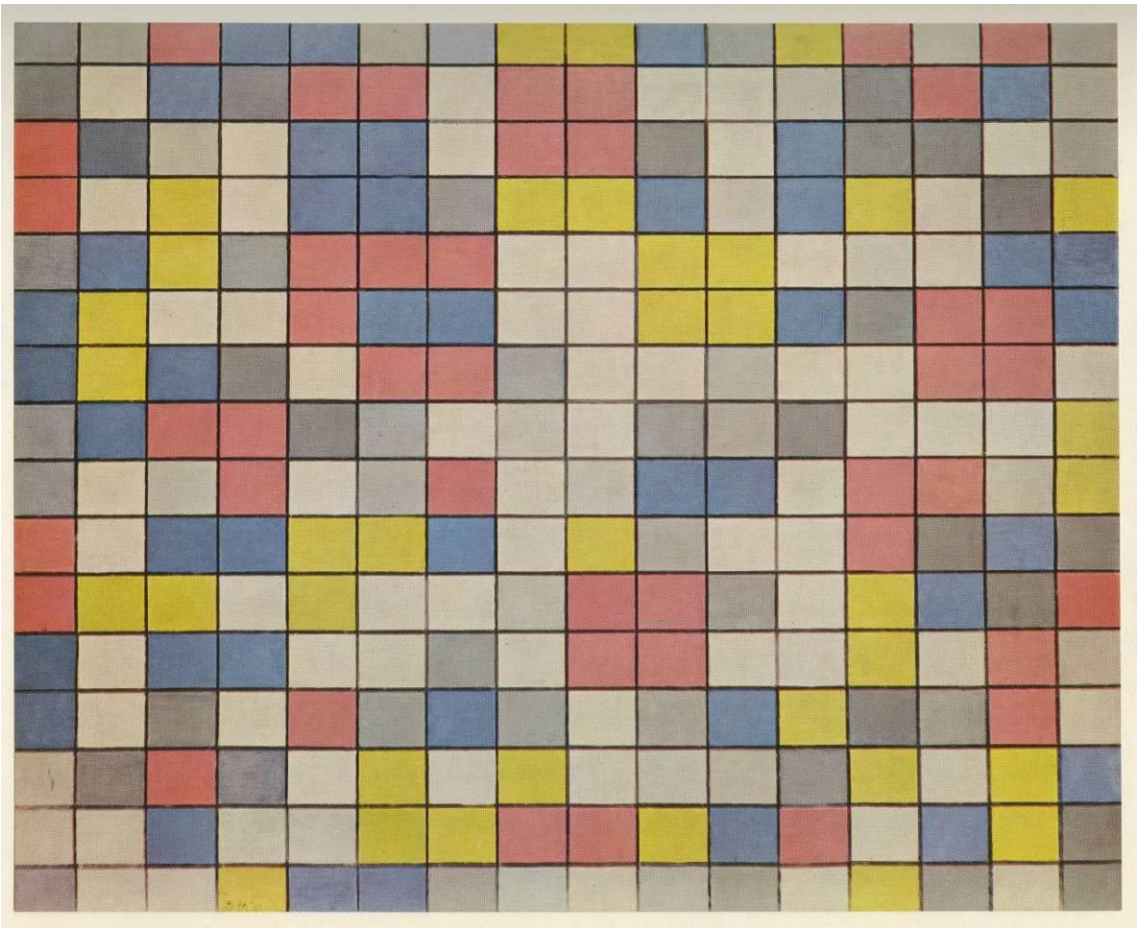

Figure 1-Piet Mondrian, *Composition 'Checkerboard', Bright Colours*, (1919), oil on canvas, 33 7/8" x 41 ¾"

By the mid-sixties, marking an important shift in perception towards non-representational abstract painting, the "grid" had separated itself from "geometric abstraction," necessitated by the emphasis on repetition and a-compositional form in the paintings of many artists, including Agnes Martin and Ad Reinhardt.

Colour in painting is both a physical, material substance, and an elusive, visual sensation, experienced through conditions of external light. In the first instance, its physical substance takes the form of dyes and pigments that painters mix and manipulate to create pictures. In the second instance, it is the fugitive, optical sensation that the visual cortex responds to and processes, mediated by perceptual and emotional

experience. Patricia Sloane, distinguishing the light by which we see from coloured surfaces, states, "The visual world can be thought of as a continuum of color or an illusion caused by light."[4] This distinction between additive (light) and subtractive (pigment or surface) was not widely understood until after Hermann von Helmholtz published his article on colour-mixing in 1852, and it was even later in the nineteenth century that psychologist Ewald Hering, studying perception, defined colour as a sensation.[5]

As a sensation, colour is dependent on available illumination, which consists of colour in the form of light waves of different length, and is experienced in the visual cortex mediated by perception. The perception of colour is also subject to colour stimulus through movements of the eye and body.[6] Light is colour, and both can be conflated with vision itself, as it takes us into the visual cortex where they are joined by subjective perception. Without vision we do not see colour. We also do not see form without the enhancement of colour and the effects of their contrasts with each other. Or, as James Clerk Maxwell explained, "All vision is colour vision, for it is only by observing differences of colour that we distinguish the forms of objects."[7] These differences of colour by which we distinguish forms are exaggerated in the visual process that begins with the eye and continues in the visual cortex. A blue-green next to a blue looks greener than it does next to a green, a situation that causes the blue to appear more visible to the eye. All colours respond to adjacent colours by maximizing their differences.

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[4] Patricia Sloane, *The Visual Nature of Color* (New York: Design Press, 1989), 106.
[5] John Gage, *Color and Meaning: Art, Science and Symbolism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 220, 258.
[6] Jonathan C. Fish, "Colour as Sensation in Visual Art and in Science," *Leonardo* 14, No. 2 (1981): 90.
[7] James Clerk Maxwell, *Scientific Papers*, ed. W. D. Niven, 2 vol. (New York: Dover Press, 1965), quoted in Patricia Sloane, *The Visual Nature of Color*, 97.

Colour is part of everything we see, yet we are often unaware of its effects. To paraphrase Expressionist painter and Bauhaus teacher, Johannes Itten, as a physical, material substance, the first aspect of colour is of interest to the physiologist, as a visual sensation, the second aspect is of interest to the psychologist. Both aspects are of interest to the artist, who works with the relationships between colour agents such as pigments or dyes, and colour effects. Itten's book *The Art of Color* was my first formal introduction to colour. In it he wrote, "Colors are forces, radiant energies that affect us positively or negatively, whether we are aware of it or not" [8], a provocative statement that served to increase my interest in what I still consider to be a mysterious substance. Colour has been the subject of much theorizing in the past two centuries, and Itten acknowledged the importance of the theories of Goethe, Runge, Bezold, Chevreul and Hölzel amongst others for his own practice as painter and teacher. As an artist I have visited many of these and other theories and found that Itten's work best satisfied me as a direct and pragmatic approach to the artist's visual analysis of colour and its relationships.

Colour, whether chromatic or achromatic, is light (hue and light value), and it is light that allows us to see form. I most often use the term 'colour' to refer only to chromatic colours, those that contain hue, as opposed to achromatic colours (white, black and greys), which do not. It is the hue constituents of colour that create the sensations that are recorded in the visual cortex as colour. The most intense colours, which provide maximum contrast of hue, are the three primary colours: red, yellow and blue. As primaries, they contain no other hues. Next are the secondary colours, equal visual mixtures between the primaries, in which both primary colours vie for sensory response.

[8] Johannes Itten, *The Art of Color: The Subjective Experience and Objective Rationale of Color*, trans. Ernst van Haagen (New York: Reinhold, 1961), 16.

Intensity lessens again with tertiary mixtures, the equal visual combination of a primary and a secondary, and with all subsequent gradations. These are all found at full saturation on the colour wheel, the form that represents the painter's spectrum, and is an important key to the use of colour in painting. Colours that are not fully saturated, that contain white, black or grey, we refer to as diluted colours.

The common colour wheel Figure 2 provides the appearance of a logical and symmetrical order that colour's more complex and elusive optical behavior belie as soon as it is off the wheel.

Figure 2-Johannes Itten, "Twelve-Hue Color Circle," *The Art of Color*, (1961).

The wheel is an important key that establishes the location of primaries, secondaries and tertiaries in relation to each other, and shows the major effect of the complements or opposites on the wheel to each of the twelve colours. Complementary colours contain nothing of each other, thus create intense contrast stimulation to the eye and visual brain when they are adjacent. They also extinguish each other chromatically, producing a dark middle grey when mixed together. We see light-dark contrast at its most extreme in the opposites, yellow and purple. The physiological effect of temperature differences felt from one hue to another are at their maximum in the warm and cold poles of red-orange and blue-green, and these are located opposite each other on the wheel.

As well as introducing us to contrast of hue, at its most intense in relationships of the three primaries, the wheel shows the decidedly non-logical imbalance of light value in the primaries and subsequent inter-mixtures. Not only are they not the same light value, the decrease in light value from highest to lowest is not equal. When the three primaries are compared to an eleven-point gray scale, yellow has the highest light value, bringing it closest to white, yet its complement purple has the lowest light value on the wheel. Red sits just under the level of middle gray, and blue a short distance closer to black. All subsequent intermixtures display this imbalance of the relationship of fully saturated hues to their light values, adding to both our fascination with colour, and our suspicion of its nature as an allusive sensation. Contrast of hue, the polarities of complementary and cold-warm contrasts, and the imbalance of inherent light values indicating light-dark contrast, are evident on the wheel. Itten also refers to three further contrasts: simultaneous, saturation and extension. We are familiar with dramatic exercises that show us that for each colour the eye simultaneously requires its opposite, and will

generate it if it is not present. Contrast of saturation and extension are both more subtle. We can best examine all three contrasts in the more complex relationships of colour and form in painting.

Outside the colour wheel, the achromatic colours black and white are the extremes of light and dark, with gradations of grey in between. The difference in light value between a light grey and a darker grey is accentuated in the visual cortex, just as differences in hue are accentuated between two chromatic colours. Both contrasts and possibly others are at work whenever two colours are contiguous. Alone, these achromatic colours are perceived as degrees of light or dark, or light value that accentuate the more serious drama of form, appealing more to the intellect and spirit than to the body. Combined with hues, as tints, colours with white, as shades, with black, and tones, mixed with grey or complementary hues, achromatic colours are invaluable in two ways: they modify the extreme sensory excitation produced by full saturation colours, and extend the range of perceptible colours.

With such options, we have available to us between three and four million colours discernible to the human eye, a language of colour that speaks to the intellect in visual, associational and symbolic terms, to the body through direct stimulation of neurological response, and to the psyche, in its effect on our subjective, emotional and spiritual being. Add to this the physiological process that intensifies differences between colours to obtain maximum contrast in each of its unique relationships, and we have encountered the incredible instability and flux of colour as sensation that makes any ordering of it seem contingent and provisional. However, despite personal and cultural differences in our response to colour, we also belong to a collective unconscious, with shared

experiences that originate in our experience of natural environments, including the urge to order.[9]

The visual cortex processes colour, where it engages with experiences and associations found in memory, and the body responds to it. Because of the powerful effects colour has on our entire organism as we surround ourselves with it in the built environment and our choice of personal attire, architects and designers take care to study objective visual colour and to be aware of shifting trends in colour use. As recent scholarship on colour in architectural space states:

> Perceiving colors means experiencing them and becoming more aware of them, and is always accompanied by associated meanings. Diverse conscious and subconscious factors play a role. Every objective color stimulus that we record from the outer world corresponds with a subjective reaction from our inner world. The human experience and response to color are as diverse as people themselves. For this reason, it is not possible to generalize color experience, color effect, or the human response to color.[10]

As for the direct physiological effects of colour on the body, we know we rely on the full spectrum of natural light to trigger the production of Vitamin D, so it should not be surprising that the sensation of individual colours also might have bodily effect. Both Itten, and Faber Birren, who wrote extensively on colour therapy and colour psychology, have claimed that individual colours have effects on the body ranging from the sedative effects of blue to the stimulation of red. Zena O'Connor counsels against taking the claims of colour psychology and colour therapy that are available in popular culture at face value, but also tells us that recent more rigorous studies tend to corroborate earlier

[9] Gerhard Meerwein, Bettina Rodeck, and Frank H. Mahnke, *Color – Communication in Architectural Space* , trans. Laura Bruce with Matthew Gaskins and Paul Cohen (Basel: Birkhäuser Verlag AG, 1998), 20, E-book.
[10] Ibid., 19.

findings.[11] Akira Yasukouchi and Keita Ishibashi have shown the somatic or non-visual effects of the colour temperature of fluorescent lamps on the human autonomic nerve system produced by their spectral composition.[12]

The early potential for colour within abstraction had been limited in Cubism to an almost monochromatic definition of planes and shapes, restricted to the three primary colours plus black, white and gray in Mondrian's work, or laid open to colour-science exploration and decorative use during the period of Bauhaus influence. In her monograph on Ad Reinhardt, Lucy Lippard described Willard Huntington Wright's *The Future of Painting* (1923) as "a small but prophetic book" that influenced Reinhardt and earlier geometric abstractionists.[13] Following his previous work, *Modern Painting*, in which Wright charted the history of painting, in the later book he proclaimed: "Modernist painting, against which the advocates of academic painting have protested so bitterly, is, in reality an art of color."[14] Wright based his claim on the long history of painting as a graphic, representational art, in which, he said,

> Color played no part in the classic pictorial conception. All forms and rhythms were conceived and expressed in drawing; and all volumes and tones – namely: the means for obtaining solidity and structure – were produced by the scale of grays.[15]

Wright declared that the final breach of traditional painting had been achieved, and based on pictorial experiments and researches done since 1800, the future belonged to the art of

[11] Zena O'Connor, "Colour Psychology and Colour Therapy: Caveat Emptor", *Color Research & Application* 36, no. 3 (June 2011).
[12] Akira Yasukouchi and Keita Ishibashi, "Non-visual Effects of the Color Temperature of Fluorescent Lamps on Physiological Aspects in Humans," *Journal of Physiological Anthropology and Applied Human Science* 24 (2005): 41-43.
[13] Lucy Lippard, *Ad Reinhardt* (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1981), 147.
[14] Willard Huntington Wright, *The Future of Painting* (New York: B. W. Huebsch, Inc., 1923), 9.
[15] Wright, *The Future of Painting*, 19.

colour.[16] On such diverse foundations as these, artists of the New York School searched for new avenues of expression through the visual, formal and material elements of painting, and colour began to emerge as an equal to form.

Colour presents itself as a puzzle for artists, scientists, anthropologists, philosophers and poets, each studying one or more of its many facets. Colour is subjectively experienced, and as John Gage, who has written extensively on the history of colour and its meaning declares, "Colour is almost everybody's business but it has rarely been treated in a unified way."[17] As to its pervasiveness in the everyday life of human experience, Faber Birren recounts the mystical and symbolic functions early man assigned to colour that were essential to his survival and are evidenced in his earliest artifacts, and claims, "The story of color is almost the story of civilization itself. Man's love of color is as old as his time on earth…." [18] Because colour is experienced through our sense of sight, can't be measured or weighed in any concrete sense, and is dependent on external light, it is fugitive and ungraspable; adding to our awareness of it as a sensation experienced through the coordinates of our inner selves of memory, perception, and body, thus worthy of awe.

My argument

The grid is a rational structure; colour is an irrational sensation and substance. On first appearance, this rational structure often seems to be the most important element within a painting. As a rational structure, and one that defines and measures space, we are too ready to accept its apparent dominance over the colour that allows it to give such

[16] Wright proceeds in strictly linear modernist fashion to trace the lineage of this new art from Turner, Delacroix, Impressionism, Pointillism, Matisse and ultimately, Synchromism.
[17] John Gage, *Colour and Culture: Practice and Meaning from Antiquity to Abstraction* (London: Thames and Hudson, ca. 1993), 7.
[18] Faber Birren, *Color: A Survey in Words and Pictures* (New York: University Books Inc., 1963), 11.

definition, which further obstructs our understanding of colour's expressive power and potential.

I argue that the coloured grid is the instance of parity between colour and form. Whether colour is an equal to form has long been a matter of contention, and not until non-representational, non-objective, abstraction emerged early in the twentieth century were there grounds to support the notion of equality. Longstanding prejudices against colour have been culturally inscribed and valorized. Consensus on the importance of vision and visuality, so severely treated in recent post-modernist theory, is critical to an acceptance of colour as equal to form. Martin Jay's excellent scholarship on the hostility towards vision and its hegemonic role located the origin of the most recent occurrence of anti-visuality in the thought of French intellectuals – artists, critics, philosophers and theorists – influenced by the philo-Semitism inspired by early twentieth century phenomenologist, Emmanuel Levinas.[19] He then traced its influence in the reawakening of an anti-visual impulse within the modernist project in America in the period concurrent with the subjects of this thesis.[20] The 'anti-retinal' hostility to painting espoused by Dadaist artist Marcel Duchamp contributed to the avant-garde movements of Pop and Conceptual art, which were, with retrospective irony, the points of origin for the Colour Chart Paintings of Gerhard Richter.

Colour does not exist without form (to provide contrast and differentiation) and form does not exist without colour (hued or otherwise). Colour of one kind or another is a given in the arena of painting. Since the advent of abstraction it is possible to see colour determining form just as easily as we see form determining colour. The American painter

[19] Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 546.
[20] Martin Jay, 160.

Jules Olitski described his approach to painting thus: "I begin with colour. The development of a colour structure ultimately determines its expansion or compression – its outer edge."[21]

These artists, Reinhardt, Martin and Richter, have not used the grid to give form dominance over colour, but have used its capacity as a supporting structure to enhance the relational and expressive potential of colour and thus prove its undeniable equality with form. The grid appears to be a rigid structure, but it is more permissive than restrictive, and so does not restrict colour. Unlike the monochrome painting, another outcome of abstraction, one in which the goal of unity is implicit, the impartial and supportive grid permits colour to exercise its own contrasts and relationships, and, if it chooses, to take over the role of composition from form.[22]

Why these artists

Within critical moments in contemporary painting, moments in which colour was under a cloud of suspicion and mistrust, each of the three artists, Ad Reinhardt, Agnes Martin and Gerhardt Richter rigorously put colour to the test in its relationship to form, (while appearing to do nothing of the kind). They developed tactics to ensure the equality of colour with form by selecting variants of the a-compositional orthogonal grid as the form in which to produce significant bodies of work highlighting colour as a primary element. Of the many artists who have used the grid as formal structure, these three not only decisively separated their work from the relational form of geometric abstraction but tested the limits of our perceptions of colour in their use of the grid.

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[21] Jules Olitski, "Jules Olitski: Painting in Colour //1966", in *Colour*, ed. David Batchelor (London and Cambridge: Whitechapel and MIT Press, 2008), 134.

[22] Barbara Rose, et al, eds. *Monochromes: From Malevich to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 21.

On more or less parallel routes, Reinhardt and Martin restricted chromatic colour within their minimal grid structures, not to eliminate or suppress it, but to prove how important even a trace of chromatic colour is to abstract expression in painting, and how powerful achromatic colour is. Reinhardt's barely perceptible chromatic sensations resided in achromatic blacks, and Martin's ethereal tints were most often infused in achromatic whites: both often looked upon as non-colours. Richter chose to explore a seemingly endless range of chromatic colour in a specific body of work initiated under the influence of the Dadaist anti-art perspective and associated conventions of Pop and conceptual art that informed his early painting, which he identified as Colour Charts.

Why the grid.

We think of line as an essential visual element, the circle, square and triangle as essential shapes, and we can view the regular orthogonal grid as an essential structure. Within the limits of a painting, whether consisting of a single surface or modular units comprising a work, the grid is seen as either a repeated pattern of squares or rectangles, or the parallel horizontal and vertical lines or edges that cover the surface at regular intervals. On a painting surface, these lines or edges parallel all four sides of the painting unit, sometimes stopping just short of it. The resulting grid gives the appearance of being concerned with nothing more than the division of space across the surface. This simple grid is by now a commonplace structure.

Figure 3-Incised Clovis stone.[23]

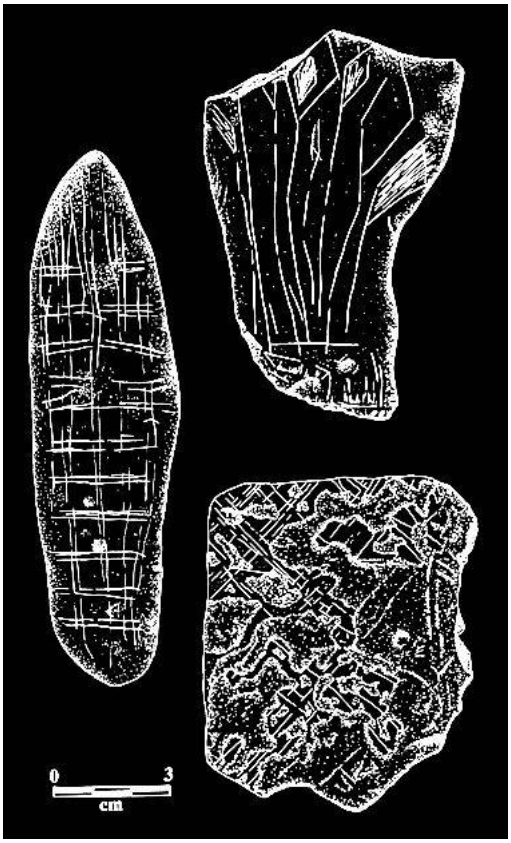

Figure 4-Pam Headrick, *Drawing of incised Clovis stones*.[24]

Although it made its earliest appearances in pre-historical pasts inscribed on cultural artifacts (for example, Figure 3 and Figure 4), it became ubiquitous in the twentieth century of the Western world in architecture, design arts, painting and sculpture.[25]

The gridded canvas or two-dimensional surface is a square or rectangular structure, but can also vary in myriad ways and still maintain its identity as grid, as artists tinker with its minimal parts to suit diverse purposes. The possibilities of form are

[23] Image of i*ncised Clovis stone* from "Clovis Reconsidered," *The Gault Site* (University of Texas, October, 2001), http://www.texasbeyondhistory.net/gault/clovis.html, accessed Sept 22, 2011.
[24] Pam Headrick, *Drawing of incised Clovis stones* in "Clovis Reconsidered," *The Gault Site* (University of Texas, October, 2001), http://www.texasbeyondhistory.net/gault/clovis.html, accessed Sept 22, 2011.
[25] The artifacts found at the Clovis excavation at Gault, Texas, roughly 15,000 years old, are the earliest known inscribed implements. There are variants of the simple grid on two of the pieces, and one striking simple grid on a long tool.

limitless, even within such a seemingly narrow definition as "grid". The venues for visual art production include the studio, the computer, the street or site – as object, assemblage, installation, performance, film and video, to name but a few modes of practices. The grid found within the practice of painting is open to as full and open-ended a range of exploitation – of material, size, scale, technical intervention – as any of these art forms, although it has the paradoxical look of order, definitive statement, or resolution, as though it were the end of possibilities instead of the beginning that it has been for so many artists.

When used in art the grid exposes essentials, becomes a forum for construction and destruction, a response to nature and a denial of it. Turning its back on naturalistic representation, it challenges us to get beyond the materiality of its form and see in it a metaphysical mirror. In its passive, impersonal appearance, it is a form that belies its ability to contain, if not resolve, the paradoxes implicit in contemporary life.

Historiography

The three artists whose works are the subjects of this thesis instigated their strategies for colour within the orthogonal grid in the middle years of the twentieth century. In 1967, American artist and critic Max Kozloff wrote a critically important essay on the lacunae in contemporary art criticism of meaningful attempts to address the role of colour in painting, in which he claimed:

> Of all the challenges that criticism faces, color is the most shunned. Despite the fact that color-field painting has expanded into one of the most significant undertakings in post-war art, and regardless of criticism's own acknowledgement of that fact, no writer on art has seriously proposed to interpret color, or to integrate it within any critical exposition.[26]

[26] Max Kozloff, "Problems of Criticism, III: Venetian Art and Florentine Criticism", *Artforum* (December, 1967): 42.

At the same time, Kozloff acknowledged the longstanding resistance colour offers, "…inherent in the tension in any linkages among sensations, words and memory" and its present situation: "a more current disposition within which the color factor causes disturbances that are in contradiction to a general outlook."[27] At the time of Kozloff's essay, within "the general outlook," the wars between formalist readings of paintings and sculpture designated "high art" with the "anti-art" attitudes of a conceptual and "pop" culture – in which such readings were irrelevant – were being fought with intensity. As Kozloff notes, in the effort to clarify perceived differences between painting and sculpture, colour in sculpture was deemed "superfluous" by many, at the time most notably by modernism's most famous critic, Clement Greenberg, who objected to the addition of colour to the sculpture of two artists whose work he otherwise championed, Anthony Caro and David Smith. [28] The evidence of colour as a surface addition to the physical structures of temples, cathedrals and sculptures throughout world history conveniently forgotten, the effect was to push colour into the neo-Platonic notional realm of the cosmetic.

Kozloff framed the challenge for art criticism as a re-ordering of its priorities regarding colour: to find a language that evokes rather than describes colour, synthesizes rather than analyzes and incorporates the widest possible variety of tools of examination. In his critique of the acquiescence of critics to the notion that art refers to nothing but itself, a mainstay of the criticism of postwar abstraction, Kozloff states:

> Let there be no mistake that this mental caliper called modernist criticism holds as its gauge of reality, not unique, shifting states of consciousness elicited by works of art, but the degree to which concrete objects conform

[27] Kozloff, "Problems of Criticism," 42.
[28] Sarah Hamill, "Polychrome in the Sixties: David Smith and Anthony Caro", 92, *www.getty.edu/museum/.../pdfs.../stark_online_hamill_archival_lo-res.pdf*

> to a self-determining program. In this scheme of things, color, because it would only be subversive, can have no place.[29]

Kozloff is referring to the habit of critics to focus on formal "measurements of progress" in artworks as though they are conceptual and material properties only, a habit that does not allow for the fugitive and unstable nature of a visual sensation that issues from indeterminate places on chromatic and light spectrums and is responded to both subjectively and objectively.

Listing the great number of colourists in America's recent past, Kozloff reminded his readers that no matter in what form colour made its way into art, a critical language able to comprehensively address it and the artistic stance it was part of, needed to keep pace. The origins of that colour, whether in the form of commercial enamels, synthetic acrylics or traditional oils, contribute vastly different visual properties and convey distinct conceptual and cultural attitudes, yet we process all colour sensations and perceptions of them through our sensory faculties, a universal bodily process.

In retrospect, it appears that Kozloff's admonition to art criticism to reappraise its terminology and language concerning colour went largely unheard in the battle for hegemony of competing visual and cross-disciplinary art forms then underway. Newer art forms such as video, conceptual and performance trivialized colour or considered it unnecessary to the social, cultural and political ideas now being enacted in art. The moment in the sun of Colour-Field painting, emerged out of Abstract Expressionism, was over. Nevertheless, colour is, as previously stated, a "given" in painting; artists continued to develop strategies for its use, just as art's critics, theorists and historians continued to downplay or ignore its presence and look to form instead.

[29] Kozloff, "Problems of Criticism," 44.

My examples of the apparent invisibility of colour within grid painting for art historians and critics in this period contemporaneous with their production are found in such key works on the development of the grid as Lucy R. Lippard's catalogue essay for the exhibition *Grids* (1972), and subsequent essays by John Elderfield (1972), Amy Goldin (1975), and Rosalind Krauss (1978). [30] By the mid to late 1960s, the modernist grid that emerged out of geometric abstraction had clearly declared itself as either an overt structure or framework for many dozens of artists in America and elsewhere. Lucy R. Lippard declares as much in her brief discussion of the multiplicity of grids and their uses in the *Grids* exhibition, calling the grid "an armature for a variety of styles, means and contents."

The *Grids* exhibition included works by American and European artists from 1940 to 1970 and consisted predominantly of painting. As might be expected from such a broad survey, Lippard's essay focused on the vastly different approaches taken by each artist towards the grid, whether as singular formal structure, or framework for imagery or notation. The presence of colour was superficially noted, as in: "The grid is music paper for color, idea, state of mind," but without any attempt to tie the three objects of this sentence to each other, or reflect on the effects of their inter-relationships.

Given this exhibition's expository purpose, to appraise the recent appearance of the grid in art, it is perhaps not surprising that colour is so little mentioned. We might also see its absence from discussion, however, as an indicator of the silence that had by then descended on colour, despite Kozloff's admonition to address it as an equal subject of painting. Signaling the strength of the repression this silence indicates, and the

[30] Lucy R. Lippard, "Top to Bottom, Left to Right," exhibition catalogue essay, *Grids* (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 1972), unpaginated.

rationalization in place to justify it, Lippard noted in reference to Ad Reinhardt's five-foot square trisected "black" paintings that "the barely perceptible divisions of color were crucial to Reinhardt's premise. " In complete contradiction, Lippard then claimed that once these divisions have allowed the eye to locate the grid, their colour could be ignored.[31]

Following the *Grids* exhibition, John Elderfield contributed a major critical essay reflecting on the emergence of the grid within Minimalism as one of the "modes of organization for recent art" (along with modules and series).[32] His elaboration on the differences between grid as "structure" or as "framework" locates the roots of the structural version in the Florentine privileging of drawing over colour (echoing Kozloff's starting point for the modern dilemma of colour). From there, according to Elderfield, the lineage to the decentralized picture surface of the grid painting that appeared in the 1960s proceeded most directly from Cubism and Pollock's "allover expansiveness." The grid as structure is overt and visible, according to Elderfield, while as a framework, it is "underlying" or invisible, acting as an organizational starting point for further pictorial activity or repetition. Elderfield is thorough in his analysis of how grids are used, whether as the subtractive structure or framework of most grid paintings, or as the cumulative information container of Warhol's additive units of images, and cautious in assessing the future of the grid in painting. Elderfield's claim that Agnes Martin's paintings are "all grid," and that her grids do not service other pictorial components, ignores the textured surface of the canvas support, the colour and texture of the drawn lines, and the colour of

[31].Lippard, *Grids*, unpaginated.
[32] John Elderfield, "Grids", *Artforum* (May, 1972): 53.

the line-created spaces of the painted surface, which may well consist of nothing more than the achromatic colour,white.

With no appreciable mention of colour's presence, Amy Goldin's essay explored the grid through its pattern for an exacting analysis of how this element operates, within its long associations with decoration and craft, and its more recent role in providing a structure of repetition for painting.[33] Goldin warns of the dangers inherent in repetition, as it "disengages the control of context and erodes meaning." In making a distinction between compositions, which have focal areas, and grids, which do not, Goldin explains the different modes of perception required by each. The composition provides easy access, as it is but another version of our everyday experience of seeing, while the grid must be repeatedly scanned for any appearance of difference. Goldin also tells us that grids are centrifugal unless there is a framing edge, that they are nonhierarchical and nonrelational. Consisting of intervals, Goldin claims that grids are without shape:

> By denying informational value to shape, the normal carrier of form and content, the grid offers nothing more (or less) than a seamless experience of measured space, the experience of visual order itself. A grid is an isolated, specified, unlocalized field, as close as we can come to perceiving pure being, free from any added rational or emotional activity.[34]

Goldin made it possible for us to reconcile the grid of contemporary painting with its other more commonplace or decorative origins. However, except for a reference to Andy Warhol's "schlocky color", she missed the opportunity to discuss the difference between the function of colour in the work of artists with strategies and intentions as diverse as Ad Reinhardt, Ellsworth Kelly, and Agnes Martin.

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[33] Amy Goldin, "Patterns Grids and Painting," *Artforum* (September, 1975): 50-54.
[34] Ibid, 53.

Rosalind Krauss, in her canonical essay, *Grids*, chose a structuralist analysis with which to explain the grid's appearance in early twentieth century painting as "the emblem of modernity," and to question the significance of its place in contemporary visual art.[35] Krauss describes the grid and its operation as both aesthetic and mythic structure, a fertile duality that allows for the conflicts between the material and immaterial to coexist and sustain each other:

> …although the grid is certainly not a story, it is a structure, and one, moreover, that allows a contradiction between the values of science and those of spiritualism to maintain themselves within the consciousness of modernism, or rather its unconscious, as something repressed.[36]

Here Krauss refers to the grid's use as an organizing structure for studies of the analysis of light and its perception in the science of optics in the nineteenth century, and its appearance in geometric abstraction in the early twentieth century. Although the optical studies were widely available to artists and stimulated the late nineteenth century Symbolist painters towards an abstracted representation animated by colour, Krauss traces only the grid, not its colour, into contemporary painting.

As for Krauss's claim that the grid announces "modern art's will to silence, its hostility to literature, to narrative, to discourse," perhaps the grid has merely insisted on its own status as language – or meaningful structure – with equivalent rights and powers.[37] If it frustrates literary discourse, it does so deliberately in order not to be circumvented, mediated or translated, but demands to be directly confronted in its visual and material form. And if the "will to silence" is true for the grid, it is even truer for

[35] Rosalind Krauss, "Grids", *October* 9 (Summer, 1979) 50-64.
[36] Krauss, "Grids", .55.
[37] Krauss, .50.

colour, for colour is always present in some form in painting and by its nature as a sensation, resists language.

Each of these four scholars has made an enormous contribution to our knowledge of the grid in painting; however, most of this scholarship comes well after the appearance of the "grid as structure" that maps the surface of the picture plane, and it arrives almost entirely colour-less. Colour might conceivably be a secondary element when the grid is employed as an "information container" or organizing framework, but what is the purpose of painting for artists using the grid as structure? How do we reconcile to the notion of a painting that is all structure when we know colour is a given in painting?

Although there has been an abundance of scholarship since the last of these critical essays on both the grid and colour, they have not yet been reconciled within painting. Hannah B. Higgins' *The Grid Book* (2009) surveys the history of the grid, found everywhere, from the Paleolithic building brick to the gridiron city plan, and now the internet. Since 1994 and the publication of Alexander Theroux's essays on the primary colours, there have been numerous books on colour, its sources and significance for cultures across time.[38] The first attempt to address the absence of colour from the discussion of art since Max Kozloff's essay came with David Batchelor's book, *Chromophobia*, an important acknowledgement of colour's decades-long repression. Here Batchelor admits that although his intention was to write about colour in painting and sculpture, colour resisted:

> The obvious thing to say is that colour speaks silently for itself in art, and that any attempt to speak on its behalf is bound to fail. And yet for all the small talk that might happily be silenced forever, there is at the same time

[38] Alexander Theroux, *The Primary Colors* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1994).

> a bigger silence around the very subject of colour in art which itself speaks volumes.[39]

Batchelor claims the move from traditional oil paint to acrylics and commercially-available colours, and an abandonment of "protocols and procedures, conventions, habits of thought, training, techniques, tools, effects, surfaces and smells that went with it," not only unsettled the place of colour in painting, but de-stabilized painting as well. I am not so concerned. Means and methods will continue to change in painting. As long as painting exists as a visual art form, it will also be made of colour.

[39] David Batchelor, *Chromophobia* (London: Reaktion, 2000), 98.

Chapter 2. Ad Reinhardt (1913-1967)

> "The expressive and structural meaning of color space in painting is my main interest." A.R., 1947
>
> "To those horrified that we may take the mystery out of painting, we promise to keep the question of color quality a deep (bright) secret." A.R., 1947[40]

In this chapter I discuss the progress of Reinhardt's painting through geometric abstraction to the reductive grid in his final body of work, the 'black' paintings. I theorize that his use of the grid and deliberate reduction of chroma into the dark, unreflective surface of the canvas was intended to slow the viewer's perceptions – to contain and direct attention to the visual, formal presence of painting, as well as to prove the indispensability and importance of colour. This is a bold claim, and one his last paintings and many of his statements appear to contradict. I make this claim in the attempt to reconcile the highly chromatic paintings that form the body of Reinhardt's work done between 1938 and 1953, which prove his skills as a colourist, with its later evolution, in which colour appears to be almost extinguished.[41]

In my argument for the importance of colour in Reinhardt's work, I first examine some of the artist's social, political and cultural contexts to find contributing factors to the development of his ever-changing strategies. Stressing his conviction that art came from art, in a monologue taped by Mary Fuller, he stated, "the painter only comes from

[40] Lucy Lippard, *Ad Reinhardt*, 1981, 89. The two quotations in Lippard's book present a central paradox that may help us reinterpret his later intentions, and satisfy the question, How does an artist who spent most of the latter half of his life making paintings that hovered on the edge of the darkest (black) dark, warrant a key place in a study of the role of colour in the grid of modern painting?

[41] Ibid. In the chronological notes made on the occasion of his retrospective at the Jewish Museum in 1966, Reinhardt refers to 1938 and 1953 as the first and last dates of bright coloured paintings.

other painters."[42] This belief may have merit in a historical and material sense, but all painters come from larger social and political contexts. I look at other models for Reinhardt's development as an artist as well, to help us better understand the fine balance for the place of colour that he found necessary to maintain in his last major body of work. I examine the gradual change from earlier easel-size and horizontal canvases of the 1940s and larger more vertical works in the 1950s, to the last series, in which the five-foot square canvas of the "black" paintings became the definitive body-sized format. I discuss how within them colour as a sensation relates to the body. Reinhardt was neither a Minimalist object-maker nor a Conceptual artist, but an influence on younger artists who were. He was a painter in a very long line of painters, and form and colour were the tools of his trade. Achieving painterly meaning – or meaninglessness, as he would more likely express it – were the aims of his practice.[43]

In this section, I address the question of meaning as it applies to Reinhardt's lifelong commitment to a pure abstract painting, and his strategies of denial concerning the interpretation of his work and its sources in public discourse. Reinhardt delighted in the play of language, and he delivered his over-the-top, often ambiguous, public statements as much from an innate sense of humor as a need or strategy to define and separate his art from other Abstract Expressionists.[44]

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[42] Mary Fuller, "An Ad Reinhardt Monologue," tape-recorded April 17, 1966, printed in *Artforum* (October, 1970): 40.

[43]. Lippard, *Ad Reinhardt*, "…he was unenthused at the prospect of his ideas, his weapons, being weakened by application to work he didn't fully identify with," 194.

[44] Robert Motherwell, *The Collected Writings of Robert Motherwell*, ed. Stephanie Terenzio (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 77. In 1950 Motherwell referred to this group of painters and sculptors as "The New York School," describing its artists as "a collection of extreme individuals" committed to art-for-art's sake, the rejection of prevailing ideologies, and to protest against dogmatic intellectualism.

His denial of any meaning that could be located outside of painting's materials, surface and process, was a call to cleanse painting of what he saw as false allusions to religious, social and political matters and states of being. Reinhardt rejected the Social Realism of the 1930s, as well as the gestural excess of the 'action' painting of Abstract Expressionism, and resisted attempts by others to characterize him as a religious artist. It is a paradox of such resistance that though these subjects were of deep significance to him, Reinhardt refused the possibility of their depiction, or any allusion to them. The titles of his paintings remained neutral labels, at best descriptive of what was already available to the eye.

Reinhardt demanded the same stringent self-examination from his fellow artists. In "*Religious Strength Through Market-Place Joy*," a critical response to the Houston chapel paintings of Mark Rothko, Reinhardt wrote, "What's wrong with the art world is not Andy Warhol or Andy Wyeth but Mark Rothko. The corruption of the best is the worst." [45] In this statement, Reinhardt gave voice to the consensus of the community of Abstract Expressionists that Rothko, one of its most important members, had relinquished his ethical compass by mixing monetary interest and spiritual intent. Briony Fer attributes this harsh critical consensus leveled against Rothko by his fellow artists to Rothko's insistence on a mystical and transcendental reading of his work. As the paintings were the result of a commission, Rothko's insistence was seen as hypocritical, and any intended meaning of the work compromised.[46]

The Abstract Expressionists were acutely sensitive to signs of betrayal of the artist's hard-won freedom from the yoke of capitalist patronage, and Reinhardt was one

[45] Barbara Rose (ed.) *Art-as-Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt*, undated notes, 190.
[46] Briony Fer, "Rothko and Repetition," in *Seeing Rothko*, eds. Glenn Phillips and Thomas Crow (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2005), 162.

of the most vocal. The preceding quote by Reinhardt is frequently used to illustrate his role as the 'conscience of the art world.' It is worth noting that he ends the piece with "How about a Lutheran adopting the Hebraic-Islamic disdain for images?" in which "Lutheran" is crossed out and (Reinhardt) written underneath as its intended replacement, an indication that his questioning of the role of the artist applies to himself as well as his friend Rothko, "a Jew decorating a Catholic church."[47]

Of all possible formative influences on the initial direction of Reinhardt's painting, the example of Piet Mondrian was strongest. Reinhardt was an early admirer of the Dutch artist's work and met him on his arrival to America.[48] He was most certainly aware of the metaphysical and theoretical foundation of Mondrian's pure abstraction in theosophy and utopian vision. Margit Rowell provides a good account of the affinities between the two artists, citing shared Protestant backgrounds, and attraction to Eastern and Western philosophies and religions, in which Reinhardt's art-as-art dogma can be viewed as a parallel for Mondrian's idealism. Reinhardt also saw how the late paintings of Mondrian quickly evolved to reflect the restless energy and optimism of New York after his arrival in 1940. He must therefore have been acutely aware that the spiritual quests of Mondrian and Kazimir Malevich had in the end, either disintegrated or gone underground, in order to survive an increasingly skeptical and secular post-war age.[49]

Reinhardt's work in its last phase appeared to bring painting to a standstill as he repeated his motif of the nine-part grid with the subtlest of variations to ever darker

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[47] Rose, *Art as Art*, 190.

[48] Reinhardt certainly knew of Mondrian's work before his arrival in New York, through exhibitions as well as through the mutual acquaintance of Harry Holtzman and Carl Holty. Margit Rowell, in "Ad Reinhardt: Style as Recurrence", *Ad Reinhardt and Color*, 13, tells us that Reinhardt had a key to Mondrian's studio, and took Priscilla Colt to see the older artist's work "as though it were a shrine".

[49] Although Reinhardt may not have known Malevich's work as well as Mondrian's, the two were among many Europeans who exhibited at the *Société Anonyme* in the early 1920s as New York embraced modernist art, according to Barbara Rose in *American Art Since 1900: A Critical History*, 1967, 113.

surfaces; however, I propose that this strategy was essentially exploratory and pedagogic. Like the art-as-art dogma that accompanied his work, he called attention to the resilience of pure painting and weighed the value of form and colour by pushing both to the brink of elimination. The power of the work was enough to prompt critic Harold Rosenberg to describe Reinhardt as "the black monk" and denounce the artist as an ideologue, although according to Fuller's taped account, Reinhardt interpreted Rosenberg's label more strictly as a reference to religion.[50]

Art historian Meyer Schapiro was arguably as important an influence to the trajectory of Reinhardt's painting as Mondrian was, although a more indirect one. Reinhardt was a student of Schapiro in the early 1930s at Columbia University and was encouraged by the latter to political activism.[51] Reinhardt's conception of what his painting could and should consist of, was no doubt challenged and strengthened by Schapiro's efforts to define the role of the artist in modern society. In 1937, describing the possibility that by its vitality, art without political intention could induce a questioning of values, Schapiro wrote, "The fact that a work of art has a politically radical content therefore does not assure its revolutionary value. Nor does a non-political content necessarily imply its irrelevance to revolutionary action."[52] Although judging by earlier writing, Schapiro had taken some time to come to an understanding of the possible hidden values and uses of art, Reinhardt knew early on that certain separations were essential to ensure the integrity of pure painting.

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[50]Lynn Zelevansky, "Ad Reinhardt and the Younger Artists of the 1960s," *American Art of the 1960's*, eds. James Leggio and Susan Weiley (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1991), 28.

[51] Also at Columbia in 1933 were members of the so-called Frankfurt School - Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Herbert Marcuse, Erich Fromm and Max Horkheimer – transplanted from Nazi Germany, and adding to the general ferment of the American New Left and its multiple views on Socialism, Communist Russia, Stalinism and Trotskyism.

[52] Meyer Schapiro, "The Patrons of Revolutionary Art," *Marxist Quarterly* 1, no. 3 (1937): 465, as quoted in David Craven, "Introduction," *Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique*, 1999, 1.

Reinhardt believed in the moral responsibility of the artist. But even an abstract artist working without patronage or obligation inevitably reflects underlying personal interests, beliefs, experiences, and attitudes that produce meaning, whether the work is done with the intention of producing meaning or not. Reinhardt's belief in the timelessness of art removed the individual maker from the picture and inserted the work itself into the continuum of recurring forms. His engagement with the political, social and cultural issues of his time and place, and the long and broad history of arts and cultures that preceded it, was intense. We may question whether these interests translate into a visual expression of metaphysical or mystical states of being. We may also decide that, given the record of his work and writing, such a question is what keeps the paintings alive and safe from any mere formalist reading.

To make my case for the importance of colour in Reinhardt's work, no matter how less visible it was in his last series, I point out that aesthetic perceptions of colour were markedly changed from the Abstract Expressionism of the late 1940s and early 1950s, when colour was meant to convey religious, spiritual and mythic states that issued from subjective sources. In the post painterly abstraction and Colour Field painting that succeeded Abstract Expressionism in the 1960s, such intentions, if present, were greatly diminished. In this major shift in painting, colour was freed of such responsibilities as artists rejected emotional expressionism "in favour of a more impersonal, detached, and clearly articulated art."[53]

Reinhardt identified himself as an Abstract Expressionist, although the form his work took did not share some of the most obvious characteristics of this movement, such

[53] Barbara Rose, *American Art Since 1900: A Critical History* (New York: Praeger, 1967), 213.

as attention to gestural qualities and typically larger canvasses. He shared even less with the following generation, the Colour Field artists, Helen Frankenthaler, Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland, whose works tended to monumental scale and a cool, impersonal, intellectual approach to large expanses of flat, saturated colour applied fluidly with economic dispatch.

Although Reinhardt to all appearances belonged to this latter generation, his Abstract Expressionist convictions clearly separate his intentions from the more detached attitudes of the younger artists. Art critic and activist Lucy Lippard wrote the first monograph of Reinhardt's work between 1966 and 1969, a period marking the retrospective of the artist's paintings at the Jewish Museum in 1966 and his death the following year at age fifty-three. The monograph was not published until 1981. In it Lippard added a *nota bene* to the 1971 "Postscript" in which she acknowledged that "…attitudes toward Reinhardt's ideas had been crystallizing, times had been changing, and critical issues had been raised that did not belong in the body of a book focused on the black paintings…", further conceding that writing a new postscript would require a new book. Her decision was to let the original postscript stand.

Lippard's decision suggests that substantial shifts in the critical analysis of Reinhardt's work relative to Abstract Expressionism and its successors occurred in this turbulent period in which, as art historian and critic Barbara Rose suggested, Minimalists and Conceptual artists had already adopted Reinhardt as their model in the stand for the collective ownership of art in opposition to what was perceived as the decadent elitism of the time.[54] Painting was declared dead, not for the first time in history, but it seemed with much more critical and cultural ammunition lined up against it. During the same period,

[54] Barbara Rose, "Problems of Criticism, VI: The Politics of Art Part III", *Artforum* (May, 1969): 50.

the branch of Abstract Expressionist painting embraced by Clement Greenberg morphed briefly into Post-painterly Abstraction, then became Color Field painting before it too disappeared in the 1970s under a barrage of new painterly *-isms* that were more circumspect about (or dismissive of) colour.

Painting suffered a drastic fall in its status as most important of the visual arts as the field quickly expanded in other directions including installation, site-specific, video and performance. Within painting, abstraction was countered by a strong return to representation, figuration and issue-oriented art. Given these circumstances – the rapidly changing field in which Reinhardt's last series of paintings was done, and the expanded field that surrounded it after his death – the issue of his relationship to Minimalist and Conceptual art has pulled attention away from his many declarations that state his allegiance to painting and painterly issues. What is significant here is that Reinhardt remained committed to his ideas of form and colour as an Abstract Expressionist artist, while his work and public utterances were reinterpreted to provide a logical bridge to the succeeding generation.

I am at a greater distance than Lippard from the moments in the middle of the last century in which the orthogonal grid and colour were united as equals. With this longer perspective I can attempt to show some of the conditions and effects of the conjunction of the grid form and colour as they issue, not only from the work of Reinhardt, but Martin as well, and are still being felt in the work of Richter. Although the word "grid" may have been in use in the early and mid-part of the century in other spheres, in descriptions of the gridiron of urban planning or the emerging electrical power grid for example, the term

was not in common use in painting.[55] Earlier language surrounding the grid of painting described it in terms of parts and characteristics – the right angle, square, cube, parallel lines, horizontal, vertical, planes, geometric, indicating that within early twentieth-century painting the grid's holistic potential was still understood largely in terms of compositional geometric abstraction. The "checkerboard", as the grid in painting was conceived when it appeared in Mondrian's 1918-19 works, presented a dilemma for traditional relational composition by admitting the possibility of a simple, passive and open structure that gave itself over to colour.

Lippard's wrote her monograph at a time in which recognition of Reinhardt's earlier overt use of chromatic colour in his painting had not yet been excised, or re-prioritized from the myth surrounding the artist. Given the dominance of Minimalist and Conceptual art by the mid-1960s, the debt many of their practitioners ascribed to the influence of Reinhardt's *art-as-art* dogma, and the "apparent" expulsion of colour from his painting, later focus was most often shifted to other aspects of the artist's substantial *oeuvre*. His roots in geometric abstraction and skill as a colourist were easily hidden in the deliberate ambiguity and contrariness of his many public statements. We know from Lippard that Reinhardt was intellectually interested in ritual and religious philosophies, particularly in "negative theology," such as Buddhism."[56] According to Rose, Reinhardt had conceived the black paintings as a culminating synthesis of Eastern and Western art.[57] With Reinhardt's deep knowledge of Eastern religions and Zen philosophy, instead

[55] *Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary of the English Language: Being the Unabridged Dictionary by Noah Webster, LL.D.* (New York: Publishers Guild, Inc., 1941), 764. defines the word, "grid, n. 1. A grating, gridiron or other structure with parallel bars," indicating three-dimensional structures and their uses within technologies transmitting electric power and radio waves.
[56] Lucy Lippard, *Ad Reinhardt*, 176.
[57] Barbara Rose, *Art as Art*, xiv.

of a break, we can perhaps surmise a link between the Zen approach to 'achieving' by "letting go", and what to all appearances was a program to extinguish colour and "to make the last painting that can be made."[58]

Henri Focillon's 1934 book, *The Life of Forms in Art*, was a text Reinhardt referred to constantly in his lectures and notes.[59] According to this formalist art historian, evolution is autonomous in the sense that forms are transformed or transmutate over cyclical, non-linear time. Defining progress as change that proceeds in linear fashion and evolution as change that often involves a turning back, refinement or circularity within a field, sector or form, in this section I explore some of the cultural context surrounding Reinhardt's commitment to the grid of geometric abstraction as the form for his painting, and its seemingly endless capacity for repetition. As Rosalind Krauss notes, "the grid declares the modernity of modern art," a status achieved by its proliferation and prominence, as a manmade structuring form devoid of reference to the natural or "real" world, in the art of the twentieth century. [60] At the same time it is subversive in its attempts to stop "progress", or the notion of it inherent in the condition of modernity, by sheer repetition within and of itself.

Reinhardt's insistence on the same five-foot square canvas and the barely perceptible grid of his final series of nine-part paintings adheres to a classical model of form as contemplative icon. Within such a relentless repetitive pattern the sense of time is stopped or slowed and meditation (a practice Reinhardt was familiar with as a student of

[58] The artist quoted in Bruce Glaser, "An Interview with Ad Reinhardt," Art *International* (December, 1966): 18.
[59] Naomi Vine, "Mandala and Cross," *Art in America* (November, 1991): 129.
[60] Rosalind Krauss, "Grids," 50.

eastern religions) can begin. The "meaning" or content that appears in viewing a single painting in this series might best be described as a demanding presence or "isness" that requires the full and active engagement of the viewer before its grid and colour are slowly revealed. Repeat this as many times as there are works in the entire series and the viewer is confronted with Reinhardt's insistence on recurrence as a constant in art across time and cultures. Hidden within each "recurrent" work are the barely discernible colours that provide focus for our attention and animate its grid form. Both form and colour vary from one canvas to another with imperceptible subtlety, reminding us of the presence of the artist – not the invisible artist of "machine-finished" Minimal art, nor the pervasive visceral and psychological presence of fellow Abstract Expressionists, but the Classic Zen artist, engaged in the constant and circular task of the renewal of painting. With the black paintings Reinhardt affirmed the tenets put forth in his art-as-art dogma for abstract art, and conceded the subtle but critical role of colour.

Artists and intellectuals questioned the distinction between notions of progress and evolution y in the early and middle years of the twentieth century, and Reinhardt was among the most critical and vociferous. Political unrest and radical socialism during the Great Depression of the 1930s followed the trauma of the First World War. The economic recovery made possible by the Second World War was followed by the interminable state of crisis and pervasive anxiety of the Cold War. The possibilities of a better future promised by endless progress were in serious doubt in America, probably nowhere more than in the literary, intellectual and artistic boiler room of New York City, in which the Abstract Expressionists formed a vital and questioning community. The repetition of form and insistence on barely perceptible colour in his last series of black

paintings became a confirmation of Reinhardt's belief in art's importance and his denial of endless progress.

Many artists in the 1940s and 1950s looked to Zen Buddhism for respite, if not psychic salvation. Lippard connects Reinhardt's belief in the cyclical instead of the progressive to his interest in Islamic art and Zen Buddhism, quoting Claude Levi-Strauss, "Marxism and Buddhism are doing the same thing, but at different levels", which alludes also to Reinhardt's Marxist leanings.[61] The artist travelled extensively throughout Asia and the Far East and compiled a large library of slide images comparing forms found in art and architecture across cultures and periods, out of which he regularly produced slide shows of as many as two thousand images.[62]

As Reinhardt's painting evolved to its final state of colour and form, his growing conviction that "there is nothing new under the sun" found agreement with historian George Kubler's theory of the relationship of forms across time, or the timelessness of forms.[63] Reinhardt's fascination with the spiral and the mandala forms, as seen in his satirical cartoon-collages, *How to Look at a Spiral* (Figure 5) and *A Portend of the Artist as a Yhung Mandala* (Figure 6) confirm that his personal interest in "style as recurrence" predated introduction to Kubler's theories.[64]

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[61] Lippard, *Ad Reinhardt,* .63.

[62] Shortly before his death Reinhardt spoke about wanting to make a film of these images, according to his daughter, Anna Reinhardt, in a telephone interview, February 1, 2010.

[63] Lucy Lippard, *Ad Reinhardt*, 178. In 1966 Reinhardt wrote a review of George Kubler's *The Shape of Time* (Yale University Press, 1962) for *Art News*, titled "Art vs. History," reprinted in Rose, *Art as Art,* 224.

[64] Margit Rowell, *Ad Reinhardt and Color*, 1980, 21. Sometime after 1947, according to Rose, Reinhardt delivered a lecture at New York University on "The Spiral Form in Modern Architecture."

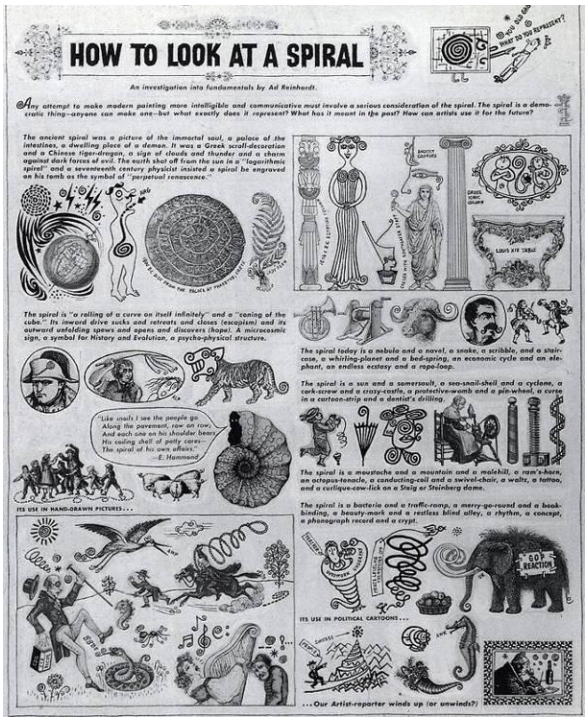

Figure 5-Ad Reinhardt, *How to Look at a Spiral*, (1946). © Estate of Ad Reinhardt / SODRAC (2012).

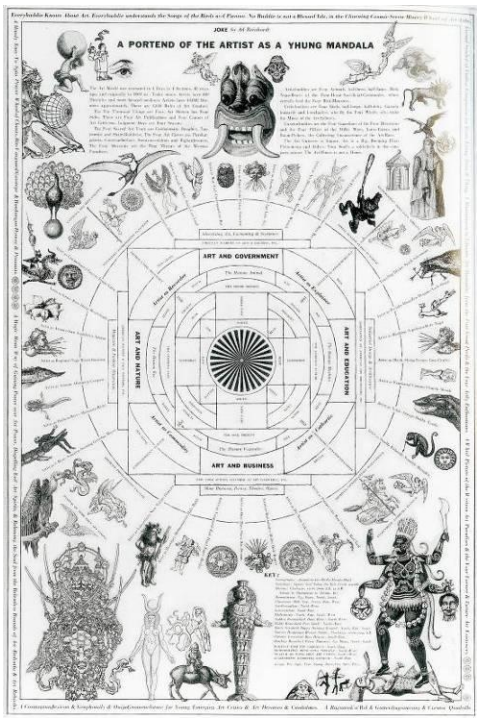

Figure 6-Ad Reinhardt, *A Portend of the Artist as a Yhung Mandala*, (1955), ink and paper collage, 10¼ x 13½, originally published in *Art News* (May, 1956). © Estate of Ad Reinhardt / SODRAC (2012).

The correlation with Kubler's notions of formal relationships as the linked succession or continuous change of form, independent of time or place, can be seen in the timeless space of classical form that becomes more evident in Reinhardt's mature works. Repeated over and over during the last six years, this classical form is a parallel to Mondrian's re-working and un-doing of his final canvas.[65]

[65] "Human desires in every present instant are torn between the replica and the invention, between the desire to return to the known pattern, and the desire to escape it by a new variation. Generally the wish to repeat the past has prevailed for the impulses to depart from it. No act ever is completely novel, and no act can ever be quite accomplished without variation." George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things*, 1962, 72.

In spite of his interest in other recurrent forms, the one Reinhardt found most amenable for his painting, as the classic painter he believed himself to be, was the grid.[66] As Lippard says, Reinhardt had come to abstraction not through the figurative or representational, but through decorative Cubism.[67] The grid is an open, structural form. Its bivalent nature as either centrifugal or centripetal structure, as described by Krauss and introduced through the work of De Stijl, Suprematist and Constructivist artists (Mondrian, Malevich and Rodchenko), offered endless possibilities within its strict orthogonal structure for testing the limits of pure painting.[68] In the words of Yve-Alain Bois: "the power of the modular grid is that it is at once a deductive (centripetal) structure and an all-over (centrifugal) system. As such, it eliminates any notion of a final formal unity: this unity is a given at the beginning, thus there is no struggle to achieve it…."[69] Reinhardt's career as artist began a relatively short distance from the avant-gardism of the early years of the century and Mondrian's "checkerboard" paintings of 1918-19. Between Reinhardt's well-known antagonism to notions of heroic "breakthrough" and the gestural within Abstract Expressionism, which imply endless innovation, and his interest in the repetition and recurrence of forms, it is not surprising that he chose to paint within a series in which only the most excruciatingly subtle differences of colour and surface occurred within the nine-part grid of identical five-foot square canvasses.

[66] I will use the word grid, although Anna Reinhardt says she does not remember her father ever referring to the grid to describe the form of his painting.
[67] Lippard, *Reinhardt*, 18.
[68] Krauss, "Grids," 52-58.
[69] Yve-Alain Bois, "The Limit of Almost", *Ad Reinhardt* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art/ New York: MOMA, 1991), 19.

Setting Reinhardt in a larger artistic and cultural context helps us understand the change that took place that led to the final series of works, the 1960s five-foot square "black" paintings. As evidenced by his early work, Reinhardt arrived at the grid and its final "blackness" over a long period of wide-ranging exploration of abstract form and colour. This, from a background that included a foundation in the classical aesthetics of Plato; a lifetime of social and political involvement within the New York School, the community in which he lived and worked; antipathy to surrealism and expressionism in art (including that aspect of the prevailing and dominant Abstract Expressionism); and a thorough knowledge of Eastern art, religion and thought. Although Reinhardt maintained a separation between his art and his social and political commitments, for more than thirty years he wrote on a broad range of subjects related to both with, as Barbara Rose claims, "a remarkable logic and consistency, an uncompromising clarity and stubborn unwillingness to confuse one thing with another."[70]

Reinhardt was born in 1913, and as he chose to elaborate in his own chronological notes, this event not only took place on Christmas Eve, but nine months after the Armory Show, the exhibition of European and American art that shook New York by announcing the arrival of the avant-garde and modernism to the shores of the New World.[71] I do not intend to pursue a biographical or historical account in this thesis, but will sketch what I contend to be the most relevant lines leading to the later "black" paintings, insofar as they connect to my examination of the grid in painting and the role of colour within it. What becomes obvious in the artist's own chronological account, assembled with the same

[70] Barbara Rose, *Ad Reinhardt*, xiv.
[71] Ad Reinhardt, "Chronology, Selected Writings and Cartoons by Ad Reinhardt," *Ad Reinhardt: the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, the Museum of Modern Art, New York*, 107.

razor-sharp wit that informs his political and social cartoons, is his profound sense of connectedness to the several worlds in which he lived.

Reinhardt entered Columbia College in New York in 1931, studying with art historian Meyer Schapiro, who apparently urged the young artist to political activism.[72] Schapiro had become more radical in his political views in the early years of the Depression and was a Marxist and Communist Party supporter by 1932.[73] Although Schapiro at this time had not resolved what the role of painting within political action should be, he was not satisfied that the Social Realists of American painting had answered the requirements, and suggested that the cartoon, a form of critique Reinhardt was already familiar with, could reach a larger audience than painting.[74] His lifelong friendships with the poet Robert Lax, and Trappist monk and Zen scholar, Thomas Merton, important touchstones for Reinhardt's interest in spirituality, began at Columbia. Following graduation Reinhardt studied painting with Carl Holty, who had known Mondrian's work in Paris in the early 1930s. According to Patterson Sims, his teaching offered Reinhardt an alternative to the prevailing Social Realism of the day and introduced him to the ideas and work of Mondrian.[75]

Under Holty's sponsorship Reinhardt joined the American Abstract Artists Association in 1937, a group dedicated, according to Lippard, to "the principles of

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[72] David Craven, *Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique: Dissent During the McCarthy Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 34.

[73] Reinhardt early on chose to separate his painting from his political involvements. He was not a member of the Communist Party, but retained socialist ideals to the last.

[74] Andrew Hemingway, "Meyer Schapiro and Marxism in the 1930s", *Oxford Art Journal* 17, no. 1 (1994): 13-29. Reinhardt had developed an interest in illustrating and cartooning in high school , and he made regular submissions to the student papers while at Columbia.

[75] Patterson Sims, *Ad Reinhardt: A Concentration of Works from the Permanent Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art* (New York, 1981), 11.

Cubism, Neo-plasticism and the Bauhaus."[76] That same year he also joined the Artists' Union, thus committing himself to two seemingly unrelated directions, one devoted to discoveries in "purist" art, and the other in support of artists' rights. They were essential and complementary directions for Reinhardt, and would remain so. This is not to suggest that he was unique in pre-war America – particularly within the context of economic hardship brought by the Great Depression and the prevalence of socialist and Marxist politics in artistic circles – but as Barbara Rose states, pure abstraction was a moral as well as an aesthetic cause for Reinhardt.[77]

To reconcile these convictions with his political, social and cultural selves within the unsupportive environment of the period, both Lippard and Rose suggest that it was necessary for Reinhardt to separate art and life, implying their mutual incompatibility. As a student of Geometric Abstraction, which still carried the echoes of metaphysical, social and political utopias envisioned by Mondrian and Malevich, it was a pragmatic necessity for Reinhardt to separate the form and style of his social and political cartoons from his commitment to pure abstraction. Supporting the ethos of his artwork also required financial means divorced from the production of painting.

Rose describes the "improbable alliance of Zen and native American pragmatism" in the "inclusive and permissive esthetic" of the art of John Cage, and I would suggest that this same "improbable alliance" is responsible for the "timeless Absolute" and the oppositional nature of Reinhardt's work.[78] One paradox to this proposition is that Rose is discussing an artist whose lineage includes Duchamp, whose Surrealist influence Reinhardt refused in his own art. Another paradox is the implication that a self-

[76] Lucy Lippard, *Ad Reinhardt*, 18.
[77] Barbara Rose, "Introduction," *Art-as-Art*, xiii.
[78] Barbara Rose, "Problems of Criticism, V: The Politics of Art, Part II", *Artforum* (January 1969): 47.

proclaimed “classic” artist is also a pragmatist, but then I am discussing an artist who could be defined as “paradox personified” on the basis of his prodigious contrarian statements alone. In this view, in Reinhardt’s later work we can see the Abstract Expressionism (minus Precisionist connections) to which Reinhardt belonged, and, although strictly limited, parallels to the ambivalence found in Duchamp’s “passive, negative pessimism”, both of which underlie later Pop and Minimal art. No matter what Reinhardt’s proclamations, we know the influence his work and writing had, not so much on Pop art, but certainly on Minimal and Conceptual art.

During the late 1930s to mid-1940s, Reinhardt worked as a newspaper illustrator and commercial artist and with the Federal Art Project. He continued his studio work, exhibiting most notably at Peggy Guggenheim’s *Art of This Century* Gallery. After a brief, non-combat, stint in the Navy, Reinhardt returned to New York University to study East Asian and Indian art history with Alfred Salmony for six years. This decision reflected his growing interest in modes of art and belief outside his American and Protestant milieu; it also enabled him to secure a teaching position from which to support a studio practice. He taught Oriental art history, primarily at Brooklyn College, from 1947 until 1967.

Reinhardt’s artistic progress was paralleled by cryptic, theoretical, and polemical writings, cartoons and political activism. For several years he produced satirical cartoons for the socialist newspaper *PM*, for *The New Masses*, and *Art News*, platforms he used to critique the politics and ethics of the art community in which he lived and worked (Figure 7).

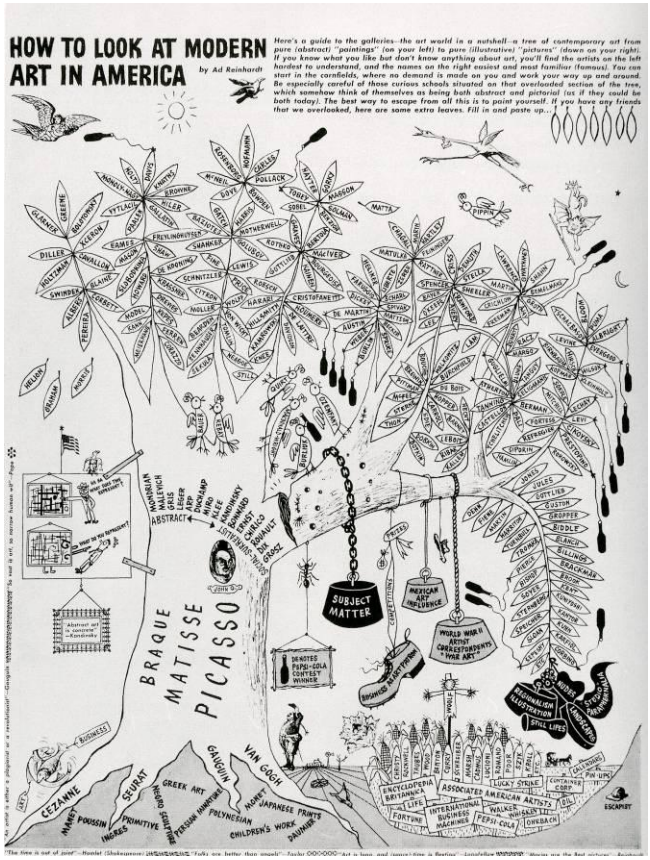

Figure 7-Ad Reinhardt, *How to Look at Modern Art in America,* (1946).© Estate of Ad Reinhardt / SODRAC (2012).

Although Reinhardt considered the surrealist collage style of Max Ernst perfectly suited to this task, they would find no place in his paintings.

Reinhardt described himself as a classic artist, saying, in Mary Fuller's taped monologue quoted earlier: "Anyway, the classic idea of an artist is somebody who knows what he's doing and who is a separate person. Even as an artist he is separate from himself as a human being," adding, "I never go anywhere except as an artist. I think that way and I indicate that whether I'm a good father or a bad husband or anything in my personal life is completely irrelevant."[79]

[79] Mary Fuller, "An Ad Reinhardt Monologue" *Artforum,* (October, 1970): 40.

In 1940, Reinhardt made *Abstract Painting*, (Figure 8) a work Yves-Alain Bois describes as the first "perfectly modular grid painting done by an American artist."[80]

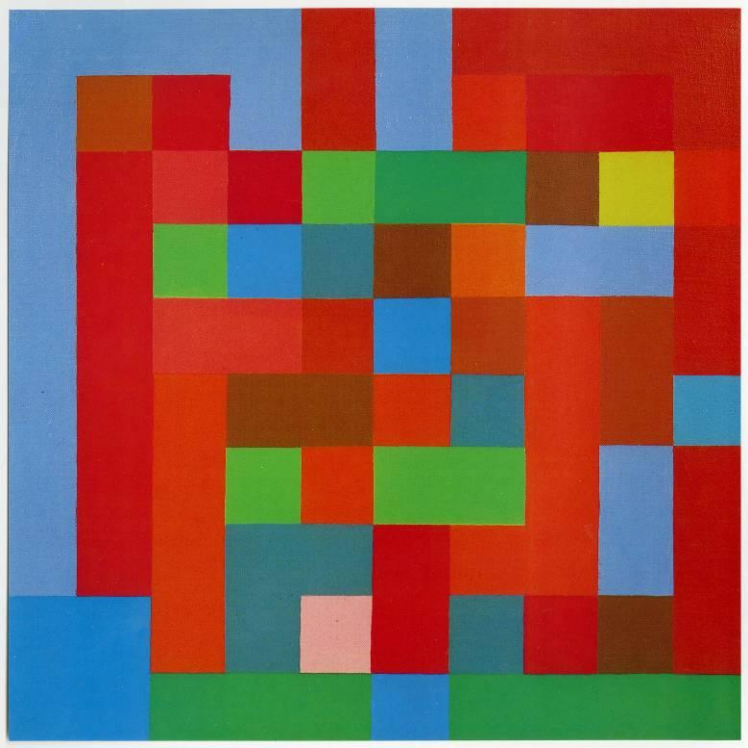

Figure 8-Ad Reinhardt, *Abstract Painting*, (1940), oil on canvas, 15" x 15". © Estate of Ad Reinhardt / SODRAC (2012).

This easel-size oil painting, fifteen by fifteen inches square, is based on the checkerboard, the simplest of all regular grids, in which all divisions of space across the surface are equal. The orthogonal grid within the painting, ten squares across both vertical and horizontal axis, is well defined, with at least five highly saturated and close-valued reds, a subtle range of strong greens, blue-greens, and two blues of differing intensities. There is one "accent pink" square, and one yellow-green. The application of colour is uniform and

[80] Yve-Alain Bois, "The Limit of Almost", *Ad Reinhardt* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art/ New York: MOMA, 1991), 18, a distinction that acknowledges the "checkerboard" compositions of Mondrian of 1919, and a handful of works using a regular grid by van Doesburg, Albers, Vantongerloo and Rodchenko.

opaque. Straight edges, as always in Reinhardt's work, are hand drawn instead of taped. Even in the central area of this work where more contrasting squares can be seen, the tessellation of contiguous squares occasionally, by random turns, become rectangles or right-angled rectilinear shapes as identical colour squares join up to form larger shapes. Along each of its four edges the grid-form begins to "dissolve" as even longer rectangles and bands of like colour are formed, becoming an enclosing surround for the twenty-six true squares in a work that, if it were "perfectly modular", would have one hundred. The result is a work that is contained and interlocking, with a rich variety of warm colour and, given differences of saturation and value, no hint of conceptually imagined overlapping shapes.

A grid painting cannot be considered perfectly modular if any of its shape cells shares an edge with an identical colour. Though *Abstract Painting* (1940) is not "perfectly modular" by reason of the bands, rectangles and other shapes created by the contiguity of identical colours, the underlying structure of the "perfectly modular grid" is clearly seen in the mind's eye thanks to the predominance of squares in relationships of unlike colours. As Arnheim taught, we need few visual cues to complete forms and recognize shapes, particularly ones we are already familiar with.[81] One of the singular achievements of early geometric abstraction was to place the grid, a familiar utilitarian structure, onto the surface of the canvas. The grid's long history of use in everyday life is well elucidated in Hannah Higgins' *The Grid Book*. When it eventually appeared in painting, it was easy to recognize it as the commonplace structural form it had always

[81] Rudolph Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye*, The New Version, 1974, 42. Orig. pub. 1954.

been.[82] The same grid of the tiled-floor depicted in painting from the Renaissance on, and the one used to illustrate optical treatises of the early nineteenth century, now became a structural form of painting.[83] The powerful inhibiting effects of artistic conventions and expectations of viewers insured an almost glacially slow transition; in this instance, from thousands of years of wide-ranging functional uses outside the picture plane, to pictorial structure. Once inside the two-dimensional arena of the traditional square or rectangular canvas, the grid could then be used as a template with which to explore the endless promise of essential elements of abstract painting such as form, line, shape, space, colour, light value, surface and texture. Form, line, shape and space are inherent in the grid structure. In appearance a rigid delimiting structure, when used with other elements, particularly chromatic colour, the grid generously exposes the nuance and range of other elements, and supports their intentions and effects.

Abstract Painting (1940) is a clear example of Reinhardt's early interest in the orthogonal grid as a formal structure that permitted thorough exploration of contrasts of chroma and degrees of saturation and value. It has a retrospective importance as an example of direct confrontation with the regular grid as a platform for colour – a fundamental challenge avoided by many geometric abstractionists, including Burgoyne Diller and Stuart Davis, two of Reinhardt's artist- friends and colleagues, whose works tended instead towards compositional contrasts.

Reinhardt was perhaps not yet ready to fully embrace the grid form as structure of his painting. During most of the 1940s, his forms became less rectilinear, then almost

[82] Hannah B. Higgins, *The Grid Book* (MIT Press: Cambridge, Mass., 2009).
[83] Krauss, "Grids," 15, 16.

calligraphic. This exploratory stage was briefly interrupted by a brief spell in the Navy without discernible effect.

Figure 9-Ad Reinhardt, *Abstract Painting Yellow*, (1947), oil on canvas, 40" x 32". © Estate of Ad Reinhardt / SODRAC (2012).

Although he continued to work with a broad range of colour's hues, tints, tones and values, Reinhardt e gradually moved towards using closer values to limit spatial contrasts. The resulting paintings alternated between works using the brush as a tool for loose spontaneous gesture in shallow depth, as in *Abstract Painting Yellow* (Figure 9), or as a controlled "brick' maker" on surfaces of even less determinate depth, such as *Blue-Green Painting, 80 x 50, 1948* (Figure 10).

Figure 10-Ad Reinhardt, *Blue-Green Painting, 80 x 50, 1948*, (1948), oil on canvas, 80" x 50". © Estate of Ad Reinhardt / SODRAC (2012).

In the early 1940s, before the gradual resolution that culminated in the so-called "black" paintings, the artist's developmental process was anything but linear. One could say he chose another timeless and recurrent form, the spiral, a form that repeats and gradually transforms as it proceeds in circular motion, as model for the path of his explorations of colour and form on his way to the grid.

Reinhardt's circuitous route from the modular grid *Abstract Painting* (1940), through gestural and geometric abstraction resulted in paintings that by the late 1940s and early 1950s were now more vertical, symmetrical, and close-valued in colour. Two monochrome series, were produced, one red, the other blue; colours chosen, according to Lippard, because of Reinhardt's interest in the properties of warm and cool colours.

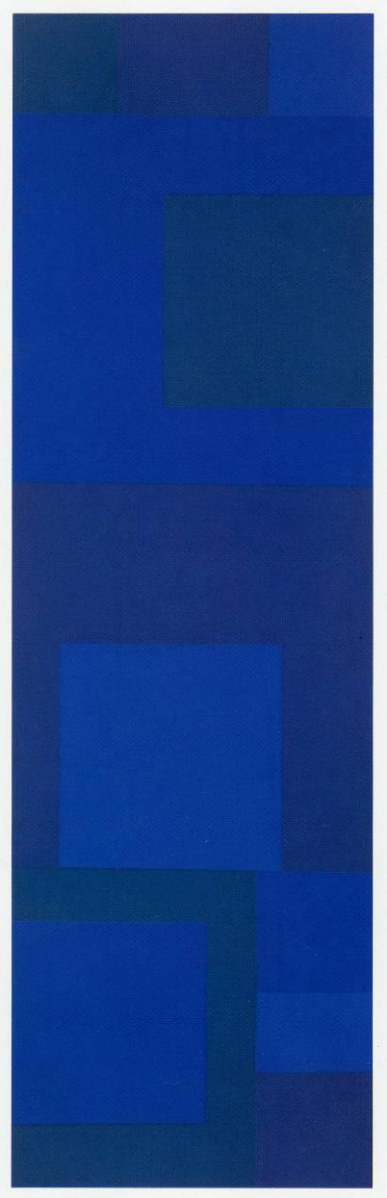

Figure 11-Ad Reinhardt, *Abstract Painting, 1950-51*, (1950-51),
oil and acrylic on canvas, 78” x 24”. © Estate of Ad Reinhardt / SODRAC (2012).

We note also that both colours are primaries of similar mid-range light value, and unlike yellow, remain relatively stable with slight admixtures of near colours or black, white or grey (Figure 11 and Figure 12).

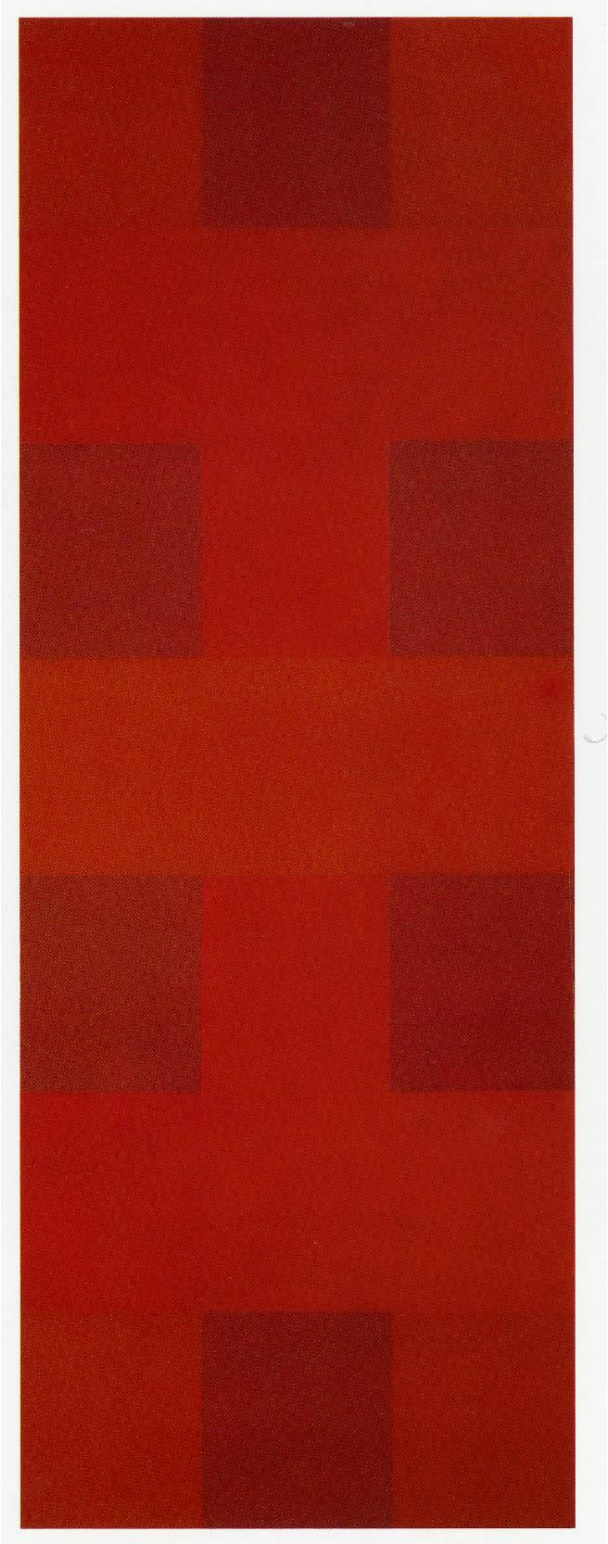

Figure 12-Ad Reinhardt, *Abstract Painting, Red, 1952*, (1952), oil on canvas, 107 7/8” x 40”. © Estate of Ad Reinhardt / SODRAC (2012).

The tripartite division, the equal division of three columns of geometric shapes across the horizontal axis of the canvas, made its first appearance in the red and blue series. As the paintings became square in format, these divisions also appeared across the vertical axis, eventually creating the nine-part grid of the "black" paintings. The symmetrical tripartite division of the nine-part grid created the motif of a "Greek cross" as Rosalind Krauss has noted, although Reinhardt denied he intended any associations to religion.[84]

We know of Reinhardt's background of knowledge and interest in world religions and spirituality, and can see how these paintings and their close-valued colour, ever-more demanding of the viewer's attention, were becoming icons for contemplation in a secular age, or as Barbara Rose claimed, "icons without iconography."[85] He produced the first "black" paintings in 1954 while still painting the monochromes, in an effort to diminish the "sensational" effects of chromatic colour. Reinhardt had been adding turpentine to his oil paint since 1948 in order to draw off and eliminate the oil in his attempts to remove evidence of the brush. Used this way, without the fat that gives body to oil paint, the colour surface no longer reflects light but absorbs it, and the gestural mark of the brush disappears. All pigments have different weights, and Reinhardt likely did not feel he had succeeded in producing a paint mixture that would carry pigment without brush marks until well into production of the "black" paintings, shortly before his death.[86]

In his constant quest for the purity of *art-as-art*, which would ultimately be represented by the "black" paintings, by 1957 Reinhardt had begun to question the role of strongly-hued colour, describing colour as "…barbaric, unstable, primitive," "woven into

[84] Rosalind Krauss, "Grids," *October*, 52.
[85] Barbara Rose, *Art as Art*, 82.
[86] Lippard, *Ad Reinhardt*, 151. "It was only at the very end of his life that Reinhardt could predict and thereby fully control the drying process, which depended on the weather, the mixing of the paints, and even the canvases, which, in his words, 'never handled the same way twice."

the fabric of life," "cannot be completely controlled," and "should be concealed". [87] Colour carries associations, memories and preferences for the viewer that, for Reinhardt, could contaminate the intention of the work. It seems evident from his long period of experimentation with colour in his early paintings and his many references to colour in his writings that he understood the nature of colour as an optical, visual sensation, capable of carrying symbolic and subjective meaning. Once he had begun to reduce the chroma of his colours by the addition of black, Reinhardt began trying to perfect the perfect synthesis of barely visible colour suspended in bottomless dark, and in the complex process of thinning his oils he endured the challenges presented by the instability of colour as pigment or dye. At the same time, he was aware of the impossibility of transposing colour's material presence, and its capricious nature as a sensation, to language, as the following indicates:

> A color in art is not a color.
> Colorlessness in art is not colorlessness.
> Blue in art is blue.
> Red in art is red.
> Yellow in art is yellow.
> Dark gray in art is not dark gray.
> Matte black in art is not matte black.
> Gloss black in art is gloss black.
> White in art is white.[88]

He was also separating the colour found in everyday life from the colour found in art, insisting that our perception of colour in art must reflect this contextual difference. That colour was equal to form in Reinhardt's painting is reflected in the two statements that mark the beginning of this chapter, made as he was making his way towards the monochrome in the late 1940s:

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[87] Unpublished, undated notes, found in Rose, *"Black" Art-as-Art*, 97. In this same piece Reinhardt's notes refer to the art of painting vs. art of colour.

[88] Ad Reinhardt, "Art in Art is Art-as-Art (Art-as-Art Dogma, Part III)", in Rose, *Art as Art,* 65.

> The expressive and structural meaning of color space in painting is my main interest.[89]
>
> To those horrified that we may take the mystery out of painting, we promise to keep the question of color quality a deep (bright) secret.[90]

The notions of colour as expressive and colour as mystery exhibit his early understanding of the importance of both chromatic and achromatic colour. They represent the foundation of Reinhardt's evolution to the "black" paintings, in which Abstract Expressionist notions of transcendence and Eastern philosophies achieve their synthesis in almost-extinguished colours and the grid. After more than a decade producing the "black" paintings Reinhardt participated in *Black*, a taped teleconference on the nature and expressive symbolism of the colour black and its broad relevance to music, visual arts and architecture, in which he said," Black is interesting not as a colour but as a non-colour and as the absence of colour."[91]

In colour physics, white is already all colour and all light, black is the absence of both. According to Bois, "What one then perceives, in the blackest of the "black" paintings, is no longer the infinitesimal variation of color (although of course this plays a part), but the always fleeting, always dubitable, beginning, the promise of a speck of light, the 'last vestige of brightness."[92] The promise of light is a spiritual notion that can only be supported in painting through some quality of colour, whether chromatic or not, and Reinhardt's light consisted of red, blue and green.

Now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, where the grid form can finally be seen everywhere – in art, architecture, design, and the mapping of modern cities, to

[89] Ad Reinhardt, quoted in Lippard, *Ad Reinhardt*, 89.
[90] Ibid.
[91] Ad Reinhardt, "Black," *Artscanada* (October, 1967): 3.
[92] Bois, "The Limit of Almost", 28.

name but a few places – we see it even in places where, although intimated, it is not visible. Variations on an invisible or underlying grid in Reinhardt's final series are abundant. That they are often not perfect regular grids is less important than the *perception* of the total grid form in the mind—a perception that over the last century has entered modern consciousness and is now imbedded in the neurological wiring of the one-third of the brain devoted to vision.[93] The visible grid in painting in the early twentieth century was an anomaly, dependant on its association with the checkerboard; by mid-century its lines could be assumed even when they were not visible, and again, even when they were not true regular grids. The use of the word "grid", at least as a concept in the visual arts, was just beginning to emerge, and so it was not part of Reinhardt's vocabulary.[94]

The appearance of the grid that distinguishes Reinhardt's final body of work is created by the tri-partite division of squared canvases, in works such as *Abstract Painting 1960-1965* (Figure 13).

[93] Irving Massey, *The Neural Imagination: Aesthetic and Neuroscientific Approaches to the Arts* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 29.

[94] In a telephone conversation with Anna Reinhardt, February, 2010, the artist's daughter said that neither she nor her mother, Rita Reinhardt, recall the use of the word grid in reference to the form of his paintings. Lippard does not use the word in her catalogue essay for the Jewish Museum retrospective, and the artist referred to the form of his later paintings as "square, cross-beam symmetries."

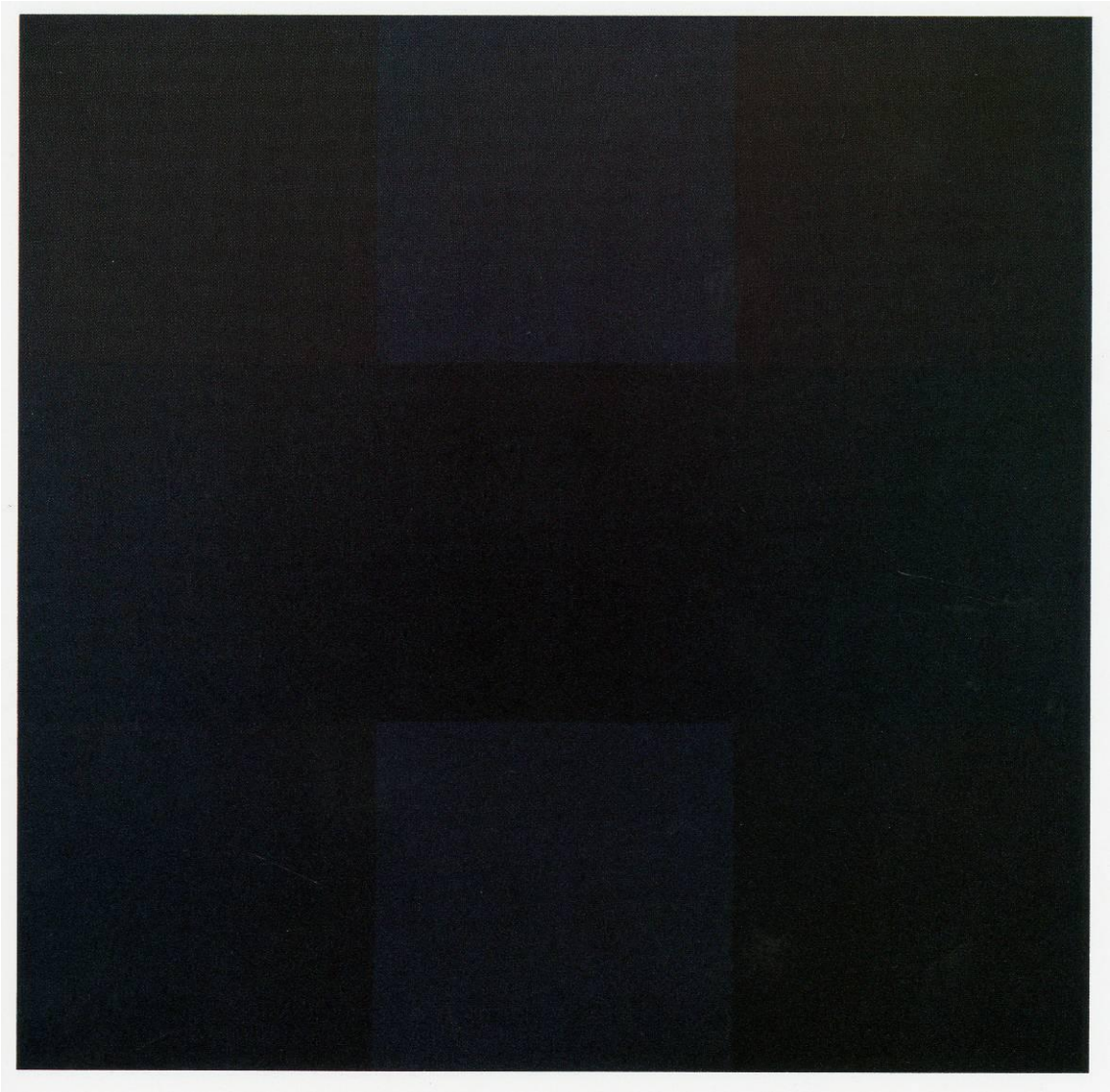

Figure 13-Ad Reinhardt, *Abstract Painting 1960-1965*, (1960-1965), oil on canvas, 60” x 60”. © Estate of Ad Reinhardt / SODRAC (2012).

In this painting, a dark, horizontal band containing a barely visible green crosses the middle section, giving the appearance of an overlap of three vertical bands that emerge as barely visible reddish-black squares in the four corners and bluish-black squares in the centre at top and bottom. As noted by Krauss and others, the format of the paintings suggests the Greek cross and the circular Buddhist mandala that contains equilateral geometric divisions within, evoking spiritual meaning for all who perceive these

symbols, which can represent the four directions or the four elements of earth, air, fire and water. At an even more essential level, the horizontal and vertical members of the grid speak to us all, a reminder of the personal body and the laws of gravity that hold each of us to the planet. Given Reinhardt's deep understanding of both eastern and western religions and his insistence that art was a discipline not a religion, I contend that the true purpose of his paintings was their function as secular icons conveying a personal, spiritual essence. It is the colour emanating from his canvasses that exposes the grid with what Bois called the "always dubitable, beginning, the promise of a speck of light". [95]

In some paintings, the tri-partite division contains a central horizontal band that appears to overlap a vertical band. In others, the vertical traverses the horizontal, and in both instances, four squares are left in the corners thus produced. Although more rarely, as in the enhanced drawing (Figure 14) of *Abstract Painting*, ca. 1960-64 (Figure 15) complex divisions can be seen.

[95] Rose, *Art-as-Art*, quotes Reinhardt, "I never had the cross …as a symbol in mind in my painting…I want to give it no meaning." 186.

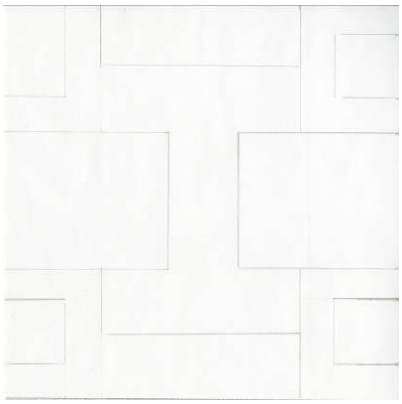

Figure 14-Enhanced drawing of *Abstract Painting*, (ca. 1960-64), 10” x 10”.

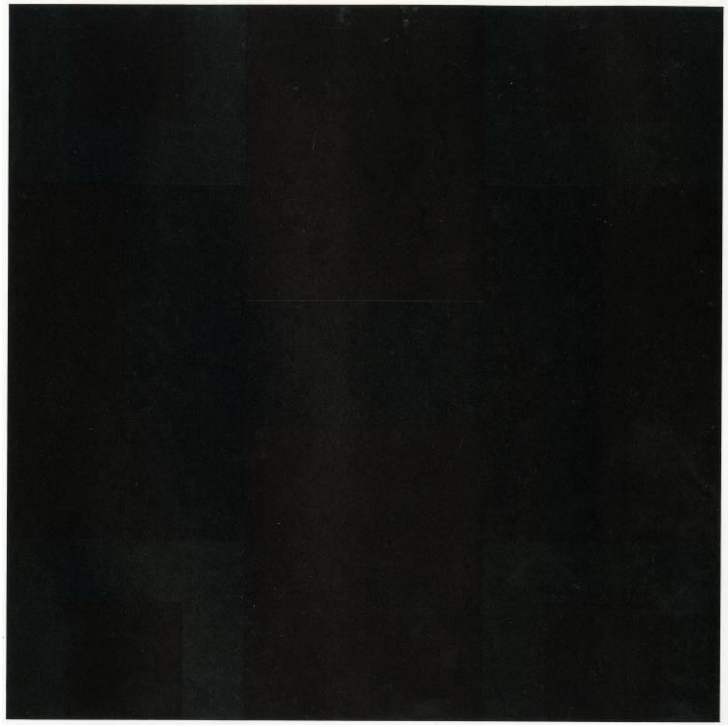

Figure 15-Ad Reinhardt, *Abstract Painting*, (ca. 1960-64), oil on canvas, 60” x 60”. © Estate of Ad Reinhardt / SODRAC (2012).

There is no illusionism possible in these close-valued and darkened colours, each of which take minutes to distinguish in optimum lighting conditions, and then is quickly lost as the unstoppable eye moves on. There is no surface, only a limitless depth to each area of the darkened surface. What is the intention here? Is it to submerge colour and light, or prove that it is colour and light that sustains form? If the observer stops long enough in front of these paintings to ask these kinds of questions, we can consider that Reinhardt has succeeded in providing a platform for meditation of a spiritual art in which both colour and grid-form are equal supporting members. What should be obvious to the reader is that there must be direct confrontation between the observer and the painting, for any such experience is lost in reproduction.

A recent (2009) installation of works from the permanent collection in the Museum of Modern Art places Reinhardt's *Abstract Painting, 1963*, at the end of a short partial wall that opens into a larger room. In this location it is not obliged to engage in unnecessary conversation with its neighbors. To encounter this work now, roughly fifty years after it was painted (or re-painted) is to be acutely aware of its obstinate and demanding nature. As I stood in front of the painting in the fall of 2009, only gradually did hints of edges demarcating one elusive colour area from another emerge. Other visitors passed by the painting, some pausing to see where the mystery was hidden, a few staying long enough to succeed in seeing some of the colours. Whether the unmoving Reinhardt was carried away with them as a memory of presence, another form of Being, is a question for a Zen koan.

In spite of Reinhardt's many earlier public statements to the contrary, Vine quotes him in a *Studio International* interview shortly before the artist's early death in August 1967, as saying, "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 is a reason for making a religious analogy. Maybe that's the best analogy today." [96] I suggest that the colour suspended within the matte black surfaces may be all that remains available to the realm of vision, and enough to make us consider that perhaps he was conveying the *idea* of the possible extinction of colour as a reminder of the fragility of our spiritual existence. Reinhardt had explored the potential of intense chromatic colour and found it interfered with his intellectual and spiritual intentions. Although the younger Colour Field painters were now more directly in line with Willard Huntington

[96] Vine, "Mandala and Cross," *Art in America* (November, 1991): 126, quoting Reinhardt from a *Studio International* interview (December, 1967).

Wright's prophecies of 1923, in which Wright claimed that modernist painting was in reality an "art of colour" that could coexist with the older art of painting, Reinhardt stood his ground against the alternative: representational, figurative – or academic – painting.[97] As a student of Platonic aesthetics Reinhardt was familiar with Plato's theory of perfect Forms and Ideas, in which, according to Plato, painting was a suspect imitation of the world we live in, "once-removed" from the perfect world of the original Ideal. For Plato, only the mind and soul could find their way into the Ideal world. In search of the "timeless absolute" in painting, Reinhardt knew that of all the elements of traditional painting, form and colour, are essential and unavoidable. Although "the last vestige of brightness" quoted earlier from Bois, might have been made with the addition of white, Reinhardt chose reds, blues and greens to animate its grid.

Reinhardt lived in a time when colour in painting was becoming bolder yet could still be equated with folk art and vulgarity. Two weeks before he died, Reinhardt participated in *Black*, the teleconference between artists in New York and Toronto recorded by *Artscanada*. Insisting that the conversation be held on an aesthetic level, Reinhardt argued,

> I just want to again stress the idea of black as intellectuality and conventionality. There's an expression 'the dark of absolute freedom' and an idea of formality. There's something about darkness or blackness that has something to do with something that I don't want to pin down. But it's aesthetic. It has *not* to do with outer space or the colour of skin or the colour of matter.[98]

Perhaps that "something to do with something" might have been the deep, dark, mystery that, amongst other things, generates light and its colours.

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[97] Wright, *The Future of Painting*, 9.

[98] Ad Reinhardt, "Black as Symbol and Concept," in Rose, *Art as Art*, 87. In spite of Rose's claim, this segment of Reinhardt's statement does **not** appear in *Artscanada* (October, 1970).

Chapter 3. Agnes Martin (1912-2004)

"I can see humility
Delicate and white
It is satisfying
Just by itself" A.M., ca. 1972[99]

In the previous chapter I discussed the evolution of Ad Reinhardt's painting to the final "black" series, in which barely visible colour plays the crucial role of transmitting light through otherwise matte-black surfaces, allowing us to see the regular nine-part grid that serves as structure for these works. Reinhardt could easily have made the move to a monochrome black canvas at any time during the later years, but he chose not to eliminate visible colour and structure entirely Although to all appearances Reinhardt was eliminating colour, its vestigial presence in his final paintings prove its necessity and power. This delicate balance was reached through the artist's thorough knowledge of the visual properties of colour – well-evidenced by his early work – and within the context of the search for essentials mandated by abstract art and an ambient awareness of the modernist principle of "less is more", a tenet in art and architecture that influenced the use of both form and colour at mid-century.[100]

The grid paintings of Agnes Martin also fall within the context of a search for art's essentials and share a strategy comparable with Reinhardt's by "appearing" to ignore that colour is as important as form to paintings' expressive potential, a strategy that harkens back to Mondrian's restricted use of the colour spectrum. In this chapter I examine the role of colour in Martin's grid paintings, the artist's first mature body of

[99] Agnes Martin, from "Notes," *Agnes Martin: Writings*, ed. Herausgegeben von Dieter Schwartz (Germany: Cantz Verlag, 1991), 17.

[100] A concept in the Asian arts Reinhardt studied, pithily articulated in the West by architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, who along with Walter Gropius and Le Corbusier, spread Bauhaus design principles across the major cities of America when they left Germany during the Second World War.

work, by following the evolution of form from her earliest known works and suggesting possible strategies employed that account for the relative consistency of her colour palette through this period. One of the difficulties we face in examining this evolution is that the artist destroyed most of the works done before the grid paintings.[101] As Martin explained concerning this destruction: "I made paintings for twenty years without liking them. What I wanted was to get more abstract. When I got to the grids, and they were completely abstract, then I was satisfied."[102] What is missing from this account of major formal change, and absent from most recorded statements Martin made reflecting on sources and intention of her work, is acknowledgement of colour's presence and function through the process. Yet if we can agree that a painting, by its most basic definition, consists of kinds and qualities of form and colour that achieve some degree of equal measure within the delimited arena of a flat surface, what then was colour doing in Martin's painting, what was colour's status?[103]

In this chapter I argue that the palette or "language" of colour Martin employed in the grid paintings had been largely established in earlier representational works. By this I mean that out of an extensive range of possibilities of colour use, Martin established her vocabulary early on, and maintained it. While Martin focused on finding a formal structure that would free her from representations of the external world, colour continued to be drawn from deeply personal experiences of physical environments, retaining

[101] Joan Simon, Perfection Is in the Mind: "An Interview with Agnes Martin," *Art in America* (May, 1996): 88. Also, in an earlier interview with Kate Horsfield, "On Art and Artists: Agnes Martin '74", *Profile* 1, no. 2 (March 1981), Martin said that although she began painting at the age of 25, she did not show her work until she was about 40.

[102] Martin quoted in Simon, 86

[103] By 'form', I mean the painting's internal shapes. This simple definition is not meant to address the potential of illusion, the complete lack of it in an evenly flat-surfaced, monochromatic painting, or the role of other elements.

qualities unique to both her subjective experience of them and notions of a transcendence removed from gendered identity.

Nonetheless, even as I argue that continuity is key to Martin's approach to colour, in the search for essential means that prompted the transition from representation to the abstract grid structure, I suggest that colour's role underwent subtle transformation that was a result of shifts in societal forces as well as formal evolution. The palette remained much the same, yet its colours behaved differently. Divorced from any relationship with representational form, colour was now free to assert its independence in relationship to the disinterested abstract grid structure – although neither the continuity of Martin's palette nor subtle change of its function were acknowledged by the artist.

Lastly, I propose that Martin's silence on the vital role of colour within the more strictly orthogonal, grid paintings made before her hiatus of 1967 was a result of her wariness of prevailing assumptions of gender differences, and how these differences could be signaled by colour. Gender distinctions representing expectations of masculine and feminine roles had been particularly well-defined after the Second World War and reified in social, cultural and artistic realms. Beginning in the early 1960s feminism succeeded in disrupting many of the resulting social norms and existing hierarchies, effectively increasing possibilities of expression for women. When Martin returned to painting, after time away between 1967 and 1973, it was to a climate in which gender distinctions had begun to blur, assisting Martin's release from previous self-imposed restrictions of form and colour.

Martin's palette was not substantially changed or increased after 1973, but there was a gradual transition from an emphasis on the orthogonal grid to open horizontal and

vertical band structures in which subtle colour relationships could more easily be brought to attention. The earlier, more tightly gridded paintings were most often drawn on monochromatic surfaces, or confined within a border (Figure 16). In the monochromatic paintings the range of Martin's palette was limited to cool, diluted colours. Without any significant contrast, these subdued, often naturalistic, hues tend not to draw attention to colour as an issue.

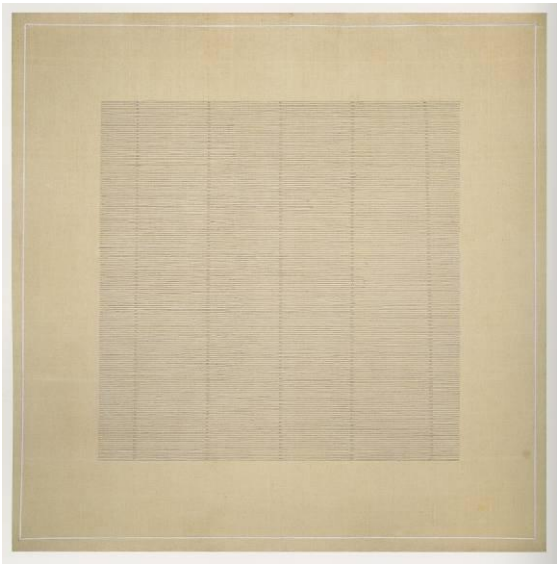

Figure 16-Agnes Martin, *The Dark River*, (1961), oil on canvas, 75" x 75". © Estate of Agnes Martin / SODRAC (2012).

Figure 17-Agnes Martin, *Untitled No. 4*, (1996), acrylic and graphite on canvas, 60" x 60". © Estate of Agnes Martin / SODRAC (2012).

The later band structures permitted Martin to use more highly tinted colours in a range that would have been identified with the feminine in the 1940s and 1950s, but now were without strong gender associations (Figure 17).

My argument for the relative continuity of palette in Martin's painting, against her more radical formal development, begins with a 1973 essay by Lizzie Borden, who describes the kinds of colours in Martin's early work that could easily apply to her grid paintings. Although Martin began painting in the early 1940s, according to Borden, it

wasn't until the early 1950s that her work moved away from conventional still life and the human figure to the more abstract (but still figurative), works of 1952 and 1953.[104] Borden noted the "delicate drawing" and "pearly color" of the abstract biomorphic paintings produced after her departure from representation.[105] Barbara Haskell, in her 1994 retrospective exhibition essay, describes works from 1951-52 as "abstract biomorphic shapes in open, atmospheric fields of thinly washed paint," which appears to indicate that the formal developments happened even earlier. At the same time, Haskell remarks on the "pale, closely valued colors" of these early works.[106]

By 1955, the paintings had progressed to frontal depictions of simple shapes that would become more geometric and symmetrical over the next several years. Borden compared Martin's 1955 paintings with those of Arshile Gorky, the Armenian-American artist whose work in the 1940s presaged the Abstract Expressionism of the 1950s.[107] According to Borden, "while Gorky's color is often intense, contraposing light, sweet colors with harsher ones, Martin's color have always been pale and washlike, carrying the translucency of watercolor into oil paint", suggesting strong first-hand knowledge of Martin's work. Such descriptions of colour, or ones remarkably similar – "pale, closely valued," "pearly color," "washlike" –are found throughout the critical writing on Martin's painting from this early transition through biomorphism to the geometric, and indeed, past the mature period of the early grid paintings that began in 1960.

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[104] Lizzie Borden, "Early Work," *Artforum* (April, 1973): 41.
[105] Lizzie Borden, "Early Work," *Artforum* (April, 1973): 39-44.
[106] Barbara Haskell, "Agnes Martin: The Awareness of Perfection", *Agnes Martin*, 1994, 100.
[107] Diane Waldman, "Arshile Gorky: Poet in Paint", *Arshile Gorky: 1904-1948: A Retrospective* (New York, Harry N. Abrams and Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1981), 13. , according to Diane Waldman, Gorky "heralded the coming of age of an independent and progressive American art."

By drawing only a few examples from the substantial body of critical writing on Martin's paintings, we see that descriptions by Borden and Haskell of qualities of colour found in early paintings remain remarkably similar to descriptions of colour in Martin's mature works made by other art scholars and critics. If we consider the terms used by Borden and Haskell to describe the colour and light in the earliest works, and compare them with the following descriptive terms used on Martin's later work, a remarkable consistency appears. For instance; "Translucent films of yellow, grey, blue and white shimmer with a radiant and serene elegance", "evocations of radiant light", "tremulous graphite lines", "luminous washes of pale, muted colour", are descriptions found in a 2003 review of one of Martin's last exhibitions of new works. They are a close echo of the "pale, closely valued colors" and "delicate drawing" Borden and Haskell found in works more than fifty years older.[108]

Accepting the consistency of early and late descriptions of Martin's colour suggests that she had already found an essential palette, perhaps one that suited both her temperament and philosophic vision, within subjective experience. In other words, unlike the radical change made to form in her work, colour seems to have undergone only subtle refinements during the course of the grid's development from its earlier representational and biomorphic stages.

Although we no longer have access to Martin's earliest extant paintings, we can surmise that her palette remained consistent while the radical formal changes related in Borden's analysis of them took place – from conventional landscape and figurative representation to Surrealist biomorphism, then from geometric abstraction to the

[108] Jody Patterson, "Agnes Martin: Pacewildenstein, New York", *Canadian Art* (Summer, 2003): 2. The artist died at the age of 92, in December, 2004.

orthogonal grid.[109] As radical as the formal transitions were, we need only look at two geometric paintings Martin produced in the same period as her first grids to see how consistent the use of colour was, and to see how firmly it was still lodged in representation. The titles of both locate Martin's inspiration in real world experience. In *Cow* (Figure 18), it is not necessary to see a cow in the softly brushed, earth-coloured circle to be directed to a quality of colour and light we might see on the western plain where the cow might be found, or to imagine distance-created, atmospheric mists in its surrounding pale-gray outer square and bands.

[109] Lizzie Borden, "Early Work."

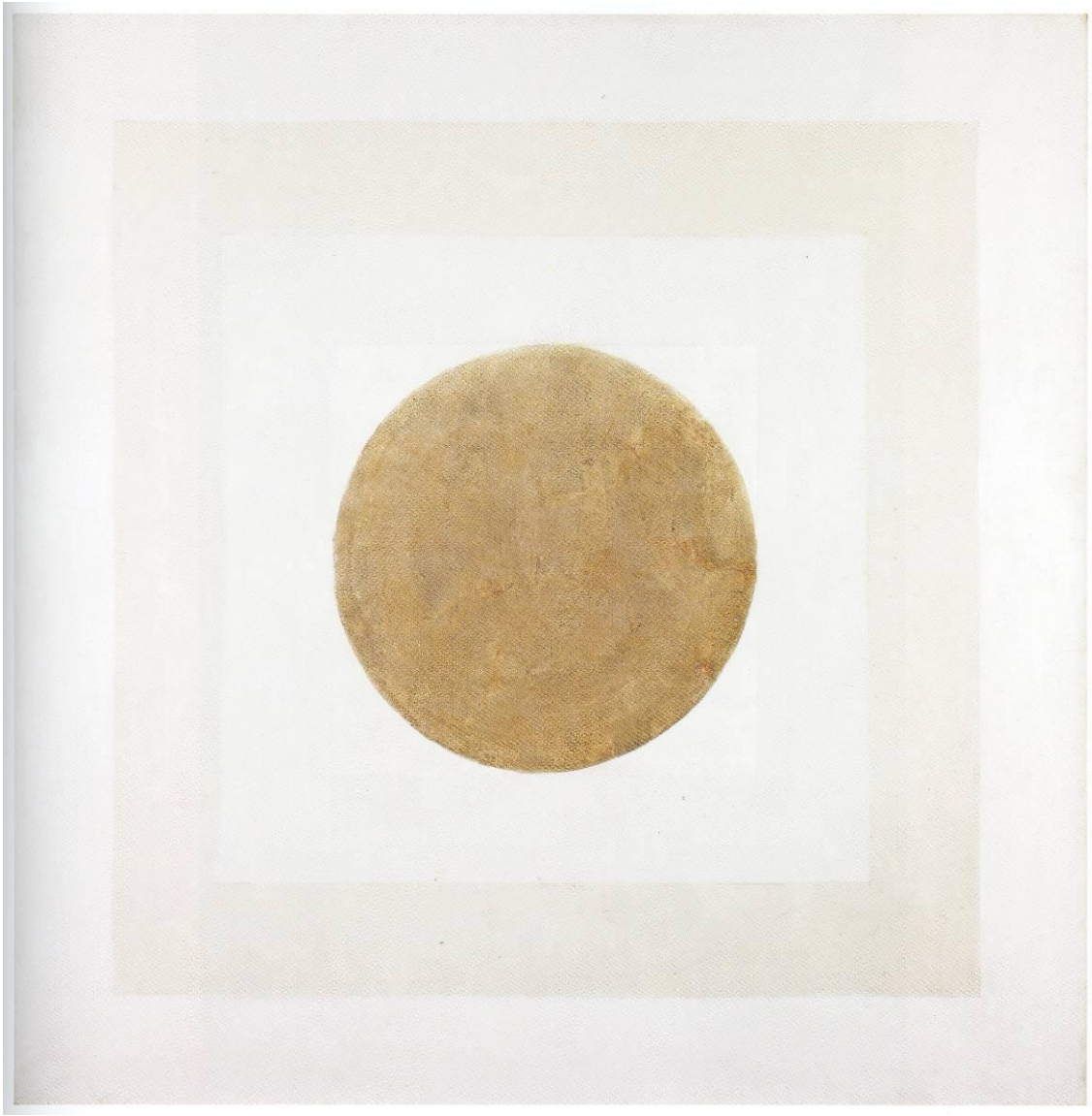

Figure 18-Agnes Martin, *Cow*, (1960), oil on canvas, 69” x 69”. © Estate of Agnes Martin / SODRAC (2012).

The title of another painting, *This Rain* (1960) takes us directly to weather and its ambiance. The soft cool blue and gray conjure a meditative mood, as well as alluding to atmospheric conditions (Figure 19).

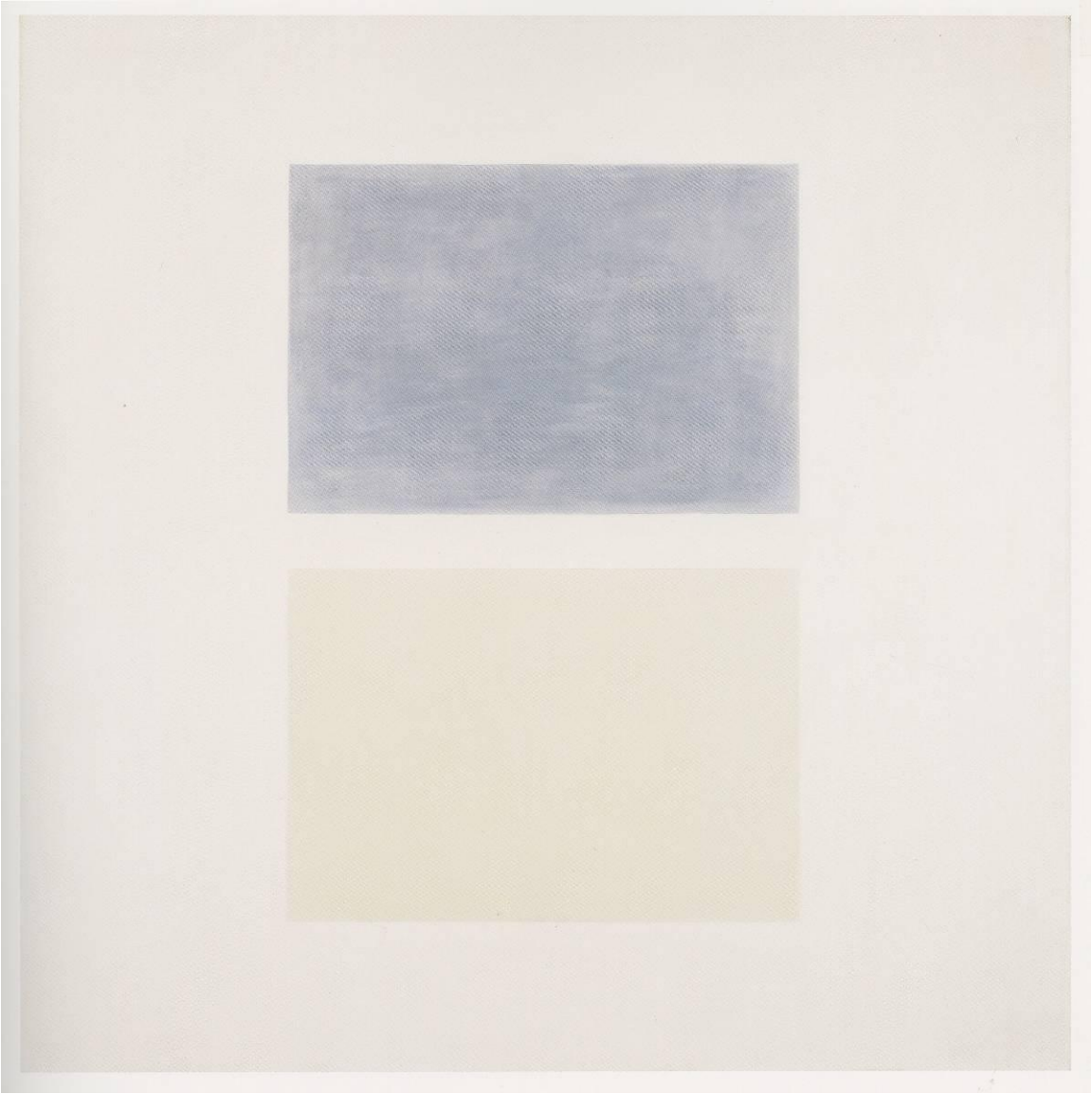

Figure 19-Agnes Martin, *This Rain* (1960), oil on canvas, 70” x 70”. © Estate of Agnes Martin / SODRAC (2012).

Martin’s use of colour was an expression of three interlinked factors: first, a palette that reflects what colourist and teacher Johannes Itten would call her “subjective timbre”; second, the aspirations for expression issuing from interests in Greek classicism,

and Zen and Taoist thought that inspired her formal evolutions and; third, the "coding" needed to protect her gendered self in the social and cultural milieu of the era.[110]

We can describe the "subjective timbre" of Martin's colour as the confluence of her inward-looking temperament and the physical environments with which she felt most connected. Whether Martin was familiar with Itten, who taught at the Bauhaus from 1919 to 1923 alongside such well-known artists as Lyonel Feininger, Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky, is not at all clear; yet I suggest his ideas concerning colour had currency for artists in following decades. One of the major contributions made by Itten in the late 1920s to colour theory was to clarify the difference between subjective experience and the objective principles of colour.[111] In his 1961 book, *The Art of Color,* Itten described three attitudes to colour, and I argue that Martin fit the second group in his schema: "the originals." For Itten, the "originals" were those "…who paint as they themselves are. They compose according to their subjective timbre. Though the theme changes, the chromatic experience of their paintings remains the same."[112]

The essence of the art – and artisanship – of painting is colour. No matter how subordinate it may appear to Martin's grid, or how silent she is on the subject, as an artist, she must have known how important its role was in her work. Inspired by atmospheres of land and sea and the Neo-Platonic and Eastern philosophies of her inner landscape, Martin "found" her colour early on and could focus attention on the formal changes needed to bring both form and colour into an alignment distanced from gender associations. The abandonment of biomorphic form, which consists of curvilinear forms

[110] Johannes Itten, *The Art of Color, The subjective experience and objective rational of color*, trans. Ernst van Haagen (New York, Reinhold Publishing, 1961), 24.
[111] Itten, 24-32.
[112] Itten, 30.

long associated with the feminine and subsequent move to geometric form, was done to accommodate the expression already present in her colour.

The radical changes made in the transition from shape-form to grid structure eliminated hierarchies of composition. Such hierarchies, in basic terms, are indicated by differences in size and shape of areas within the painting, such as the one presented by *Cow*, a symmetrical work in which the circle fills its tight square and is the focus of our attention primarily because of its different and more positive shape. The circle seems to be sitting on top of the square, turning the four corners of the square into negative spaces. The three repeated areas that enclose the square are read ambiguously as two concentric bands surrounding an inner square, three "stacked" squares of different sizes, or even the inner framing or matting common to prints and paper works.

The grid does not permit such differences in shape-form. Amy Goldin, in an essay that focuses on the importance of pattern and repetition in grid painting, elaborates the nuances inherent in the difference between shape-form and grid structure:

> Grids are nonhierarchic and nonrelational, but that is not because relationships among its components do not exist, nor because the components of the grid are necessarily equally stressed. A grid is nonrelational because its internal special relations are marked out as invariable and therefore inexpressive and disregardable. Its shapes are thus not shapes at all, but authoritative markers, indicating the pace and rhythm by which we are to perceive the whole.[113]

In other words, the grid in painting is an inert and passive over-all structure. It serves as a pattern that holds light, space, surface texture or material qualities, and above all, colour, within its invariable "authoritative markers", and allows these components to have relationships that are expressive and "regardable".

[113] Amy Goldin, "Patterns Grids and Painting," *Artforum* (September 1975): 51.

The elimination of compositional hierarchies also changed the way colour operated within this new relationship, raising the possibility of a change in colour's status, even though colour remained largely the same. Early orthogonal grid paintings such as *The Rose* (Figure 20) emphasized their 'gridness' to an almost obsessive degree with the repetition of closely drawn lines, yet it is the red pencil lines that infuse the white surface with the reddish shimmer that activates the work.

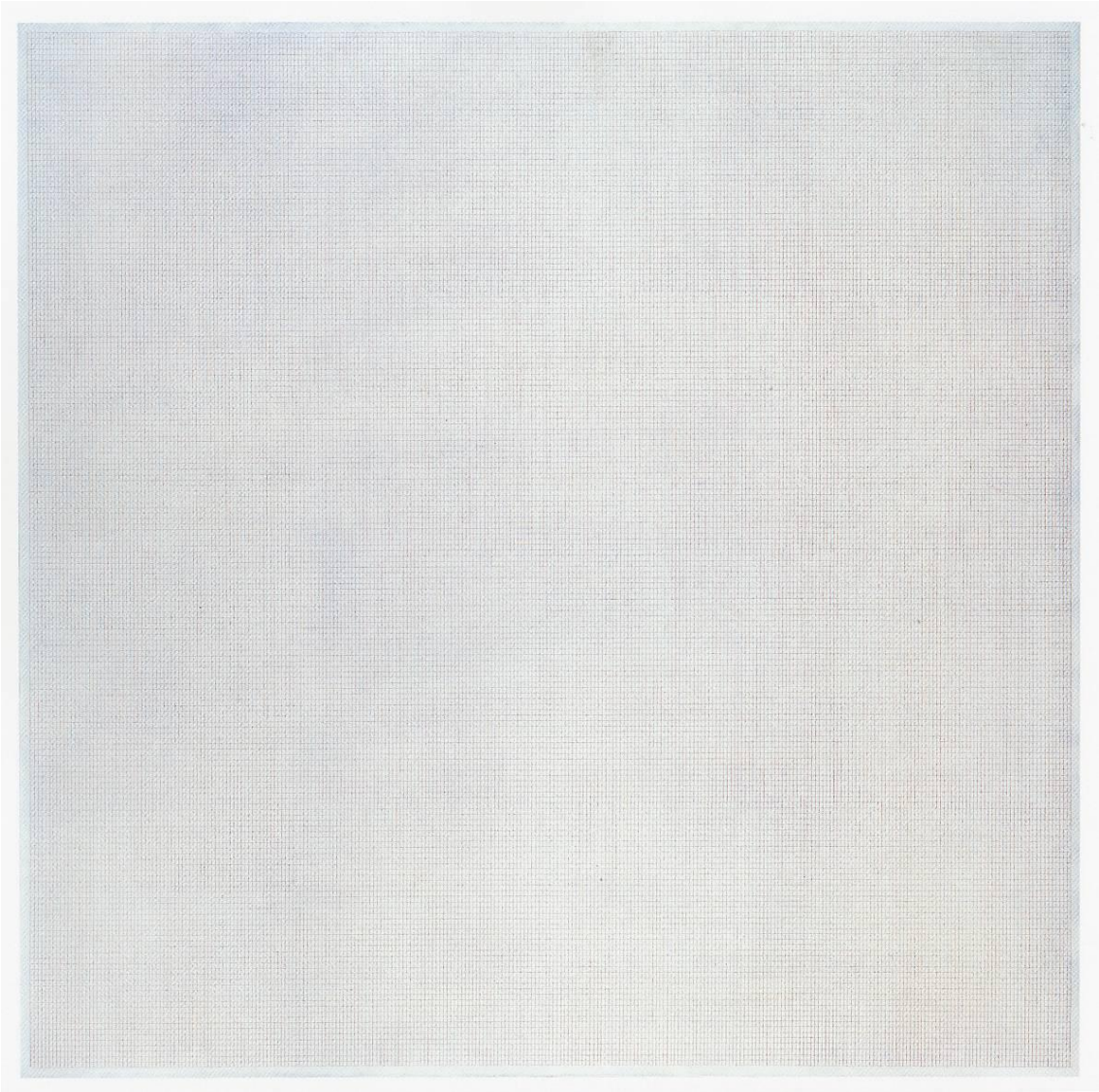

Figure 20-Agnes Martin, *The Rose*, (1964), oil, graphite, coloured pencil, and gesso on canvas, 71 7/8" x 71 15/16". © Estate of Agnes Martin / SODRAC (2012).

Although many later band paintings are monochromatic, still others consist of delicate chromatic contrasts within repeated, alternating and non-hierarchical band patterns that reference atmospheric conditions and landscape. One could argue, as scholars have, that Martin continued to think about colour in relation to the representation of distinct places and the character of their colour.

The qualities of light and colour Martin chose to work with appear to have been selectively drawn from her memory of the broad expanses of certain geographic locales and the characteristic atmospheric conditions created by their openness. Although her early grid paintings did not reference landscape associations directly, they often carried titles linked to concrete realities. There is an inevitable linking of titles of grid paintings such as *Milk River* (Figure 21), *Night Sea* (Figure 22) and *The Cliff* (Figure 23) — works done before she left New York in 1967 — to aspects of nature, a strong indication that the colour of the early grids was abstracted from her experiences of landscape.[114]

[114] Haskell, 108.

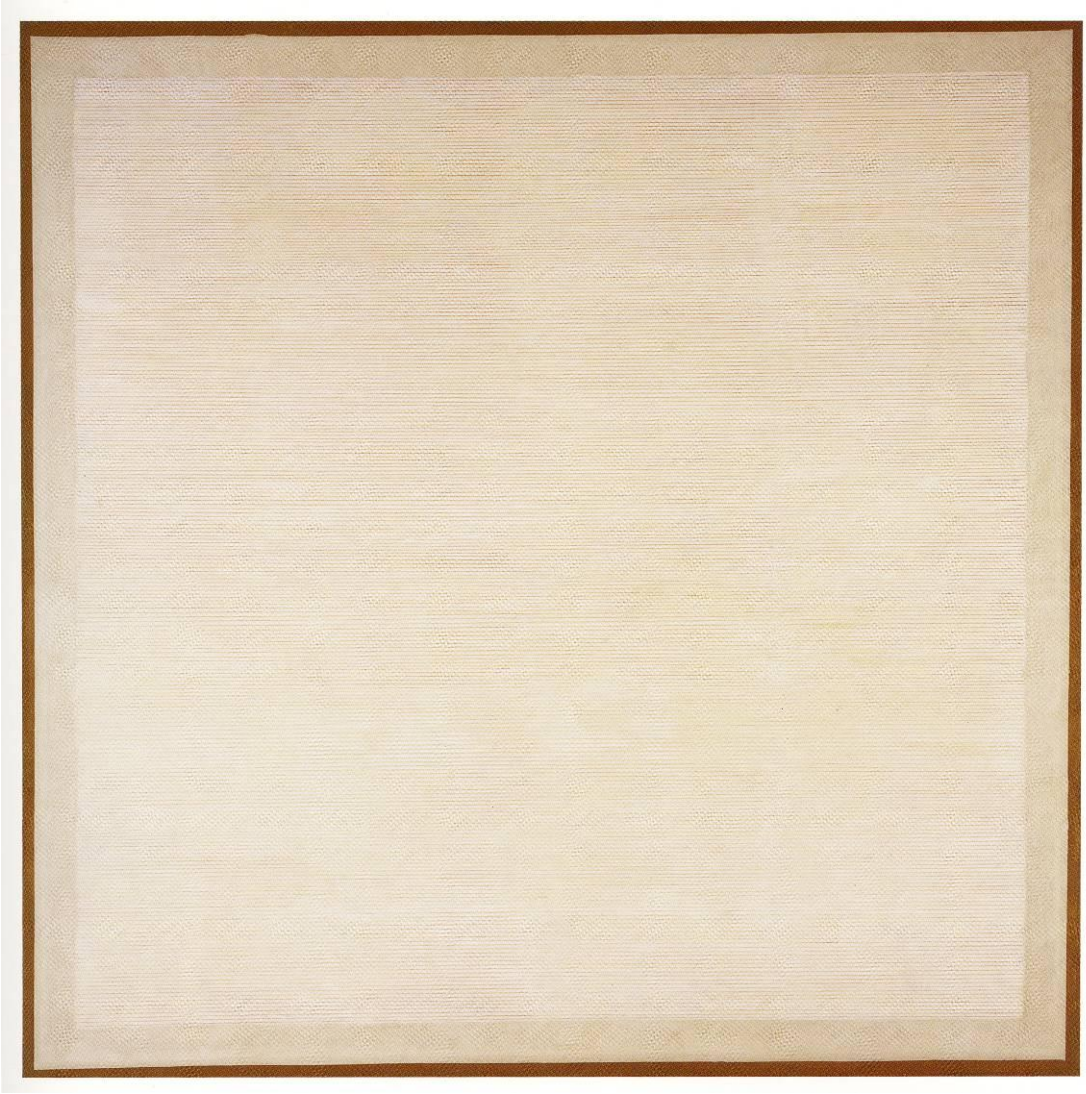

Figure 21-Agnes Martin, *Milk River*, (1963), oil on canvas, 72” x 72”. © Estate of Agnes Martin / SODRAC (2012).

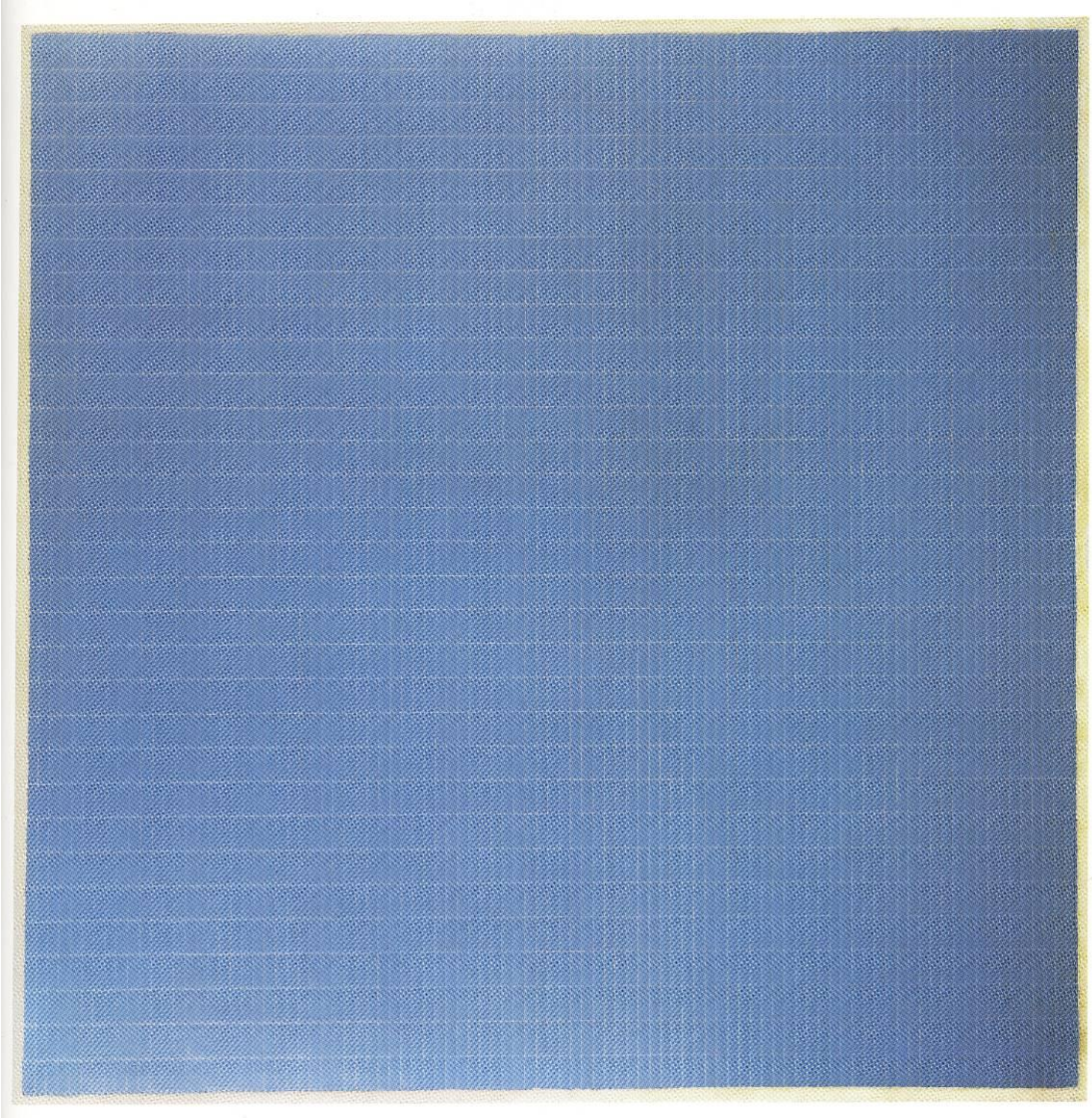

Figure 22-Agnes Martin, *Night Sea*, (1963), oil and gold leaf on canvas, 72” x 72”. © Estate of Agnes Martin / SODRAC (2012).

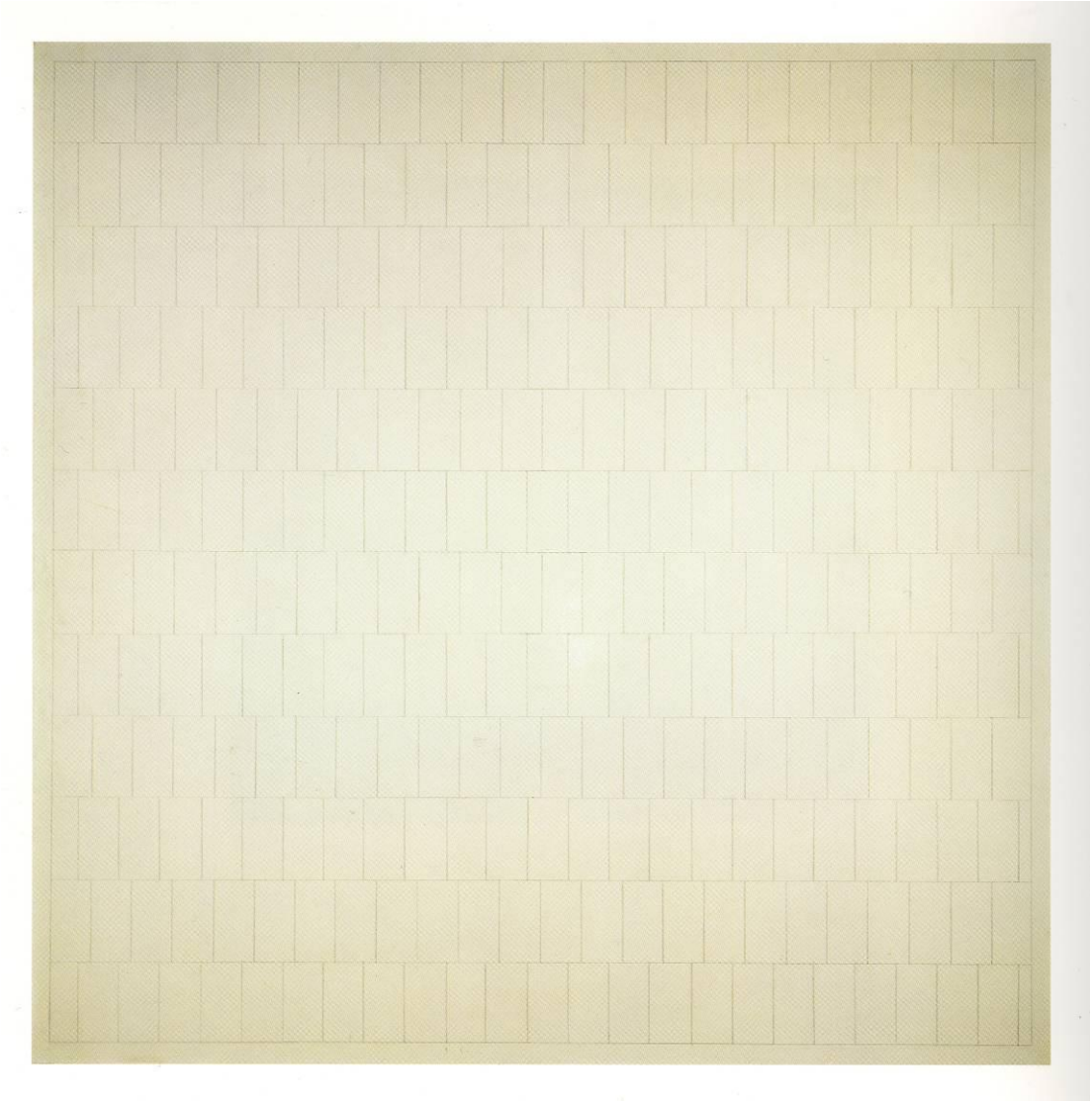

Figure 23-Agnes Martin, *The Cliff*, (1967), acrylic and graphite on canvas, 72" x 72". © Estate of Agnes Martin / SODRAC (2012).

However, I argue that these "representative" colour schemes operate as metaphors for the state of transcendence and the sublime that Martin and other Abstract Expressionist painters were searching for. As the artist stated, "I hope I have made it clear that the work is about perfection, as we are aware of it in our minds." [115] Martin's stated desire to express something larger – the transcendental state of being and "moment of perfection"

[115] Agnes Martin in interview with Kate Horsfield taped in 1974, pub. in, "On Art and Artists: Agnes Martin", *Profile* (March 1981): 1-23.

that lay beyond apparent subject matter – had not been satisfied by landscape and portraiture, and it seems obvious that the fault lay with the strictures of representation, not their colour.

Colour is an object of perception.[116] Because it is ungraspable visual sensation and not tactile substance, it could be argued that colour is already comfortable in the realm of transcendence. In a manifesto of aspirations that appears to privilege form (over colour), Martin declared, "I would like my work to be recognized as being in the classic tradition (Coptic, Egyptian, Greek, Chinese), as representing the Ideal in the mind. Classical art can not possibly be eclectic. One must see the Ideal in one's mind. It is like a memory of perfection."[117] This statement indicates Martin's embrace of both Eastern and Western notions of the classical as founded not on nature directly, but on Ideal images that pre-exist in the intellect.[118] Though the pure forms of such images must inevitably originate in our knowledge and experience of nature, they are distilled to pure essence. In the search for universal essence, the Idea is more important than physical or material substance. The brown circle in the painting *The Cow* at best symbolizes a singular idea of "cow" without in any way resembling one.

Martin had maintained a distinctive yet chromatically subdued palette through earlier modes of representation and abstraction that was consistent with her notions of transcendent calm, and it was form that proved to be the disruptive element in Martin's painting. When she began to work with the non-hierarchical and "inexpressive" grid, she

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[116] Patricia Sloane, "The Limits of Language and the Logic of Color," *The Visual Nature of Color*, 27.
[117] Agnes Martin, *Writings*, ed. Herausgegeben von Dieter Schwartz (Germany: Cantz Verlag, 1991), 19.
[118], John Shannon Hendrix, "Humanism and Disegno: Neoplatonism at the Accademia di San Luca in Rome" (2007). *School of Architecture, Art, and Historic Preservation Faculty Papers.* Paper 1. http://docs.rwu.edu/saahp_fp/1, paper delivered at University of Lincoln, *The Role of the Humanities in Design Creativity International Conference*, 2007.

found a form that did not offer conflict, but supported her colour. Martin's philosophic view, like many of her Abstract Expressionist peers, including Reinhardt, was developed in part through her interest in the lectures of Zen Buddhist scholar Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki. According to Holland Cotter, "she became interested in Asian thought, not as a religious discipline, but as a code of ethics, a practical how-to for getting through life."[119] Her philosophical allegiance to classical traditions in art, in which she followed a Platonic notion of perfection as something found only in the mind, also served to ensure a rigorous and wary approach to the use of colour. Unlike form, we experience colour as a transitory and unstable sensation, dependant on its chromatic relationships, on contrast and comparison, for its always relative, identity.

In "The Untroubled Mind," a text on life and art (compiled by Ann Wilson from conversations in 1972 with the artist), Martin begins: "People think that painting is about color….It's mostly composition."[120] The abrupt and curious denial with which this lengthy disquisition on Martin's philosophical views begins indicates colour's presence as an issue even as it is dismissed without further elaboration. While we accept Martin's address of the importance of the formal development of her work, we need to look for some reasons for her apparent dismissal of the importance of colour in her work. For now, let's consider a scenario in which colour operates as a kind of code in Martin's painting represented, in the same text on art and life quoted above, by the recurrent motif of freedom:

> Painting is not about ideas or personal emotion
> When I was painting in New York I was not so clear about that
> Now I'm very clear that the object is freedom

[119] Holland Cotter, "Agnes Martin, Abstract Painter, is Dead at 92", *The New York Times* "Obituaries", Friday, December 17, 2004, C9.
[120] Agnes Martin, "The Untroubled Mind," *Writings,* 35.

not political freedom, which is the echo
not freedom from social mores
freedom from mastery and slavery
freedom from what's dragging you down
freedom from right and wrong
In Genesis Eve ate the apple of knowledge
Of good and evil
When you give up the idea of right and wrong
You don't get anything
What you do is get rid of everything
Freedom from ideas and responsibility[121]

The importance of this is that such a notion needs to be represented somehow, and for Martin, Ideal form and language-resistant colour were the chosen means. In the same text we find, "Solitude and freedom are the same," and "These paintings are about freedom from the cares of this world, from wordliness." On another occasion Martin stated: "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."[122]

Unlike the more concrete certainties of form – measurable as shape, design or structure – the unruly sensation of colour resists "wordliness". As David Batchelor states:

> The idea that colour is beyond, beneath or in some other way at the limit of language has been expressed in a number of ways by a number of writers. At the beginning of *Colour and Culture*, John Gage refers briefly to 'the feeling that verbal language is incapable of defining the experience of colour'. In *Color Codes*, Charles A. Riley notes that 'colour refuses to conform to schematic and verbal systems.' For Stephen Melville, colour 'can…seem bottomlessly resistant to nomination, attaching itself absolutely to its own specificity…[123]

However, we know from personal experience and memory that colour evokes strong feelings and symbolic meaning that can be brought back with or without words. Martin's satisfaction, that in the grid she had found the perfect vehicle for expression, one

[121] Agnes Martin, "The Untroubled Mind," *Writings*, 38.
[122] Martin, "The Still and Silent in Art," *Writings*, 89.
[123] David Batchelor, *Chromophobia* (London: Reaktion, 2000), 81.

that removed her work from associations the viewer might make with either landscape or her own persona, meant that it could now be left to observers to "have their own response to the painting"; to extract their own meaning from all visual evidence, including of course, the unavoidable "subjective timbre" of its colour.[124]

After citing a host of scholars who have grappled with the intransigence of the sensation of colour, Batchelor claims "colour is beyond, beneath or in some other way at the limit of language."[125] He concludes:

> The silence that colour may provoke is a mark of its power and autonomy. Silence is how we have to voice our respect for that which moves us beyond language. 'Whereof we cannot speak, thereof we must remain silent', said Wittgenstein, who also saw in colour the outer limits of language.[126]

I suggest Martin's employment of colour was as critical as her choice of form to the "wordless and silent" experience she desired for her paintings. She identified herself as an Abstract Expressionist, and shared strong affinities with Rothko, Newman and Reinhardt and their desire to express universal transcendental experience in their paintings through colour as well as form. It seems therefore that colour played a more important role in Martin's spare, if not minimal, six-foot square grid paintings, than she chose to give words to.

Martin's transition from densely painted geometric constructions on canvas to the barely coloured, open grid and later band paintings was anything but a linear progression. When she began to produce geometric and grid paintings, in 1957, it was, according to Barbara Haskell, with a vision of geometry as "an appropriate vehicle for spiritual

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[124] Susan Campbell, "Interview with Agnes Martin", May 15, 1989, transcript, *Speaking of Art : 1958-2008, Selections from the Archives of American Art Oral History Collection,* Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Winterhouse Editions, 2008, 107-110.
[125] David Batchelor, "Hanunoo," *Chromophobia,* 81.
[126] Ibid, 83.

content."[127] The early grids were sometimes surrounded with a wide border, creating a two-tone appearance, and the textured patterns created by multiple, closely-set grid lines were oil-painted, as in the painting, *The Dark River* (Figure 24).

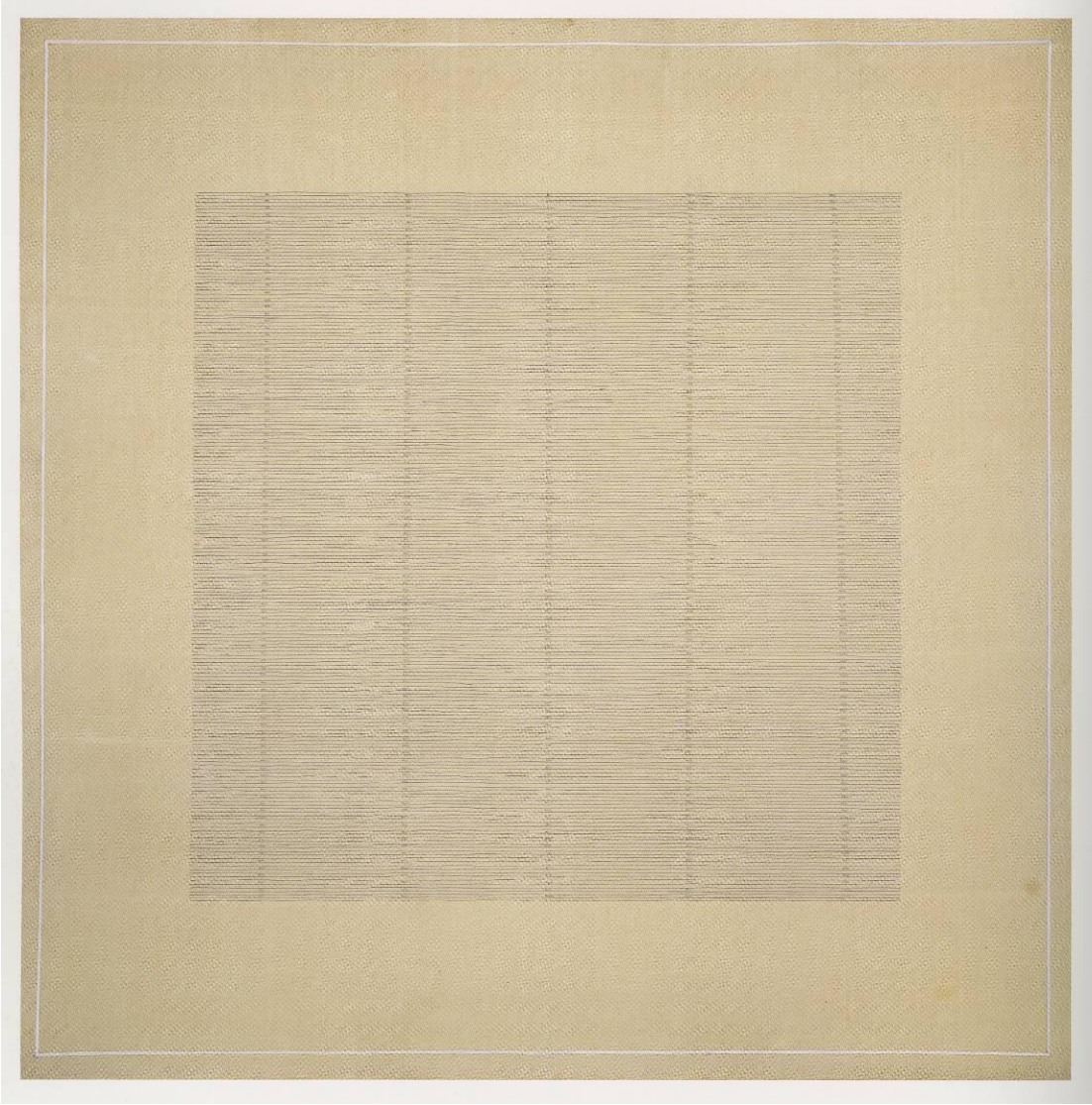

Figure 24-Agnes Martin, *The Dark River*, (1961), oil on canvas, 75" x 75". © Estate of Agnes Martin / SODRAC (2012).

By 1964, both the oil-painted grid and border had given way to an all-over penciled pattern that extended almost to the edges of the canvas, making for a more open and

[127] Barbara Haskell, *Agnes Martin*, 102.

centrifugal grid on a more relaxed surface than the medium of oils permit. In these works colour was more often created either by the application of thin washes of tints or tones over the entire gesso-treated surface of canvas under the grid, in works such as *Leaf in the Wind* (Figure 25) or the result of grid lines drawn with coloured pencil over a gesso surface, as in *The Rose* (Figure 20).

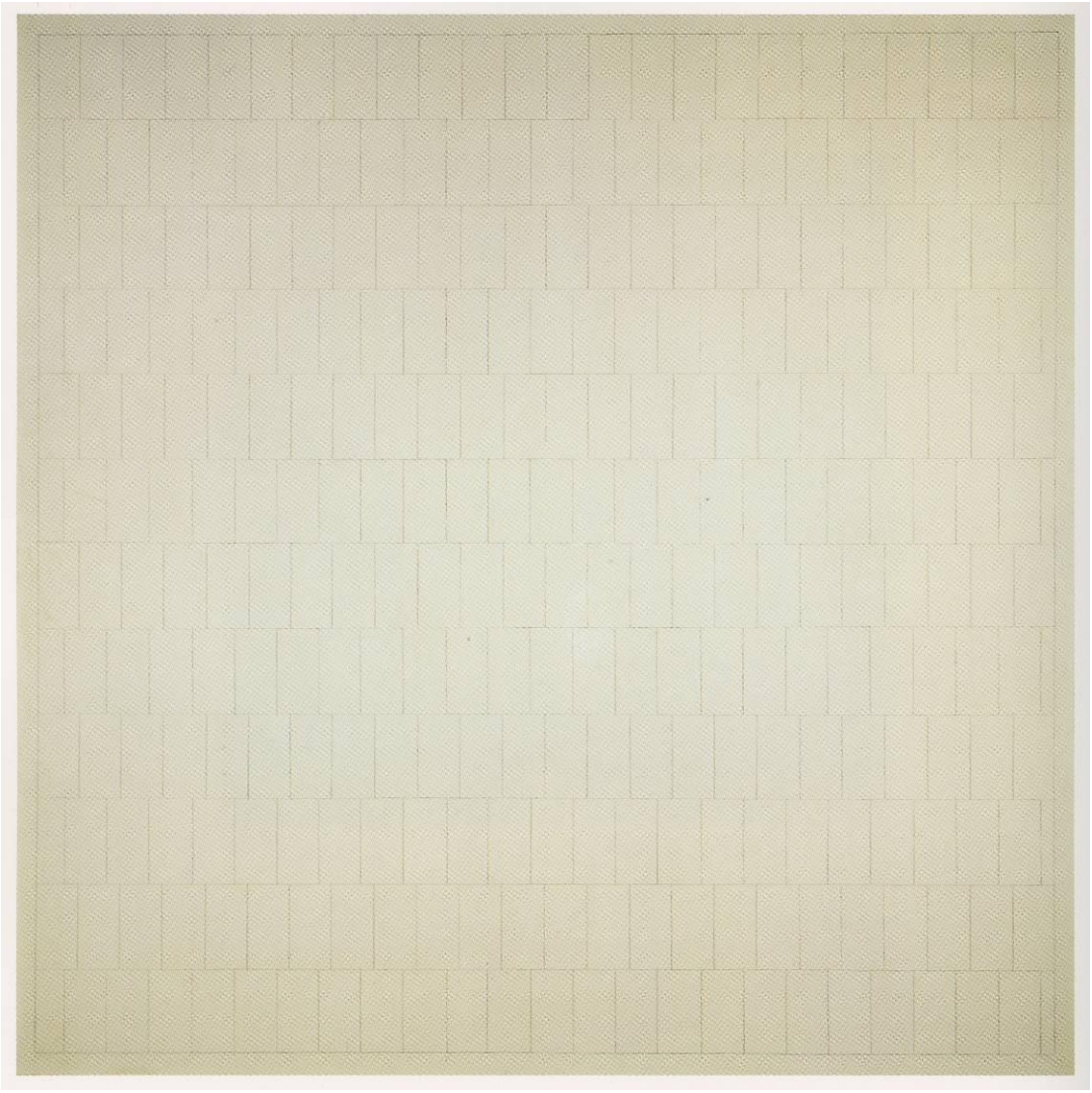

Figure 25-Agnes Martin, *Leaf in the Wind*, (1963), acrylic and graphite on canvas, 75" x 75". © Estate of Agnes Martin / SODRAC (2012).

The resulting effect was of a diffused, fluctuating, single-colour surface that changed in appearance depending on viewing distance.

Particularly in the early years of her grid painting, Martin worked with a decidedly "cool", therefore masculine, palette. By this I mean that her colours either originated on the cool, blue-green (blue is for boys) side of the colour wheel, or, if from the warm side, were so thinly washed or diluted with white, any sense of warmth was minimal, as in *The Rose*. Even though earth tones are discerned in other paintings, such as *Leaf in the Wind*, they are so evasive they appear to be non-colours, without being truly achromatic.[128] This chromatically subdued palette brings to mind a trend prevalent in the 1940s and 50s in which rooms were painted in muted tones with names like "ivory", "canary yellow" or "sea foam green" – chosen because they contained so little of any one hue or chromatic distinction of any kind. Such colours were often slow to reveal themselves to conscious awareness thus did not interfere with a room's furnishings, which could then dominate attention. Such associations with colour in the lived environment are stored in personal memory, and if the colour is unremarkable while we are in its environment, we will often have difficulty recalling it. Anything close to a pure white for walls was avoided (except by the aesthetically daring), due to associations with the unfortunate dramas that took place within hospital walls, which were almost always white until the 1960s. If we agree that colour is something beyond language that we use, both with and without conscious awareness, that sometimes we are aware, we are either making a "colour statement" or fitting within cultural conventions, and sometimes we are not, we are closer to understanding how potent the power of association is.

[128] Achromatic colours, or colours without any visible hue, consist of the range of greys between pure black and white.

Martin's colour may have been so deliberately subtle its importance was not immediately detected. In conversation with Susan Campbell in 1989, Martin stated, "The object of painting is to represent concretely our most subtle emotions. That's my own definition."[129] Again, in 1996, Martin declared, "Art is the concrete representation of our most subtle feelings."[130] Nevertheless, the pencil-drawn grid on a prepared canvas surface, in any of its permutations, cannot claim to be the sole representative of "our most subtle feelings."

In painting, unlike drawing, the artist selects the colours of the surface, or consciously accepts the colours that result from the painting process. Even if achromatic white is chosen for the painted surface out of all painterly possibilities, this is a decision about colour, in itself proof that such a choice is not an arbitrary or incidental matter. To return to the oblique language Martin used to convey the ideas behind her expressive intentions, can we then consider that in Martin's grids – more obliging, inert, and open patterns than forms – it was an understated colour that was now free to perform the wordless and silent function of the painting within the supporting grid, the idea of her "most subtle feelings"?

In the previous section, I indicated the relative constancy of Martin's colour palette during a period of radical formal change, and her apparent evasiveness regarding the importance of colour. In this section, we need now to consider the possible influence of the patriarchal and homophobic society of postwar America, in which the artist was embedded as her painting slowly began to reach maturity. Martin was born on the Canadian prairie, but from her earliest days in Washington State, where she finished high

[129] Susan Campbell, 111.
[130] Interview with Joan Simon, "Perfection is in the Mind: An Interview with Agnes Martin", *Artforum* (May, 1996): 124.

school in the mid-1930s and went on to teacher training, she was attracted to what Haskell describes as "the American independence of mind" and the fulfillment of potential that America promised.[131] This promise was not extended equally to all, however. The white, heterosexual male was the ascendant in this society, and other identities needed to develop appropriate strategies if they also were to thrive.

Martin spent twenty years furthering her studies, teaching and painting, moving back and forth across the country, principally between two very different physical and cultural landscapes, New York and New Mexico, before arriving at the grid and her first mature paintings. This long gestation period is indicative of the depths of her commitment and determination, but also suggestive of obstacles, uncertainties and personal difficulties experienced along the way. Martin needed to develop a foundation and a strategy that would sustain her as a single woman in a decidedly male-oriented art milieu.

The lean economic conditions after the Depression and the Second World War made life difficult for most, and the underlying 'frontier myth' ideologies that sustained America's vision of itself as a nation, described by Richard Slotkin in *Gunfighter Nation*, determined that masculine traits were essential to maintaining America's political, militaristic, social and economic profile.[132] Within the context of the "phobic" political, social and cultural climate of the Cold War period that followed, heterosexual women faced severe handicaps to achieving equality within the existing patriarchy. Taking this background into account may help us understand some of the obstacles Martin

[131] Martin became an American citizen in 1950.
[132] Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation : The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Atheneum, 1992), 2.

encountered and the possibility that her carefully limited palette was to some extent influenced by it.

At the end of the Second World War women were unceremoniously ushered out of roles of rank and responsibility in business and manufacturing and back into the unpaid labour force of home, kitchen and childrearing, so that white, heterosexual, males could resume control of the reins of economic, social and cultural power. Most Americans, as its soldiers returned victorious to resume places as breadwinners, accepted this forceful return to patriarchy as inevitable. Situating gender within the politically charged anti-communist McCarthy period, art historian David Craven tells us, "The belief in 'natural gender roles' was in fact embraced in almost equal measure by both the Right and the Left of the political spectrum in the United States throughout this era." [133]

The intense "cult of masculinity" that Craven describes as operating during this era was accepted as well by Abstract Expressionism's heterosexual male artists, who were not only intent on creating heroic mythologies, but had to fight society's view of artists as effeminate. According to Craven, "as Selective Service announcements from this period indicate, artists were routinely grouped with hairdressers, dressmakers, and interior decorators."[134] When artist Robert Motherwell went before the draft board in the 1940s and answered "no" to the question "Are you a homosexual?" he was not believed, since "anyone who lived in Greenwich Village and was an artist had to be a homosexual."[135]

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[133] David Craven, "Mythmaking in the McCarthy Period," *Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 115.

[134] Craven, 117. Quoting from Dore Ashton, *The New York School: A Cultural Reckoning* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 147.

[135] Craven, 117, referring to an incident cited by Ben Heller in Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, *Jackson Pollock: An American Saga* (New York: Harper & Row, 1991), 479.

Women artists were given little opportunity but to support the rigid status quo that separated genders into distinct masculine and feminine roles, and those who challenged it did so against daunting odds. According to Marcia Brennan,

> As Ann Eden Gibson has pointed out, the central figures of the New York School made up a group that consisted entirely of heterosexual white men. While their works were often characterized as heroic representations of human identity, the New York School's privileged ranks actively excluded those who did not conform to this ideal prototype, including women, gay men, and people of color.[136]

Visual culture scholar Gavin Butt argues that Martin navigated the socio/political scene of the art world by adopting a lesbian butch persona, thus being accepted as masculine in an era in which straight women had a more difficult time, but that she nonetheless allowed her sexual orientation to remain ambiguous.[137] I suggest that such an adoption may have eased, but certainly not erased, the difficulties she faced as an artist who wanted her art to be treated with equal respect in a (white, heterosexual) man's world. As far as I have been able to ascertain, as late as 1992, Martin had not publicly disclosed that she was a lesbian.[138] To do so before the late 1970s, outside a small and trusted group, might well have compromised her opportunities as an artist. It was one thing to adopt a lesbian "persona" to ease navigating in a male-dominated art world, but quite another to openly declare lesbian sexual orientation in a society that privileged masculine heterosexuality.

Whatever her sexual orientation, I contend that Martin, as a woman in a male-dominant society, was sensitive to the gendered "colour coding" prevalent in this period.

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[136] Marcia Brennan, "Pollock and Krasner: Touching and Transcending the boundaries of Abstract Expressionism", *Modernism's Masculine Subjects*: *Matisse, the New York School and Post-Painterly Abstraction* (MIT Press, Cambridge, 2004), 77.

[137] Gavin Butt, "How New York queered the idea of modern art," in *Varieties of Modernism*, ed. Paul Wood (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 315.

[138] John Bentley Mays, "Martin Demystified," *Canadian Art* 9, no. 3 (Fall, 1992): 49.

This might explain in part her reluctance to talk about colour. By colour coding, I mean the use of colour as signal (as a red traffic light signals stop, and a green signals go). Colour coding is part of our daily lives, and for the most part generic, benign and beneficial. It is simply colour at work, and more culturally "universal" or public than colour association, which has its roots in personal memory. Those of us old enough to remember the 1940s and 1950s, recall "blue is for boys, pink is for girls": a rigidly imposed societal injunction on gender-appropriate colour for apparel that continued from infancy into adulthood. This simple code, invoked at birth (even earlier, in the important matter of suitable colour for the nursery walls), signaled that there was a strict colour divide between genders, and no conflation of the two was permissible.

Although colour-coding is not intrinsic in art, it can be present through association within a particular cultural context. Painters need working knowledge of all areas of the spectrum before deciding on the qualities of colour needed to complement other pictorial elements and intentions, just as pianists must use all the keys on the piano to develop professional skills. My experience as a young artist in the 1960s provided firsthand experiences of the linkage of colour with gender. In 1968 I was subject to the sexist bias of a well-known local art critic who reviewed an international exhibition in which I and several other (all male) artists, of the Carmen Lamanna Gallery in Toronto each had art work. The graduated bands of colour of my work in the exhibition, a geometric "shaped" painting, were created by applying glazes of acrylic medium containing minute amounts of brilliant primary and secondary hues in regular and even strokes across each band with a four-inch brush onto the raw canvas surface. In her review of the works, the critic used the words "pastel" to describe their colour, and

"wallflower" to describe her notion of the work's place in the otherwise all-male artist context. A close look by the viewer would confirm the pure hues embedded in glaze, and not pastel colours, which result from the admixture of hue with white. In this instance, colour-coding then prevalent in a larger cultural context was used in the interpretation of the work to support its bias. During these same years, there were several internationally-known male artists painting with highly tinted or pastel colours, but their work was invariably addressed in "neutral" formalist terms, not overtly gendered ones.[139]

The long association of colour as the *feminine* mate to *masculine* form would have been reason enough for Martin, coming to artistic maturity in the unequivocally patriarchal society and its artistic community of the 1950s, to use it with great care. Painting and the feminine, we are told by philosopher and art historian Jacqueline Lichtenstein, were irrevocably linked when Plato condemned rhetoric in terms of cosmetics: "A fraudulent, baseborn, slavish knave; it tricks us with padding and makeup and polish and clothes, so that people carry around beauty not their own to the neglect of the beauty properly theirs through gymnastics."[140] Strong language, intended to devalue both rhetoric and the "cosmetic" of appearances. Elaborating on the association of colour and painting with the cosmetic, Lichtenstein states:

> The Platonic definition of these cosmetics that produce an illusion through appearances and colors involves an entire domain of activities where women and actors often reign, yet the definition so perfectly applies to the art of painting that it seems to do so by particular intent, though never by name. Painting is the cosmetic art par excellence and by definition, in which artifice exercises its seduction in the greatest autonomy with regard to reality and nature.[141]

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[139] Artists such as Allan Hacklin, David Diao, Larry Poons and Robert Irwin.
[140] Jacqueline Lichtenstein, *The Eloquence of Color: Rhetoric and Painting in the French Classical Age*, trans. E. McVarish (Berkeley, 1993), 38.
[141] Lichtenstein, 42.

And as noted scholar John Gage remarks,

> Feminist art historians might well find much to ponder in the history of colour, for in one phase of the post-Renaissance debate about the values of *disegno* and *colore*, even when both of them were characterized (as attributes of *pictura*) as female, colour was the 'bawd' whose wiles and attractions lured spectators into trafficking with her sister, drawing. In the nineteenth century the French theorist Charles Blanc stated categorically that 'drawing is the masculine sex of art and colour is the feminine sex', and for this reason colour could only be of secondary importance.[142]

Both scholars are referring to chromatic colour in these passages, and as Gage notes, in both European and Eastern cultures there have been periods when the achromatic colours black and white have stood for a more refined sensibility, or indicated superior status in society.[143] We can well imagine there have been periods in art and architecture in which achromatic colours have been more fashionable, or had more appeal to the sensibilities of the time.

In the Introduction, I described the familiar colour wheel as a key to the understanding of some of the effects of colour that Martin as a painter, would be cognizant of. As I also pointed out, no matter how orderly and symmetrical the colour wheel appears, it contains visual information that demolishes any link to a logical order. Neuroscientist Irving Massey tells us that although about a third of our brain is devoted to seeing, vision is mediated, and subject to a variety of distortions, not least of those ones created by the sensory effects of colour and light.[144] Speaking from an anthropological perspective, Ann Temkin explains that there is no universality in the experience of colours, and their affective qualities are "culturally specific, and even highly variable

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[142] John Gage, *Colour and Meaning: Art, Science and Symbolism* (Berkeley: University of California, 1999), 35.
[143] John Gage, *Colour and Meaning*, 31.
[144] Irving Massey, *The Neural Imagination: Aesthetic and Neuroscientific Approaches to the Arts* (Austin, University of Texas Press, 2009, 29.

within cultures."[145] Colour thus is intrinsic to human experience and pervasive in its complex effects. However, colour contrasts do exist as optical experience, and Agnes Martin, committed to painting, was culturally attuned to western colour theorists such as Chevreul or Itten, who described the seven major colour contrasts the painter needs to know in order to manage their unruly effects. [146]

To return from the colour wheel to the more complex visual context of a painting, the interactions between colour and form continue within a highly charged but immobile arena, where every incident is subject to intense, leisurely scrutiny and must somehow contribute to the larger intention of the whole. Martin was familiar with colours of such intensity as the ones found on the colour wheel, even as she made the choice to avoid them. As a painter determined to pursue the "perfection that is found in the mind" and to offer it for the meditation of others, it seems clear that, by choosing a palette in which chroma was highly diluted, Martin chose to control or eliminate colour's more capricious effects and especially its association with gender.

The reading of colour as gendered at mid-twentieth century is only one of a multitude of readings of this elusive partner to visual expression. Even if colour repels language or "wordliness", it is a visual sensation we depend on for information about nature and the "man-made" environment, and about states of being. It can be as loaded with meaning within the confines of a canvas as it is in nature and man-made colour-coded environments, although inside a painting it will rarely be as simple or direct. Paul

[145] Ann Temkin, "Color Shift," *Color Chart: Reinventing Color: 1950 to Today* (New York, Museum of Modern Art, 2008), 18.

[146] For example, a red compared to a red-orange appears dark and cool, because red-orange contains yellow, which is at the top end of the light-value scale and is considered to be the warmest colour on the wheel. The same red next to a red-violet appears lighter and warmer, because of the blue in the red-violet. The same red next to green, its opposite on the wheel, achieves intense brilliance and maximum difference.

Gauguin's lesson, delivered by Paul Serusier's matchbox painting, known as *The Talisman* (1888), "that form and color were expressive independent of the subject depicted," inspired a generation of young artists in Paris at the end of the nineteenth century.[147] Piet Mondrian and other early twentieth century abstractionists furthered the separations between form and colour with the invention of abstract, non-objective, painting. Within an abstract painting, colour does more than service form; it begins to assume some independence, although its independence is not unqualified. Freed from representation, colour still needs to justify its expanded opportunities of expression which, in subjective mode, it does by expressing emotion or states of being, and drawing on shared cultural memories and associations. In objective mode, it can appear as deliberately arbitrary as the colour chart paintings of Gerhard Richter, an artist whose work I will discuss at more length in the next chapter. Appearing arbitrary is another strategy used by artists to avoid admitting the possibility of meaning, or its absence.[148]

In the tightly focused arena of a painting, the artist selects, accepts or rejects qualities of paint and chroma. Choices must be made during countless stages and processes from conception to realization. Specific characteristics of medium and surface – dry, fluid, wash-like, viscous, transparent, opaque, gloss, matte – are deliberately or accidentally arrived at, and are retained or removed by painterly accumulation or erasure, all subject to an ongoing decision-making process that may be intuitive and spontaneous, but must ultimately be a deliberate and conscious one. Given these circumstances and

[147] Patricia Eckert Boyer, "The Nabis, Parisian Vanguard Humorous Illustrators, and the Circle of the Chat Noir," *The Nabis and the Parisian Avant-Garde* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press/Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Museum), 1988, 1.

[148] Colour-Field painting in the 1960s got perilously close to the merely optical pleasure of the decorative, and perhaps with some justification, was occasionally referred to pejoratively as 'eye candy', a term that undermines the sensory experience of pleasure and beauty.

processes concerning other attributes of the paint media, it should be clear that colour can never be incidental in a painting. Colours, whether chromatic, achromatic, or any of the thousands of their permutations that register a presence in the visual brain, are chosen or retained for visual qualities and effects such as brilliance of hue, lightness or darkness, temperature, and the myriad contrasts that result in their interactions – and ultimately, for their expressive potential. It is problematic for us that Martin chose to focus conversation on the philosophical ground of her painting and avoided discussing the decision-making processes for her colour, and it was to the grid, as a progression of abstract form, that scholars and critics gave most attention in these middle decades of the century.

When Martin returned to painting in 1974 after her six-year hiatus, it was to the same six-foot square format that she had decided on in the early 1960's when she began the grid paintings, but to a cultural climate not so hindered by gendered expectations. Although it appeared that Martin was picking up where she left off, there was a gradual move away from the orthogonal grid. The paintings now tended to be more open and emphasized horizontal expanse, or consisted of bands of horizontal or vertical colour across the surface. Most of the paintings from 1974 to 2000 were untitled, which can be seen as an effort to further detach her painting from being read as direct references to nature and more as reference to a Platonic Ideal. The colour in these post-hiatus paintings maintains the qualities of pale atmosphere and luminosity present in the early grids (Figure 26).

Figure 26-Agnes Martin, *Untitled #3*, (1980), acrylic and graphite on canvas, 72” x 72”. © Estate of Agnes Martin / SODRAC (2012).

On the rare occasion that the painting is on the dark side, it invariably falls somewhere within the range of blues and greys – deep, oceanic colours or the colour of dark cloudy days (Figure 27).

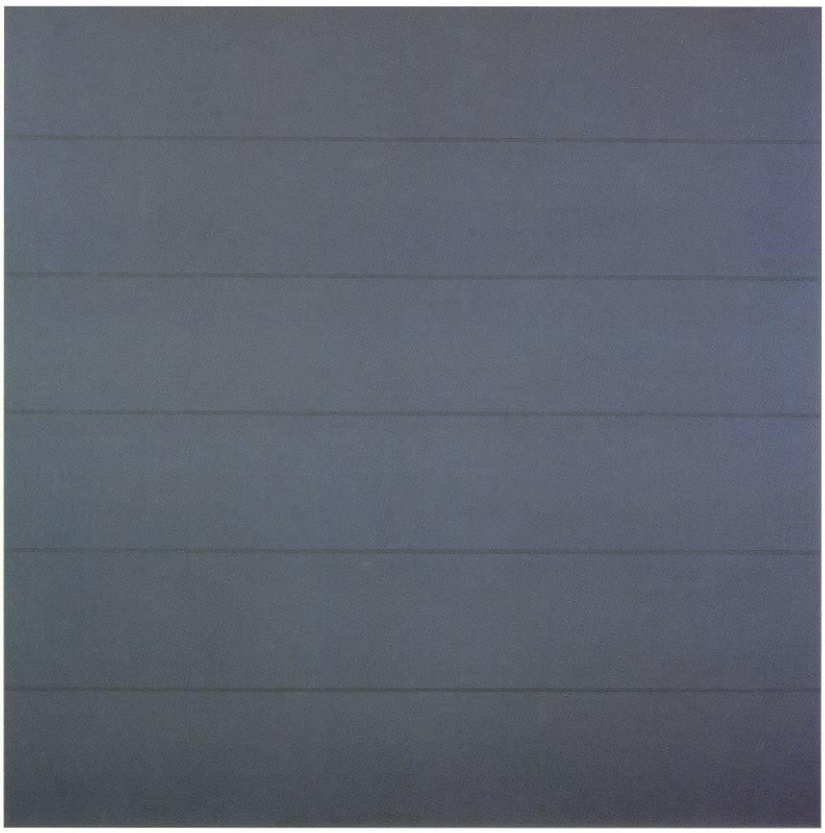

Figure 27-Agnes Martin, *Untitled #5*, (1989), acrylic and graphite on canvas, 72" x 72". © Estate of Agnes Martin / SODRAC (2012).

As John Bentley Mays describes these late paintings in 1992, "…sometimes resolutely grey, even dark, sometimes evanescent as fog – a luminous light grey with a breath of mauve in it, an off-white that whispers faintly of yellow." [149]

There is a complete absence of colours approaching purity of hue, although to refer back to the discussion of gendered colour, it is interesting that gradually the colours in these later paintings become warmer, and therefore more closely associated with the feminine palette. They are still the result of a layering of thin washes of colour, but now the association of such colour with pastels is no longer handicapped by the rigid gender associations in place at mid-century. The culture around Martin had at last moved on, the

[149] John Bentley Mays, "Martin Demystified," *Canadian Art* (Fall, 1992): 47.

colour coding of gender had diminished. Abstraction itself was maturing, and colour could perhaps begin to explore its independence, even as it drew on old sources.

Chapter 4. Gerhard Richter (1932-)

> "It is not in the analysis of truth that we must seek the reasons for the Platonic condemnation of painting but in that of pleasure. The condemnation rests on two series of arguments, the first from the theory of mimesis and the second from the definition of persuasive discourse. Condemned because of the sophistic character of its imitation, painting is also rejected in the name of the rhetorical effects of its images. Only when the analysis turns to the rhetorical aspect of the problem does it reach painting's essence, which explains the power of its illusion and defines its seduction: the glimmer of its colors.
> For to paint is, first and foremost, to color." J.L., 1993[150]

> "Aside from all theory and interpretation, I take pleasure in the purely visual aspects of these paintings." G.R., 2006[151]

In the previous two chapters we looked at some of the conditions for the reduced role of chromatic colour in the grid paintings of Agnes Martin and Ad Reinhardt. As self-defined Abstract Expressionists committed to the search for transcendental and aesthetic truths, Reinhardt and Martin chose paths that were also closely aligned with the notions of essential colour inherent in the severely reduced palette of Mondrian's early neo-plasticism. Although Mondrian's late paintings highlighted the essentialist grid, they also promised a return to a chromatic opticality and visceral energy that held no interest for Reinhardt and Martin, given the more stringent Platonic demands of Reinhardt's art-for-art-sake mission and Martin's search for "the perfection that resides in the mind." To satisfy such aims, Reinhardt challenged colour to the point of annihilation through black in the direction he took with the nine-part grid, while Martin subdued naturalistic colour in several ways, most often by applying it in thin, transparent, almost colourless, washes over white gesso grounds. These strategies were totally bound up in the search for an

[150] Jacqueline Lichtenstein, *The Eloquence of Color*,50

[151] Gerhard Richter, *Gerhard Richter : Writings 1961-2007*, "Notes for a press conference, 28 July 2006", ed. Dietmar Elger and Hans Ulrich Obrist (New York : Distributed Art Publishers, 2009), 517, referring *to 4,096 Colors*, 1974.

expression of ideals in which colour inevitably must be thought of as the problem child needing strict supervision – an ironic reminder of its potential for disruption.

Gerhard Richter holds no such stringent, carefully wrought proscriptions for colour's role. The Colour Chart paintings, the subset of his work that is the subject of this thesis, were launched in 1966 from the stance of an avant-garde artist, one in which all conventions can be challenged or discarded. Over the course of forty years his stance was subtly but profoundly altered, as the body of work that began as reproductions of commercial colour charts became coloured grid paintings. This shift undermined the utilitarian purpose and non-subjective reading of colour that is possible with a colour chart, catapulting this visual substance back into the traditional arena of the painting canvas. My argument in this chapter is that in these paintings Richter declares the equality of colour with form, as it is colour in these works that takes on the role of composition long held by form. The colour charts have been sustained out of a love of colour for its own sake, under cover of Richter's strategy of simultaneously producing diverse bodies of painting, that in such diversity, suggest an objective distance if not an attitude of detachment, in their approach. This strategy began as a necessary defense in the 1960s, during a period of growing hostility towards painting, towards abstraction, and most of all, towards colour.

Richter's work with colour as a subject for investigation came, paradoxically, via his introduction to the work of Dada, Fluxus and Pop artists, whose "anti-art" strategies stimulated Richter's avant-garde ambitions.[152] Trained in the German Democratic

[152] The Avant-garde alternately posed itself against social injustices or the "ruling taste" in art. After the successful accommodation of hegemonic Abstract Expressionism by the sector of society that governed the art world' taste-making institutions, its combative stance became more difficult to maintain. Robert

Republic in mural painting and Soviet Socialist Realism, his first exposure in 1959 to the work of Western artists at *Documenta 2* in Kassel, West Germany, was invigorated by the "sheer brazenness" of the paintings of Jackson Pollock and Lucio Fontana.[153] This exposure, to a large contingent of Abstract Expressionist painters already displaying a schism opened in the early 1950s between gestural "action" painting and geometric colour field painting, was a comprehensive and rapid introduction for Richter to the magnitude of painting's dilemma in a century characterized by a rapid succession of painterly "isms".

By the early 1960s the hegemony of Abstract Expressionist painting along with its subjective, expressive colour and transcendental aims, was overtaken by new forms that tended to have more impersonal, optical, decorative, and sometimes trivializing, attitudes towards colour – among them, Pop, Colour Field painting, and Minimal art. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the death of painting itself was loudly declared, as Conceptual art forms and practices emerged and took centre stage. Such dismissive attitudes towards painting, and colour in particular, meant that it was not uncommon for art magazines during this period to publish entirely in black and white.[154] The paradox of this is that colour reproduction and printing costs were on the decline in the 1960s. For Richter to use colour as subject during such an intensely chromophobic period, strategies of

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Jay Wolff, "The Dilemma of American Avant-garde Painting," *Art Journal* 22, no. 3 (Spring, 1963): 153-157.

[153] Gerhard Richter, quoted in Robert Storr, *Gerhard Richter: Forty Years of Painting* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2002), 22.

[154] *Parachute* and *File*, two Canadian art magazines, come to mind.

detachment were essential, and the readymade model of the commercial colour chart provided the foil that masked his interest.[155]

In spite of the avant-garde challenges to painting's hegemony, brought to a peak with Conceptual art, or perhaps because of it, Richter committed to new strategies to keep it alive, as witness the 1966 Dadaist-inspired exhibition statement issued jointly with artist Sigmar Polke, in which Richter and Polke declared, "We cannot assume that good pictures will be painted one day: we must take matters into our own hands!" [156] The predicament for painting seems to have served as a caution for Richter to avoid the restrictive notion of a single style. Instead, he chose the "relevance of painting" as his subject for analysis, approached through a strategy described by Michael Danoff as diverse "models of perception," as his way to engage with the elements of the art of painting from a credible and objective distance. [157] The multiplicity of Richter's explorations includes, but is not limited to, the optical or "retinal" aspects of painting. As part of a larger strategy for his investigations of the possibilities of painting, the grid paintings collectively referred to as the Colour Charts are a subset that has been consistently maintained as a forum that privileges colour in painting, just as other models privilege other pictorial elements, narrative or representational possibilities.

In support of my argument, I claim that the Colour Charts' importance within Richter's larger project has most often been overlooked or underestimated, not least because of colour's resistance to language and the prevailing mistrust of colour by artists,

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[155] Chromophobia is the term coined by David Batchelor, in *Chromophobia* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), 22, to describe the fear of contamination or corruption through colour.

[156] Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke, "Text for exhibition catalogue, Galerie h, Hanover, 1966, written jointly with Sigmar Polke" in *Gerhard Richter: Writings 1961- 2007* (New York: Distributed Art Publications, 2009), 36.

[157] I. Michael Danoff, "Heterogeneity: an introduction to the work of Gerhard Richter" in Roald Nasgaard, *Gerhard Richter: Paintings*, ed. Terry A. Neff (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), 9.

critics and other members of "the art world" throughout the later decades of the twentieth century, but also because of Richter's intentional strategy for deflection, which has its genesis in the complex circumstances of his emergence as an artist under the utopian but restrictive ideals of Socialist Realism. Richter's multiple strategies for painting provided a "protective shield" in what was a difficult time for anyone with a desire to paint, let alone to privilege colour. They deflect any narrowly focused critique or pigeon-holing of his work while defending that desire, and evidence his awareness of the stakes for its practice.

In 1966, the year of Richter's joint statement with Polke, and in the spirit of the "readymade" of Duchamp and the Pop Art of Andy Warhol's soup cans, Richter began to produce the first group of eighteen Colour Chart paintings, based on commercial colour samples. In a recent conversation, according to Ann Temkin,

> He recalls simply noticing a color chart one day and realizing that 'it looks like a painting. It's wonderful.' The charts provided an answer to a question that Richter already had in mind: not only how to dissociate color from its traditional descriptive, symbolic, or expressive ends, but also how to avoid the dogma that surrounded geometric abstraction.[158]

I think it important to note here that Richter's above colour-affirming statement was made in 2007, and that there is nothing as openly declarative to be found in his earlier writings or interviews. Temkin accurately interprets the separation Richter needed, but does not comment on the sensory feast of colour the word "wonderful" conveys.

The Colour Chart paintings belong to the Constructive Works, one of three divisions in Richter's early system of cataloguing, and although contrived to better define

[158] Ann Temkin, "Gerhard Richter," *Color Chart: Reinventing Color, 1950 to Today* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2008), 91.

and catalogue his vast area of exploration, its divisions may be somewhat porous.[159] Richter's larger mission was to study the relevance of painting, and in this he was not held captive to any stylistic or material process regime. Richter's output of art work over the past fifty years has been enormous and varied. Other bodies of work within his oeuvre are not central to my thesis, and so will not be discussed in any depth, except to mention the monochromatic Grey Paintings produced between 1968 and 1975. The Grey Paintings open up the question of whether Richter's emotional detachment was as real as perceived by earlier scholars during the period of its production, and remind us that the observer's response, although not always known, exists as the necessary critical and subjective completion of the work.

The Grey Paintings also belong to the Constructive Works, and it is these, paradoxically, that will help us understand the potential for the expression of emotion in the Colour Charts, despite their apparent distance from any such intention. They also help us understand the unwillingness of scholars, particularly during the chromophobic period in which the Colour Charts began, to consider the presence of any colour that admitted to the conveyance of emotional or spiritual value. The Colour Charts are extremely chromatic and diffuse in their effects: the Grey Paintings are monochromatic and, to recall Itten on the results of mixing colour opposites with each other, the deliberate annihilation of colour.

The Grey Paintings mark a period in which the artist admits to being in the midst of an existential crisis, a state laden with the emotion of despair. After making the first paintings with black and white, the artist soon chose to neutralize hues by admixture to make greys. This process of dissolution of chromatic intensity requires a working

[159] Terry A. Neff (ed.) *Gerhard Richter Paintings*,37.

engagement with colour and medium that is considerably more complex than simply mixing white and black. The paintings exhibit a range of neutral greys in which original hue components almost disappear, in the manner of Reinhardt's "black" paintings. The method of application varies from one to another, but is performed with a deliberate mechanical uniformity that enhances a reading of emotional distance, further confirming their status as signs of remoteness as a psychological state.

When asked about their genesis Richter answered, "The grey paintings… result from a state that was very negative. It has a lot to do with hopelessness, depression…"[160] and in a later interview, "I think grey is an important colour – the ideal colour for indifference, fence-sitting, keeping quiet, despair. In other words, for states of being and situations that affect one, and for which one would like to find a visual expression."[161] The composer John Cage, whose philosophy, like that of Reinhardt and Martin, was influenced by Zen Buddhism, made a lasting impression on Richter for his use of aleatory or chance methods in his writing and sound pieces. Richter liked to quote from Cage's famous *Lecture on Nothing:* "I have nothing to say and I am saying it," a line that indicates perseverance in the face of adversity, hope in the face of abjection.[162]

As Roald Nasgaard noted in 1988, the category of the Constructive Works is most resistant to a generalized description, because of the clearly diverse paths Richter chose to explore to address theoretical issues through the fundamental materials of painting.[163] For instance, as well as the Grey Paintings just referred to, the Constructive Works also

[160] Gerhard Richter, "Interview with Christiane Vielhaber, 1986," *Gerhard Richter: Writings*, 191.
[161] Gerhard Richter, "Interview with Jan Thorn-Prikker, 2004," *Gerhard Richter: Writings*, 478.
[162] Gerhard Richter, "Interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist, 2007," *Gerhard Richter: Writings*, 531.
[163] Roald Nasgaard, *Gerhard Richter Paintings*, 74.

include two other groupings, one known as the Inpaintings, and an even less defined group consisting of the Door and Window Paintings, the Glass Panes and Mirrors, each of which begin from discrete hypotheses and proceed through dissimilar processes.

At the time these divisions were established Richter was engaging with the ideas of Marcel Duchamp and Pop Art. Richter admits to a strong interest in Mondrian, but less so in Malevich, and states that the colour charts were influenced by Pop Art and "directed against the efforts of the Neo-Constructivists, Albers and the rest."[164] The spirit of questioning, and of all ideological premises underlying what art is or can be, appears to be basic to Richter's motivation as an artist. The gradual breakdown of Richter's faith in the potential state-sponsored and controlled art to improve society had begun during his early years as an art student in Dresden from 1950 to 1956, and continued as he saw ever more suppression of artistic freedoms.[165] In 1962, one year after leaving East Germany and the utopian promises and idealism of Socialism, Richter wrote, "There is no excuse whatever for uncritically accepting what one takes over from others." That same year he took the stance he has since maintained against any kind of "ism", whether in art or social and political orders.[166]

The other two divisions of Richter's oeuvre are the Abstract Paintings and the Figurative Works, to which the earlier Photo Paintings based on "found" images belong. All, including abstracts done before the 1980s, are based on Richter's appropriation of readily available images or his own photographs and exhibit his characteristic tendency to

[164] Richter, "Interview with Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, 1986," *Gerhard Richter: Writings,* 169.
[165] Dietmar Elger, *Gerhard Richter: A Life in Painting*, trans. Elizabeth Solaro (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 18.
[166] Richter, "Notes, 1962," *Gerhard Richter: Writings,* 14.

deliberately streak or blur the edges of forms in his images, resulting in paintings that range from close representation to abstraction.

The scholarship has tended to focus on works other than Richter's Colour Charts, such as *October 18, 1977*, the fifteen black and white paintings of 1988 which chronicle the deaths of members of the German terrorist Red Army Faction and belong to the Figurative Works, and *Atlas,* the ongoing archive of photographs and source materials for his paintings. More regularly produced than the Colour Chart paintings, the figurative and photo-based works for which the artist is best known generate the most interest on the part of scholars. These groups are more varied and sustained, and reference familiar subjects and traditional genres – landscape, portrait, still-life, recent events and news stories, and abstract painting evocative of landscape – all with more potential for narrative and critique. The unusual strategy of multiplicity of genres and styles Richter works within presents a wealth of questions for scholars concerning his ultimate motivations for them. Colour is impervious to such questioning, and dependant on the subjective lens of the viewer for any sympathetic treatment it receives.

The first eighteen Colour Chart paintings appear as enlarged reproductions of commercial colour samples, absent the name or number that would usually identify each hue, an absence that effectively releases them from their utilitarian origins (Figure 28).

Figure 28-Gerhard Richter, *Twelve Colors*, (1966), enamel on canvas, 27½" x 25½". © Gerhard Richter 2012.

Colour charts have been widely available from the manufacturers of ready-mixed paint for interior and exterior use since the 1880s.[167] They can be found in any hardware or building supply store, in a wide variety of formats – cards, brochures and catalogues – depending on product line, and are available to everyone from professional housepainter to do-it-yourselfer. What Ann Temkin describes as the "color-chart sensibility" in contemporary art has arisen as a result of the wide availability of such charts, which arrange individual colour units in rows and columns on neutral fields. The commercial colour chart has effectively challenged the logic of the colour wheel for the artist, and as it represents an available material commodity, it easily displaces the long association of colour with the artist's persona and skills as colourist that prevailed into the 1960s. In this it depersonalizes colour.

[167] Ann Temkin, "Color Shift," *Color Chart: Reinventing Color, 1950 to Today* (New York: MOMA, 2008) 16.

The colour chart paintings range from easel size to monumental, within a variety of formats common to paint manufacturers' colour charts, each containing from two to 192 colours. The one work containing 192 colours, *Ten Large Colour Panels* (Figure 29) was first exhibited as an accordion-folded colour chart, even though it consisted of ten separate panels.[168]

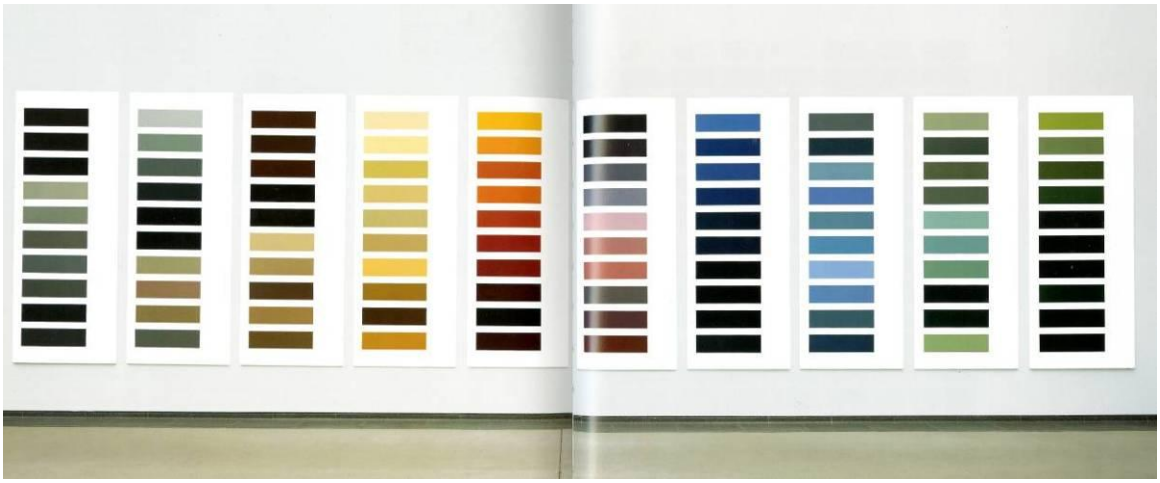

Figure 29-Gerhard Richter, *Ten Large Colour Panels*, (1966/71/72), lacquer on white primed canvas, ten panels, each 8'2 7/16" x 37 1/8", overall: 8' 2 7/16" x 31'2". © Gerhard Richter 2012.

Although done on canvas, an artist's painterly substrate, the large, gloss-enameled square or rectangular blocks of colour set on flat white primer backgrounds of these paintings mimic the non-hierarchical presentation of commercial colour charts, thus allaying expectations we may have of relationship or composition common to painting.[169] This look is intentional according to the art historian Roald Nasgaard, who identifies both the early colour sample paintings and Richter's simultaneous production of photo-based

[168] "The first colour charts were unsystematic. They were based directly on commercial colour samples." Gerhard Richter, "Interview with Irmeline Lebeer, 1973," *Gerhard Richter: Writings*, 82.

[169] According to Ann Temkin, in *Color Chart*, 90, the third colour chart in this group, *192 Colours*, of 1966, was the only exception to enamel paint, and instead was done with oils.

paintings as a uniquely German perspective on American Pop Art, and indicative of Richter's "anti-aesthetic" sensibility in these years.[170]

The designer or home decorator studies a colour chart objectively with the aim of meeting the specific intentions of a project. These objectives vary from matching existing colour schemes and achieving desired light levels and colour temperatures, to creating an ambience in which colour may be used to reflect either a designated or preferred status.

Masquerading as colour samples then, Richter's paintings are to all appearances detached from the subjective aesthetic of painting that had been emblematic of painting until the demise of Abstract Expressionism in the early 1960s. In the movements that followed this demise, the stance of objective detachment became a requisite of artists towards their materials and processes. Presented as paintings, the Colour Charts inevitably invite contemplation and consideration of visual or optical qualities of colour in relation to the chart forms in which these colours reside, even if they do not suggest symbolic, emotional or psychological meaning.

Enlarged from easel to mural size, the same colour chart first provokes questions concerning its legitimacy as a subject of painting – is the colour chart the subject, or is this an abstract painting that resembles a colour chart? Because of the art gallery context in which the work is viewed, the colour chart asks the observer to study it according to established conventions for evaluating the pictorial elements and processes of painting. The viewer must then assess them according to the visual aesthetic given art objects. But the scholarship on Richter has omitted this second step. Although they have long accepted these works as within the twentieth-century lineage of the readymade and catalogued their conceptual processes, the next stage of analysis, in which the Colour

[170] Roald Nasgaard, "The Constructive Work," *Gerhard Richter: Paintings*, 76.

Charts are examined as art objects, that is, on formal visual terms with aesthetic and philosophical truth or consequences, has not been adequately satisfied. We might ask whether it is possible to perform such analysis, given their presentation as reproductions, yet we must, because of the viewing context.

Richter's strategy of presenting these paintings as colour charts, allows him to avoid the kind of direct formal analysis conventionally accorded paintings, where all possible elements – including scale and dimension, line and shape, pattern and repetition, visual characteristics of colour and qualities of texture and surface – are examined in relation to how well they satisfy or challenge our expectation of their functions within holistic pictorial organization or composition. We know these works are meant to look like colour charts; by accepting this deceptive presentation, we eliminate the conventional reading of them as paintings.

Any analysis of these works as paintings becomes a subjective, and paradoxically subversive, response to their presentation as utilitarian colour charts. If we choose to analyze them according to painting conventions, we are ignoring their implicit interdiction to scrutiny by visual aesthetic. Marcel Duchamp had posed this same kind of dilemma on his submission, made under the name of Richard Mutt, of *Fountain*, (1917), to an exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists, although in less ambiguous terms. A mass-produced, "readymade" urinal, this object generated strong reaction not just to its originality, but its decency. As Duchamp stated in defense of his submission, "Whether Mr. Mutt with his own hands made the fountain or not has no importance. He CHOSE it.

He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view – created a new thought for that object."[171]

The colour chart is an ambiguous object containing little more than colours uniformly presented within a grid form and divorced from any possible representational relationships. The simple step of removing its indexical colour chart identification has the potential to transform the colour chart into an abstract painting. With the colour charts of 1971, Richter confronted the visual or retinal aspect of painting on its own ground, by taking cues from the Conceptual art movement that arose in the late 1960s as part of the Duchamp-ian lineage that challenged the nature of art – its genesis, processes and privilege of visual or retinal over idea.

Although the earlier Colour Charts were predetermined as copies or modeled after colour charts, and retain similar formats, the 1971 group of paintings were generated by a conceptual system that emphasized process, in which the finished painting is substantially predetermined through rules of procedure. This meant pre-determining the overall size and dimensions of the finished works, the size, number, shape and dimensions of the grid structure, as well as the process by which its colours were selected. That these paintings are no longer duplications of colour charts is clearly evidenced by the much larger number of colours they contain; well in excess of what might be useful in a colour chart, they present instead dizzying optical arrays of colour.

[171] Dawn Ades, Neil Cox, David Hopkins, *Marcel Duchamp* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999), 127.

Figure 30-Gerhard Richter, *180 Colours*, (1971), catalogue raisonné ("CR") 300-1, oil on canvas, 78¾" x 78¾".© Gerhard Richter 2012.

Four of the five works in this group are six-foot square paintings, each containing 180 tones arrived at, according to Ann Temkin, through a mathematical process in which the three primaries were mixed twice to produce twelve tones or intermixtures, although it is not clear how this process worked (Figure 30 and Figure 31).[172]

[172] Ann Temkin, "Gerhard Richter," *Color Chart: Reinventing Colour*, 91.

Figure 31-Gerhard Richter, *180 Colours*, (1971), CR 300-3, oil on canvas, 78¾" x 78¾".© Gerhard Richter 2012.

Painters' colours, whether organic pigment or dye-based, vary wildly in their mixing capacities. Without knowledge of colorant properties and visual practice in attempting to achieve visual equality, it is difficult enough to determine the nine equal tones or visual mixtures that make up the standard twelve-hue colour circle. [173]

[173] Johannes Itten, *The Art of Color*, 35.

We do not know how Richter arrived at these twelve tones, but it is likely that he chose a mathematical and conceptual approach that would privilege the idea of physical quantity or measurement of colour medium over visual equalization. Given the ephemeral nature of colour and its dependence on relationship with other colour, ratios in intermixtures such as 1:2 or 1:3 are next to impossible for us to identify. Mixing from three primaries twice may have been done, for instance, by mixing blue with a double quantity of red, and then mixing the resulting colour, red-red-blue, with red again, to produce red-red-red-blue. Each of the twelve tones were then lightened in seven gradations, and darkened in another seven, to produce 168 tones. The resulting tones, together with the original twelve derived from primaries, were numbered using a system similar to the one Ellsworth Kelly employed in his grid paintings and collages of 1952, then selected at random from a box before the colours they represented were painted into grid cells. The location of each colour was not randomly chosen; such a procedure would mean a redundant doubling of the random selection already made, and another numbering system would have to be established to determine the random location. Here it is more likely that Richter made the decision to follow the logical order of the grid by, for instance, placing the colours from top to bottom and left to right. As well as being a rational approach, it is also the easiest to perform, and consistent with conceptual art processes, in which evidence of the artist's agency is denied, yet confirmed as a subjective manifestation through its material reification.

Ann Temkin claims that each of these four paintings consists of the same 180 tones, "all in different random arrangements in the grid", but a close comparison of any two of the set shows tints and shades that either don't appear in all four paintings or do so

with much greater frequency than a "once only" use would allow. What this suggests is that with each painting Richter began anew with three primaries and performed the same mathematical procedure but with different ratios, or used different base primaries.

As anyone who has tried to make a perfect 12-hue colour wheel knows, while there may be a barely perceptible difference between two blues labeled primaries, whether they tend towards the yellow or red side of the spectrum will result in more evident differences as mixing progresses. For instance, secondary orange is the equal visual mixture of a primary red and a primary yellow, but if either of these two primaries have the slightest amount of blue in them, the results will be a dull or muddied orange. Impurities not visible to the eye in a primary colour become more apparent in each subsequent admixture.

Richter was not captive to the laws of chance or mathematics; intuition and a personal aesthetic were also drivers in his explorations of colour, as the needs of the moment arose. In reference to the production of these paintings in an interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist in 1993, Richter acknowledged that he had "found it interesting to tie chance to a wholly rigid order." In the same interview, Richter also said that "it had cost me a great deal of work to develop the right proportions and give it the right look," an admission that at all stages of production, through mathematical and random processes and procedures, satisfying his sense of a visual aesthetic was uppermost, even if it meant using subjective agency.[174]

In 1973, Richter produced several large colour charts paintings with 1,024 colours, and four of these canvasses are of equal size, 100" x 188", in rectangular, horizontal format, each with 1,024 colours on a white primer ground that provides equal

[174] Gerhard Richter, "Interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist, 1993," *Gerhard Richter: Writings*, 300.

narrow white interstices in all four works. Richter provided the following statement for the group exhibition they were part of in 1973:

> In order to present all the existent colour tones in one picture, I developed a system which – based on the 3 primary colours plus grey – permitted a progressive differentiation in constantly uniform steps. 4 x 4 = 16 x 4 = 64 x 4 = 256 x 4 = 1024. It was necessary to use the number '4' as a multiplicator, because I wanted to maintain the same ratio between the size of the painting and the format and number of colour fields. It seemed pointless to use more than 1024 colour tones (e.g., 4096), for the distinction between one graduation of tone and the next would have been no longer visible.
>
> The arrangement of the colour tones in the fields was coincidental, so as to achieve a diffuse, indifferent overall effect and thus permit exciting details. The rigid screen prevents the formation of figurations, although these can be made visible if an effort is made. This type of artificial naturalism is an aspect that fascinates me, as does the fact that if I had painted all possible permutations it would have taken over 400 billion years to finish all the canvases. I wanted to paint four large multi-coloured pictures.[175]

In its focus on a mathematical procedure, this explains some of the process yet omits important details, similar to those described above concerning the colour chart paintings of 1971. For instance, given the range of gradations between white and black, as well as asking whether the primaries were the same in all paintings, we should ask if the same grey was used in each painting. What was of most interest to scholars in this statement, however, is Richter's suggestion of a supposed attempt at artificial naturalism that I will respond to further on in this chapter.[176]

Although the format is identical in each of the four paintings and key colours and mathematical procedures remain the same, variation in the resulting colour mixes from

[175] Gerhard Richter, quoted in *Gerhard Richter: Paintings* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), 77, from *Gerhard Richter* (Brussels: Palais des Beaux-Arts, 1973), reprinted in English trans. In Pier + Ocean (London: Hayward Gallery, and Otterlo: Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, 1980), 114. A more recent translation, by Dietmar Elger and Hans Ulrich Obrist, of this quote, in *Gerhard Richter: Writings 1960-2007*, misleadingly refers to the colour fields as squares.

[176] Nasgaard, *Gerhard Richter,* 77.

one to the next, along with variation in chance placement of colour, produce distinct differences.

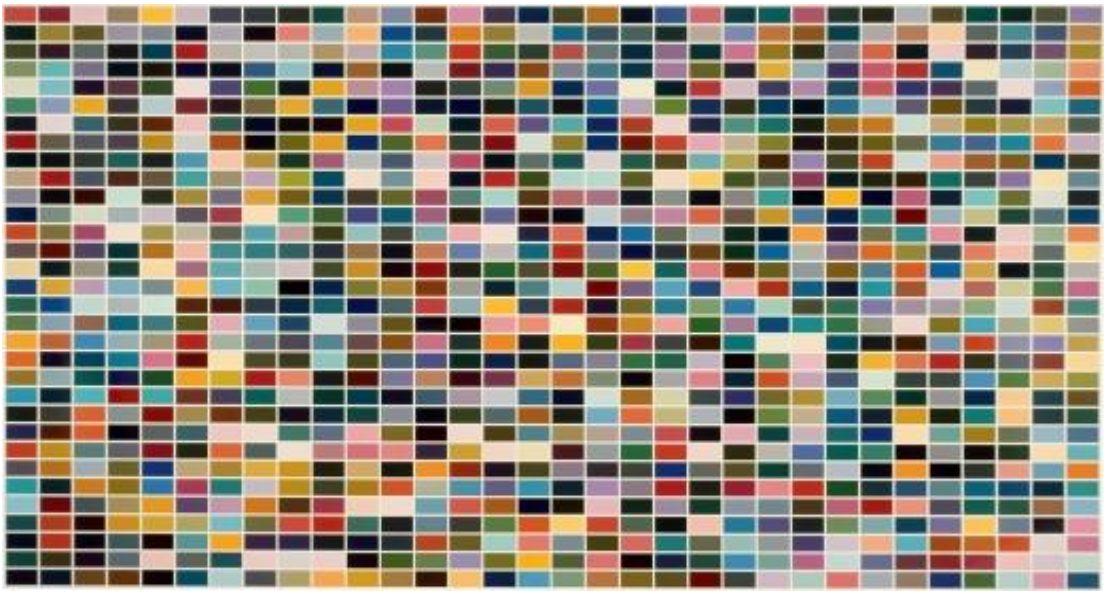

Figure 32-Gerhard Richter, *1024 Colours*, (1973), CR 350-1, enamel on canvas, 100" x 188". © Gerhard Richter 2012.

In these works it becomes obvious that from one to another, there is some slippage either in the key colours or in the process of determining ratios in the mixtures in each painting (Figure 32 and Figure 33).

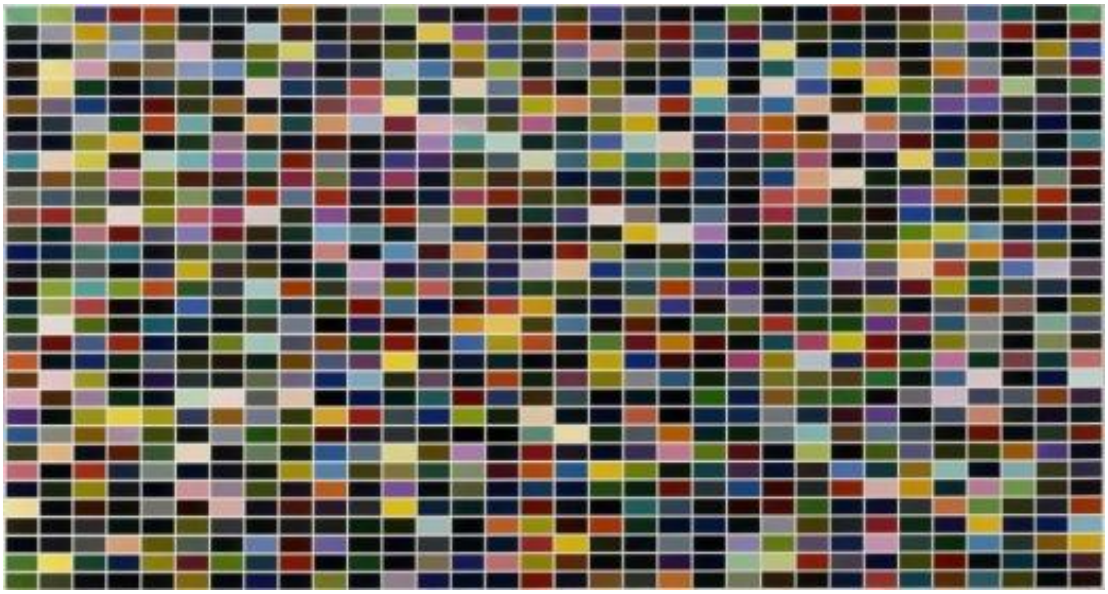

Figure 33-Gerhard Richter, *1024 Colours*, (1973), CR 350-2, enamel on canvas, 100" x 188". © Gerhard Richter 2012.

The preponderance of tints and light tones in *1024 Colours* (350-1) for instance, is in sharp contrast to the density of deep shades and earth greens of *1024 Colours* (350-2).

When compared with the luminosity of similar tints and tones in *1024 Colours* (350-2), an effect created by the larger number of surrounding dark tones and shades, the tints and tones in the first painting, *1024 Colours* (350-1) appear flat and dull.

On prolonged viewing of these monumental works, and driven by the search for shape initiated by the visual cortex, the restless eye of the observer will search for patterns or linkages in their colours that might constitute potential imagery. This activity is beyond our conscious control and in constant operation. We need it to keep us safe in the world, to identify dangers before they are upon us, and we use it to navigate through two-dimensional pictures as well. As Rudolf Arnheim tells us in describing how a gestalt, a whole or shape, is put together: "What is true of shape, also holds for color."[177] We

[177] Arnheim, "The Intelligence of Perception," *Visual Thinking* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), 30.

draw on pre-existing concepts to form perceptions, of which likenesses and similarities become organizing materials. Knowing this helps us understand that Richter's professed interest in "artificial naturalism" is not intended to be satisfied in these works, but to keep our attention, to provoke our imagination and our willingness to accept and play with ambiguous illusions. In 1985, Richter wrote,

> 'Formal conception', 'composition', 'line', 'distribution of light and shade', 'balance or disparity of colour' – such concepts are meant to explain that what counts in a work of art is not its content, the representation of an object: the thing represented is there only to serve the realization of those formal concerns, which are the truly important thing, the real point of the painting.[178]

This indicates more clearly that his foremost interest in the colour chart paintings was the exploration of colour and its relationships, and that the idea of an appearance of figuration arising through chance methods was speculative and fanciful. Fragments of patterns that come into view, however fleetingly, exist because of similarities of hue, tonality and light value that the visual cortex busily tries to organize into an intelligible whole.

The sheer number of colours present in such nuanced and subtle variation seems to suggest a subjective process of selection. The rigidity of the grid and its stark interstices, which function as aide memoire to earlier colour science, and what we may know of the initiating conceptual process, visually contradicts this notion. Vertical stacks or horizontal lines will form and fall apart again as the eye moves and brings another colour situation in view. In *1024 Colours* (350-1), at one moment there are vertical stacks of mid-tone and darker colours punctuated by individual rectangles of light pink and yellow that the eye reads horizontally. At another moment the eye isolates small

[178] Gerhard Richter, "Notes, 1985", *Gerhard Richter: Writings, 1960-2007,* 140.

constellations of familiar shapes such as crosses, or spots the contrast of the clump of dark colours in the bottom left with the light colours in the lower right corner. At still another moment, the eye scans vertical columns until they begin to lose their straight lines under the optical competition of warm gold-oranges against cooler greys and pale blues. In *1024 Colours* (350-2), the vertical columns of dark colour predominate even more than in *1024 Colours* (350-1), and when we focus on the higher tints, we may begin to see hazy circular formations, like wisps of smoke.

Whether this was what Richter meant by "artificial naturalism" is arguable, and Richter is careful to ensure that such imagery remains ambiguous, always straddling the line between abstraction and the promise of something more representational, more real. We are experiencing in each painting, through the different rhythms, directions, and movements caused by constellations of colours each with unique persona, the "formal concerns" that are paramount to the artist.

In the literature on the Colour Charts, although mathematical processes and random procedures are described, such phenomena as I have just related are not mentioned. In my view, this visual and imaginative "play" is not incidental, but central to our understanding of these paintings. Although all painting belongs to a visual language, it is most frequently mediated by representations of known or imaginary worlds that provide grounds for spoken language or narrative, the dominant means of discourse. Painting that consists of the barest essentials, of simple grid-form and colour unalloyed to representation, resist such mediation intentionally. The challenge is to attempt to comprehend the power and meaning of works that provide this resistance on the terms of its visual or optical language, which in these works must be understood as the language

of colour. Visual or optical colour refers to how visible, material properties of colour are registered by the eye and subsequently processed in the visual cortex, and in these paintings it is colour that addresses us directly, while the repetitive pattern of underlying orthogonal grid is the supporting cast.

Richter continued the colour chart paintings in 1973-74 with a group of 26 paintings of different shape and size in which green replaced grey as a key colour in grids ranging from 4, 16, 64, 256, 1,024 and in one instance a 4,096 colour unit work was made by repeating 1,024 colours made x 4.

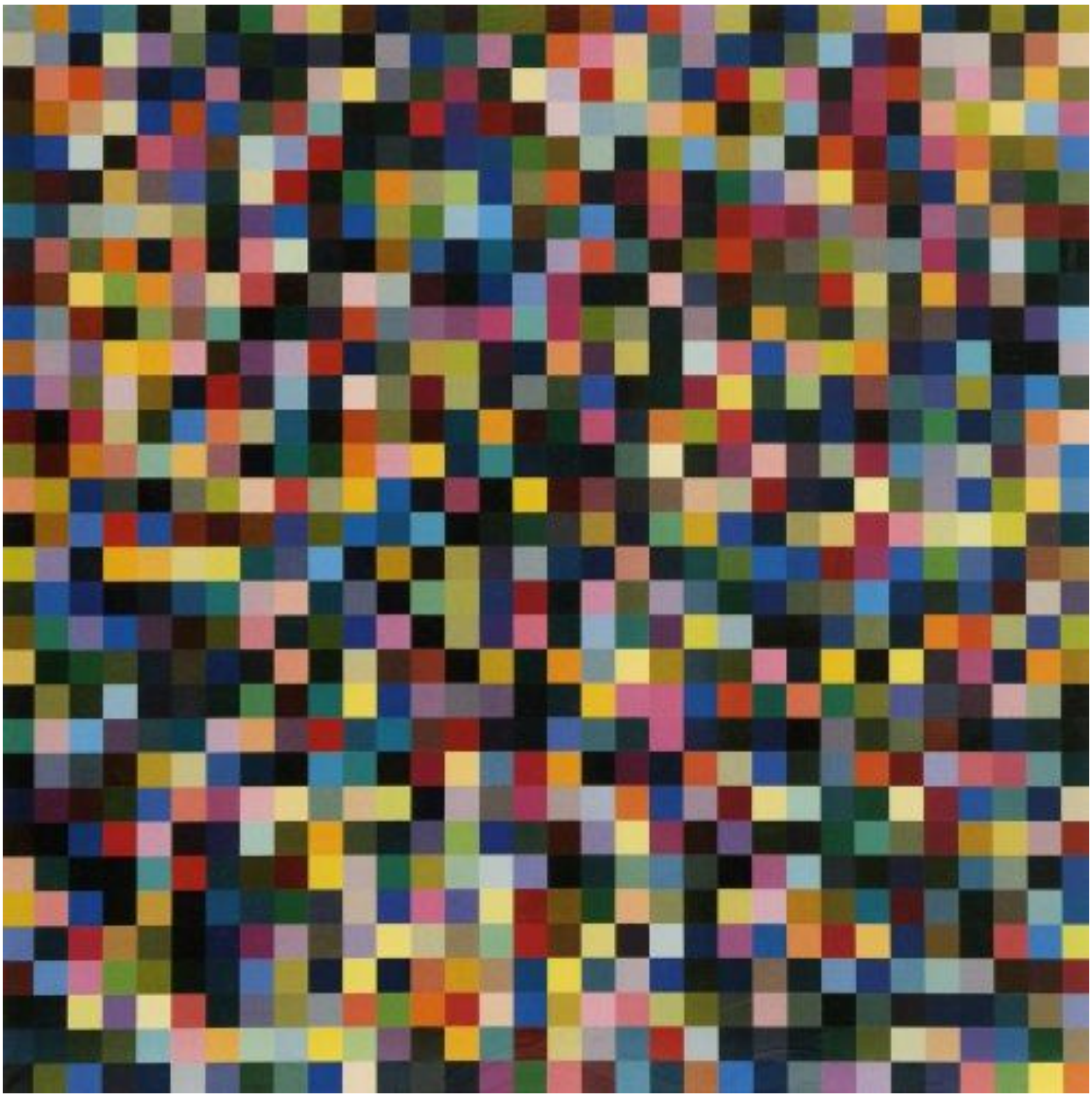

Figure 34-Gerhard Richter, *1024 Colours*, (1974), CR 355-1, enamel on canvas, 117¾" x 117¾".© Gerhard Richter 2012.

His most significant changes during this period were to introduce the use of a square instead of horizontal grid for the first time, and to eliminate the white interstices of the primer ground, thus generating a contiguous field of square colour units (Figure 34).

In doing so Richter finally severed the initial relationship these paintings had to commercial colour charts, a development that has received little notice in the literature on this body of work, perhaps because the artist still refers to them in his catalogue raisonné

as Colour Charts.[179] The importance of this unremarked shift for my thesis is that Richter's colour chart paintings now need to be understood as experiments with colour, and not as "readymades." The anti-art impetus that initiated development of the first Colour Charts had long since dissipated, as we see from Richter's 1985 note affirming formal concerns as "the real point of the painting."

Any claim to the objective distance provided by the colour chart is further eroded in Richter's production of *4900 Colours* (2007). More than thirty years had elapsed before Richter returned to this subset and this time there is no mistaking their true identity as coloured grid paintings.

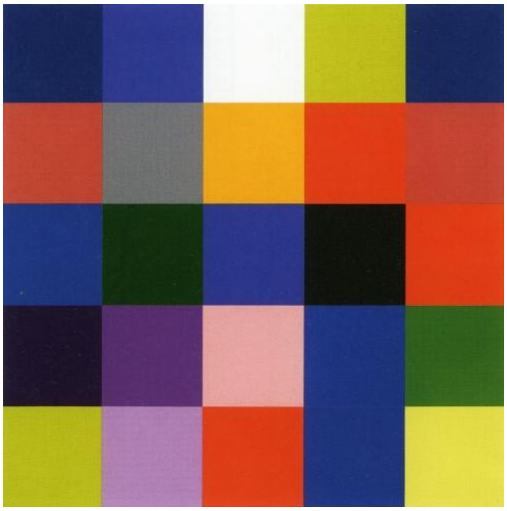

Figure 35-Gerhard Richter, *25 Colours*, (2007), CR 901-1, enamel on Alu-Dibond, 19 1/6" x 19 1/6". © Gerhard Richter 2012.

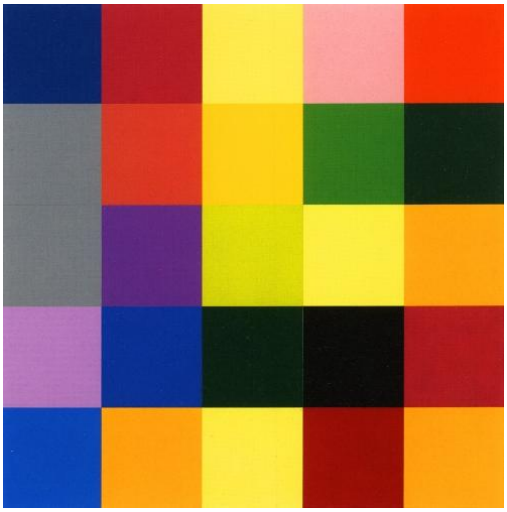

Figure 36-Gerhard Richter, *25 Colours*, (2007), CR 901-3, enamel on Alu-Dibond, 19 1/6" x 19 1/6". © Gerhard Richter 2012.

This modular work consists of 192 panels, each containing 25 colour units made of bright colour squares that have been randomly selected by computer and then fixed into grid formations of 19 1/6" square (Figure 35, Figure 36 and Figure 37).

[179] Gerhard Richter website, http://www.gerhard-richter.com/art/

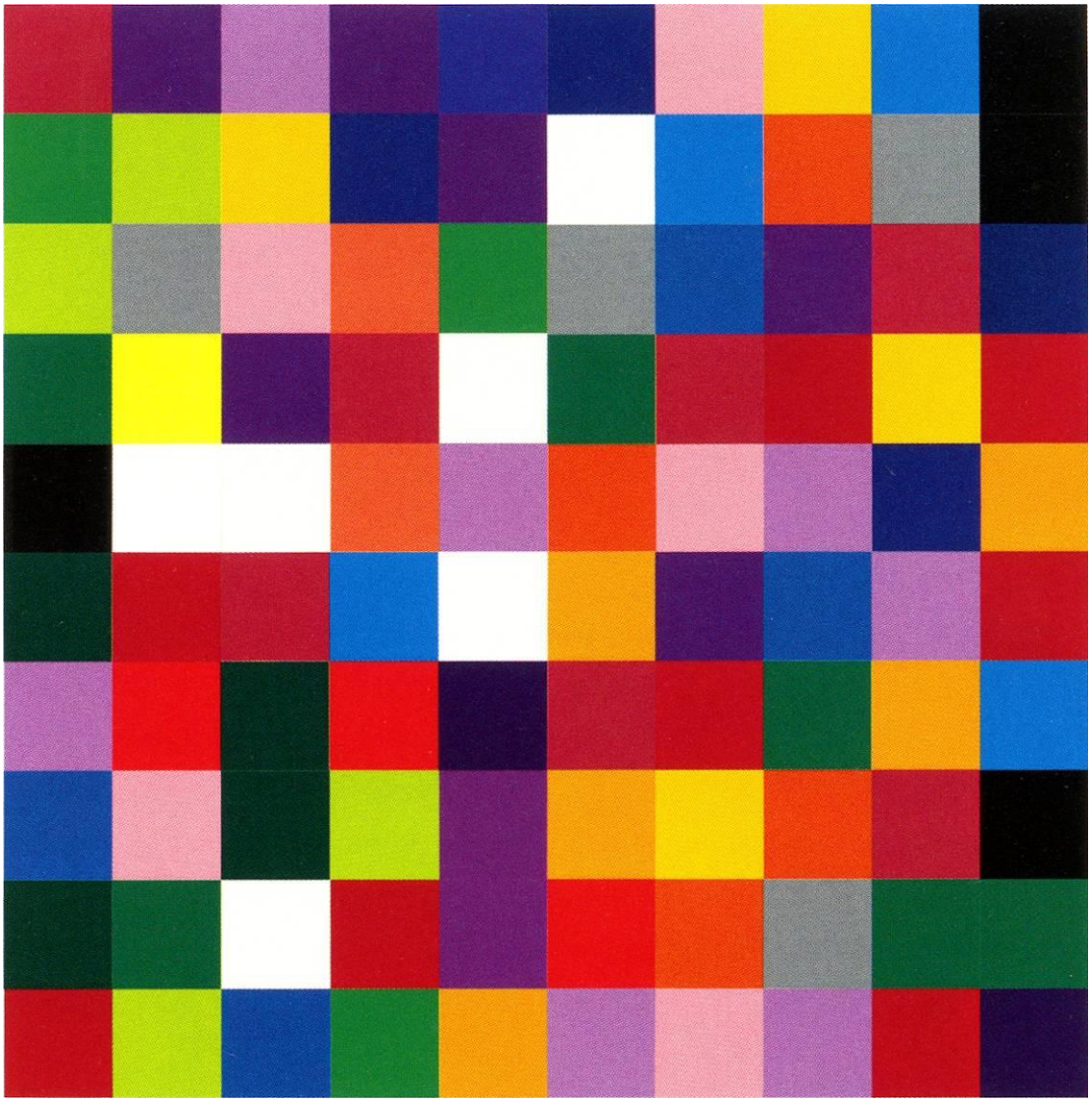

Figure 37-Gerhard Richter, *4900 Colours*, (2007), part of Version II, enamel on Alu-Dibond, 97 x 97 cm (38" x 38".) © Gerhard Richter 2012.

The panels can be hung individually or joined into larger modular grid formations for a total of 11 variations for installation purposes.

Figure 38-Gerhard Richter, *4900 Colours*, (2007), Version XI, enamel on Alu-Dibond, 267¾" x 267¾".© Gerhard Richter 2012.

The 25-colour scale Richter developed for *4900 Colours* includes white, a middle grey, as well as brilliant primary and secondary colours that have been intermixed, tinted or shaded according to the artist's notion of neutrality, and to ensure all colours remain vivid in relation to each other (Figure 38).[180]

[180] As Richter stated in an interview with Peter Gidal, "Endless Finalities, Part II," *Gerhard Richter 4900 Colours* (London: Serpentine Gallery; Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2008), 95, 96.

The palette in the set of *4900 Colours* is far less nuanced than the colour charts of 1973 and 1974. In those works a colour might be arrived at by mixing, for example, a primary red with varying amounts of one or more hues as well as black and/or white, so that identification of hues was less immediate and the resulting colour attained a more complex, multifaceted character. Richter attempts to ensure their neutrality, to satisfy the intention of avoiding any semiotic reading or any indication of subjective expression, by staying close to the character and purity of the hues found on the colour wheel. Several are lightened or darkened, but they are not complicated by undertones of complex mixtures or shadings.

We could make a vibrant, more complex, "red" by adding small amounts of burnt sienna, white, and yellow to a primary red, which will give the new red a unique character, or we can limit intermixtures to neutralize any individuality or distinction as a red. In restricting the palette to 23 chromatic colours that mostly remain close to full saturation of hue excepting some clear tints and shades, plus white and grey, Richter limits associational character to a harmonic of intensity and brilliance to attain his notion of neutrality. In an interview with Peter Gidal, when asked, "And how do you decide what's neutral? How do you manage to make that choice?" Richter simply replied, "By what seems right. Each colour fits to each, piece by piece." When then asked how such a decision was made, Richter responded, "Well…without a system. It's better that way."[181] Gidal goes on to describe the colours and the quality of their enamel surfaces in this work by claiming, "There's both a lack of melodramatically heightened tonality and a gloss without glossiness, a not-merely-surface gloss" while admitting to the difficulty language has in explaining colour or describing its effects. In spite of this, the palette still manages

[181] Gidal, *Gerhard Richter 4900 Colours*, 96.

to betray the inherent illogic and unpredictable behavior of colour, and that is what gives the resulting paintings their life. The ultimate and unmistakable expression is one of intense joy.

When a primary colour such as yellow and its complement, purple or violet, also represent the extremes of light and dark on the colour-wheel, while another pair of complements, red and green, are identical in light value, colour is anything but neutral, whether at full saturation of hue with inherent differences in light value, or tinted, toned or shaded in any degree. The paintings in the *4900 Colours* palette represent, even more than the earlier Colour Charts of 1973-74, a play on both the language of reason and the non-rational language of colour, as Richter confronts us here with a notion of a goal we know is impossible to achieve: the neutrality of colour.

Hidden in full view, the Colour Chart paintings are accepted by critics and scholars as an aspect of Richter's prodigious output, and until very recently, rarely with more than cursory acknowledgment. The sheer diversity of his overall production, rooted in a singular context of personal history and strategic philosophical stance, offers an abundance of material for critical analysis, typically with links to representations of subjects we are more familiar with – figures, landscapes, still life, and newsworthy events. Such paintings offer more straightforward access for pictorial engagement, and with possible narrative, than the colour charts that provoke such questions as – What is the role of colour within paintings that consist of nothing but hues of varying degrees of saturation and value, situated within a passive, supporting grid structure? The coloured grid of the Colour Charts has appeared in four separate "incarnations" over the course of

Richter's long career. What does this recurrence tell us about Richter's larger project and its diversity, as described briefly at the beginning of this chapter, with his ostensible aim of finding the relevance of painting?

Unlike the suppression of colour exercised by Reinhardt and Martin, Richter isolated colour as an object of study that began, albeit obliquely, in the spirit of the "readymade" and pop art, as enlarged painted reproductions of commercial paint samples. By this I mean that instead of approaching the study of colour directly, as he might have done in a less chromophobic time, he used the subterfuge of the readymade and the commercial colour chart. As different as they are in genre, these first Colour Chart paintings share their origins in such "anti-art" tactics with Richter's more well-known Photo Paintings – black and white painted copies of photographs of rather ordinary subject matter drawn from a variety of sources. For the photo paintings Richter often deliberately chose the most banal subject matter and artless photographs, whose sources were unimportant or anonymous.

The uneasy position of colour in the 1970s and 1980s is evident in essays and critical reviews given Richter's first major exhibition in North America in Toronto, the Art Gallery of Ontario, and Chicago, the Museum of Contemporary Art, in 1988. By this time the artists' colour wheel had been replaced by the commercial colour chart, heralding the move to a more impersonal relationship with this essential substance of painting in a period and milieu that in retrospect we now recognize as chromophobic. In his catalogue essay for this exhibition, Roald Nasgaard observed that Richter's process in the making of the 1970s Colour Chart paintings was generated by a conceptual model instead of the readymade model that begat earlier colour charts, but without commenting

on the significance of this change.[182] I suggest that Richter's tactic of acceding to a current mode was critical to a larger subversive strategy of continuing to foreground colour in a period in which it faced intense postmodernist suspicion. If anti-art attitudes of Pop Art and quasi-scientific and mathematical ideation of Conceptual Art were then the acceptable modes, his foregrounding of colour in all its retinal glory could be openly displayed, in a fiendishly clever reversal of the well-known Hans Christian Andersen tale, *The Emperor's New Clothes*. In this instance, the colour is front and centre, and yet we are directed to contemplate the colour chart's relationship to pop and conceptual art contexts only.

Nasgaard, as does Robert Storr almost twenty years later, too readily accepts Richter's earlier quoted statement that he was trying to evoke an "artificial naturalism," to create a kind of impressionism in which resemblances might occur in a flash and as quickly disappear. As Rudolf Arnheim has shown in his theorizing on visual perception, and we confirm from our commonplace experiences of "seeing" elephants and dragons in clouds, the visual brain is a restless and productive place. Nasgaard's unquestioning acceptance of Richter's fanciful suggestion indicates to me a kind of foreclosure, an incomplete response to the larger question of the continued rebirth of the colour chart in Richter's already over-flowing portfolio. Considering Richter's vast production and his need to tailor answers to questions about his work, we should hesitate before accepting that the hubristic notion of bringing fleeting images of any kind to life, implying a preference for semblance, could ever be a plausible reason for Richter to invest so much in these optically charged coloured grid paintings. Richter says,

[182] Roald Nasgaard, "The Constructive Work," *Gerhard Richter: Paintings*, 76.

> The rigid screen prevents the formation of figurations, although these can be made visible if an effort is made. This type of artificial naturalism is an aspect that fascinates me, as does the fact that if I had painted all possible permutations it would have taken over 400 billion years to finish all the canvases. I wanted to paint four large multi-coloured pictures.[183]

On re-reading, we see that the notion of artificial naturalism is suggested, then supplanted with an idea of a different order in the form of a somewhat whimsical mathematical extrapolation. The last sentence in this quote stands alone, but in my view, is a more plausible explanation of Richter's intention.

I. Michael Danoff, in the same catalogue, appears to be even more hostile to colour, and misses the possibility that Richter is using the Colour Charts to invite the observer, in a natural order of discovery, to contemplate, experience, and enjoy – the optical, retinal, colour that is equal to its formal structure. Referring to both the Colour Charts and the achromatic or monochromatic Grey Paintings, Danoff claims, "there seems no possibility of emotional content. These Constructive Works tend toward being systematic, serial, clinical, 'theoretical' – to use Richter's word." [184] Danoff seems to accept without question the closure of the "emotional" by the "theoretical", as if it is out of the question for the two to inhabit the same space. However, as we saw earlier with reference to the Grey Paintings, Richter admitted to the direct influence of a state of mind and emotion on their production.

In an earlier review in 1978 in which he expressed even less interest or awareness of the potential import of these works, Danoff provided a single mention of the paint sample charts as "the most anonymous" amongst a vast production of subjects and

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[183] *Gerhard Richter* (Brussels: Palais des Beaux-Arts, 1973), reprinted in English trans. In Pier + Ocean (London: Hayward Gallery, and Otterlo: Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, 1980), 114, as found in Roald Nasgaard, *Gerhard Richter: Paintings,* 1988.

[184] Danoff, "Heterogeneity," *Gerhard Richter,* 11, referring to a telephone conversation with Richter in 1987.

approaches to them that he described as "trivial, and emotionally neutral."[185] Clearly, the subterfuge Richter found necessary to employ by his strategy of producing different bodies of work, particularly in the early years, provoked a superficial reading and prevented penetration into the depths of his work as Richter was then in exploratory mode in all avenues of his painting. We recall, however, that colour was subject to extreme prejudice by the art world's critics, theorists and artists alike, and Danoff's interpretation was in line with the spirit of the times.

The difficulty of adequately addressing these Colour Chart works as paintings in this period of strong antipathy to colour is reflected again in a critical review of this exhibition in 1988 by Ulrich Loock.[186] Loock chose to analyze the Abstract Paintings – seeking to find within them Richter's conception of painting revealed through their illusionistic reference to landscape, and ultimately tie Richter's work to his reliance on photography. While photography has been instrumental in much of Richter's production, the conceptually-driven Colour Charts of the 1970s and 2007 have been a notable exception, divorced from the base in reproduction that apparently was relied on in the earliest Colour Charts of 1966.

The colour chart paintings, unlike the Abstract Paintings, present the problem of an illusionism that can't readily be tied to landscape, whether real or imaginary, an illusionism in which colour organizes itself around its own affinities and contrasts, requiring the observer to engage perceptions of colour to provide order to their otherwise "random" arrays. In contrast to the "abundance of forms" suggestive of organic shapes and movements that Loock found in the Abstract Paintings, the Colour Chart paintings

[185] Danoff, "Gerhard Richter: Multiple Styles," *Arts Magazine* (June, 1978): 150.
[186] Ulrich Loock, "Gerhard Richter," *Parachute* (Dec. Jan. Feb. 1988/89): 1-11. Loock is co-author of an earlier book on Richter.

offer a repetitive shape in the form of a grid cell that merely repeat a static, geometric form over and over again, as if shape and form are not the central issue here, which indeed, they are not.[187] What these grid cells do, however is enable the colours within them to create a sense of movement, however restricted or stilled by the grid, through their chromatic relationships of similarity and contrast.

Loock astutely observes that Richter's twin strategies of working simultaneously on different subsets of painting and exhibiting them together as groups are a deliberate block that Richter puts forth against reading his work as successive or linear production. She is, however, at a loss to find a comparable strategy or rationale that might account for the continued production of the Colour Chart paintings. Except for two brief sentences on the Colour Charts, one that stresses Richter's lack of "facture" and another referencing an interpretation of these works by Benjamin H. D. Buchloch as, "complementary negations of all conceptions of symbolism (by colour) and expression (by ductus)", Loock concludes with the observation that the Colour Charts "would represent the attempt to exploit and present all the possibilities of visibility within at least a limited range of colour."[188]

Loock' abrupt closure does not attempt to interpret or analyze the nature or effects of this visibility. For instance, what does colour make visible in these paintings that cannot be made visible without it? Does releasing colour from explicit or suggestive forms by locating it within an impassive grid structure extinguish or enhance its innate character – as hue, light value, degree of saturation, temperature, for example? What personal and cultural associations does the viewer bring to engagement with these works?

[187] Loock, "Gerhard Richter," *Parachute*, 3.
[188] Ibid. 10.

Loock at least appears to judge the Colour Charts as abstract paintings, which Robert Storr evidently does not, particularly considering the brevity with which they are mentioned in an otherwise comprehensive biography of the artist and his work for the 2002 exhibition *Gerhard Richter: Forty Years of Painting*, at the Museum of Modern Art. Even though Richter had not produced within the colour chart subset for almost thirty years, this was a retrospective exhibition, which demands a comprehensive look at an artist's work.

Storr pays little notice to the colour chart paintings. He devotes considerable attention to paintings that originated in photographic imagery in this historiographic essay, but the exhibition catalogue lists only two Colour Chart paintings in a total of 180 works. Storr's discussion of the paintings produced in 1966, 1971 and 1973-74 merits almost as little space as their images, roughly 2 of 89 pages of text, and as Nasgaard had done earlier, he relies on Richter's account of the Colour Chart project as a quest for "artificial naturalism."[189] With no further elucidation, Storr ends his brief discussion of the Colour Charts by describing them as one of the "jumping-off points on the way to abstraction."[190]

Critics and scholars have thoroughly queried Richter's aesthetic motivations, and none has challenged them more probingly than friend and colleague, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh. Buchloh assisted with the concept and installation of Richter's 1977 exhibition at the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, and has interviewed the artist and written numerous essays on his work since. His most recent effort is *Gerhard Richter : 4900 Colours*, the first publication devoted to a sustained analysis of this subset of Richter's

[189] Robert Storr, *Gerhard Richter: Forty Years of Painting* (NY: Museum of Modern Art, 2002), 51.
[190] Ibid. 54.

work, and to the variable and modular work of the title, completed in 2007.[191] Buchloh's insight here that the achievement of Richter's colour in these paintings is precisely the impediment they present to a "psychic response system," comes closest to explaining its power and equality with form. Buchloh further claims:

> As they deny the subject the right to colour as a substance of reconciliation with the natural, they insist at the same time on the right of chroma to be perceived as an autonomous sphere and matter, pre-existing and transcending its industrial abuses as technological and ideological lures.[192]

Here Buchloh recognizes the irrepressible "otherness" of colour that will permit it, now that it has escaped the bonds of representation, to transcend the confines of the science, metaphysics, and capitalist consumption it has been subject to in this most recent resurgence of the centuries-old debate of the status of colour in relation to form.

According to Eva Keuls, writing in *Plato and Greek Painting*, "The controversy as to whether contour or color is more basic to appearance probably was born, like the true art of painting, in fifth-century Greece."[193] Keuls further tells us that the division between contour and colour began in the early Hellenistic age in Greece, although its appearance in literary theory is not found until Aristotle's *Poetics.*[194] This dichotomy throughout most of the history of representational painting favours contour with the properties of form, including its all-important idea, which includes form's concept, content, and meaning. This bias against colour has been particularly strong since the early 1960s, in spite of the early promises for colour brought by abstraction.

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[191] Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "The Diagram and the Colour Chip: Gerhard Richter's 4900 Colours", in *Gerhard Richter: 4900 Colours* (London: Serpentine Gallery, 2007), 61.
[192] Ibid, 69.
[193] Eva C. Keuls, *Plato and Greek Painting* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1978), 91.
[194] Keuls, 93.

Buchloh sets Richter's colour charts within a broad historical context in which the chromophobia of the past century is understood as the inevitable consequence of the larger anti-aesthetic projects of modernism since Cézanne and Seurat, whose Post-Impressionist studies of colour and form privileged scientific analysis over expressionism. As Buchloh explains, Cubism repressed colour in favour of drawing, texture, facture and structure, and Duchamp made it impossible to consider colour separate from its material support.[195] Constructivism's assertion of art's social and political role also contributed to colour's marginalization in those early years. Buchloh, who has done a close-perspective reading of the closure of utopian models under the weight of socio-political traumas, notes also that chromophobia re-emerged with a vengeance in the 1960s with Fluxus and Conceptual art. Buchloh's thorough interrogations of Richter and his work over many years include Richter's early decision to leave the propagandist Socialist Realism of the Soviet-occupied German Democratic Republic, and extend to querying ideological and aesthetic motivations as his work in different modes has moved beyond this rupture. Unlike Storr, he has not consigned the colour charts to the margins of critical interest.

Buchloh locates Richter's colour charts in a model he calls "diagrammatic abstraction," a naming tactic perhaps intended to separate Richter's grid works from the spiritual and utopian promises implicit in the lineage of Mondrian's geometric abstraction and to direct attention to the chance and random processes for colour selection that grew out of the first readymade paintings. He resolves the mystery, or, to use his word, the "monotony", of an endless repetition of colours selected for their neutrality, by declaring, "*4900 Colours* recedes into the realm of a withdrawal that is simultaneously defiant in its

[195] Buchloh," The Diagram and the Colour Chip: Gerhard Richter's 4900 Colours", 62.

indifference and desperate in its desire to signal resistance", which in spite of an earlier claim that, "there are neither heroic nor ironic aspirations at work", presents Richter as both victim and subversive hero of his times.[196]

As we saw earlier in this chapter, by 1974 the identification of the commercial colour charts with the Colour Chart paintings was no longer necessary for Richter. He could now produce large colour grid paintings that would be referred to by Richter and scholars alike as Colour Chart paintings. The transition from commercial charts, first guided by conceptual protocols produced gradual, yet visible changes in structure, as the Colour Charts became "Coloured Grid" paintings. Surprisingly, the implications of these visible structural changes have gone unremarked by scholars. Richter continues to refer to the coloured grid paintings as Colour Charts, yet they are clearly removed from anything that could logically be so described. They have instead become compositions of chromatic and tonal difference supported by grid structures.

Colour operates differently in grid paintings, and its operations, its raison d'être, have yet to be specifically addressed. Julia Peyton-Jones, speaking about the *4900 Colours* in the Serpentine Gallery exhibition installation in 2008, went directly to the point by saying, "These paintings are about the joy of looking."[197] In this declaration it is most doubtful that Peyton-Jones is referring to the form of the grid – that serviceable, commonplace, inert and repetitive pattern – but to the optical pleasures offered by the colour it contains, as in the catalogue foreword she describes the "stunning kaleidoscopic

[196] Buchloh, "The Diagram and the Colour Chip," 70.
[197] Julia Peyton-Jones, http./www.gerhard-richter.com/videos/

colour and rigid grid formations" these paintings consist of.[198] It is worthy of note that such a bald statement affirming the pleasures of the gaze was not possible in earlier, more chromophobic decades.

Richter employs whatever strategies of deception, displacement or obfuscation work best to probe the perceptual blocks set in place by the art world's collective conscious and its consensus, in order to test the relevance and limits of painting. Form is shape and structure as well as idea, and in these works he states the equality of colour with form, as colour takes on the major role of composition long held by form. We might well ask: Is Richter deliberately misleading us with a title no longer relevant to the later incarnations of his coloured grid paintings? Is he testing the power of suggestive illusion, the tenuous link between the visual imagination and perception of what is seen, in his project to examine the relevance of painting? Is this another example of *The Emperor's New Clothes*?

With the Colour Charts of 1966, Richter went beyond the paradox of representation resident in Duchamp's "readymades" by removing the identifying text of the commercial colour charts, changing the scale and using painterly substrate and display conventions. The large scale of the paintings makes viewing a bodily, as well as optical and intellectual, experience. The resulting colour grid paintings are exhibited in the formal spaces of art galleries and museums where, like Duchamp's readymades, they become the subject of scrutiny, not for their utilitarian value, but their meaning. They present colour relationships as a visual stimuli to a search for order, and the order found depends on the observer's willingness to accept the innate instability of colour as a dynamic, sensory challenge. In, for instance, a landscape painting, according to Arnheim,

[198] Julia Peyton-Jones, *Gerhard Richter : 4900 Colours*, 8.

"typically, the observer starts from somewhere, tries to orient himself as to the main skeleton of the work, looks for the accents, experiments with a tentative framework in order to see whether it fits the total content, and so on."[199] The grid form, as pattern and repetitive structure, offers no assistance to the search, and colour is the only substance that qualifies as Arnheim's "accent" because unlike the grid's repetition, it is differentiated in these works, providing a variety of contrasts and similarities. The pretense to commercial colour charts sets up a conflict situation or dynamic tension between the idea and sensory experience that can only be resolved by the observer.

Still in the guise of the colour chart, the paintings of 1971 and 1973-4 utilize a larger range of the millions of colours that can be distinguished by the human eye, and permitted Richter's exploration of chromatic nuances to an extent that would have been difficult in a post-modernist climate. The suspicion of subjective colour was intense, and complex or nuanced colour implied subjectivity, yet these paintings as colour charts were accepted as almost clinical scientific studies. As an artist, I recall the acidic yellows, garish reds and muddied earth tones of neo-Expressionist painting in the 1970s and 1980s. Conceptual, or non-object, art of the same years seemed mostly limited to white, black and red, alluding to revolutionary aims and Marxist beliefs.

Richter set the colour grid paintings aside for a considerable period of time, and his return to them to produce *4900 Colours* (2007) is therefore significant in its confirmation of the relevance of colour to his painting. This work was prompted by the opportunity to provide Cologne Cathedral with a design for its south transept windows, a project completed the same year (Figure 39).

[199] Arnheim, *Visual Thinking*, 35.

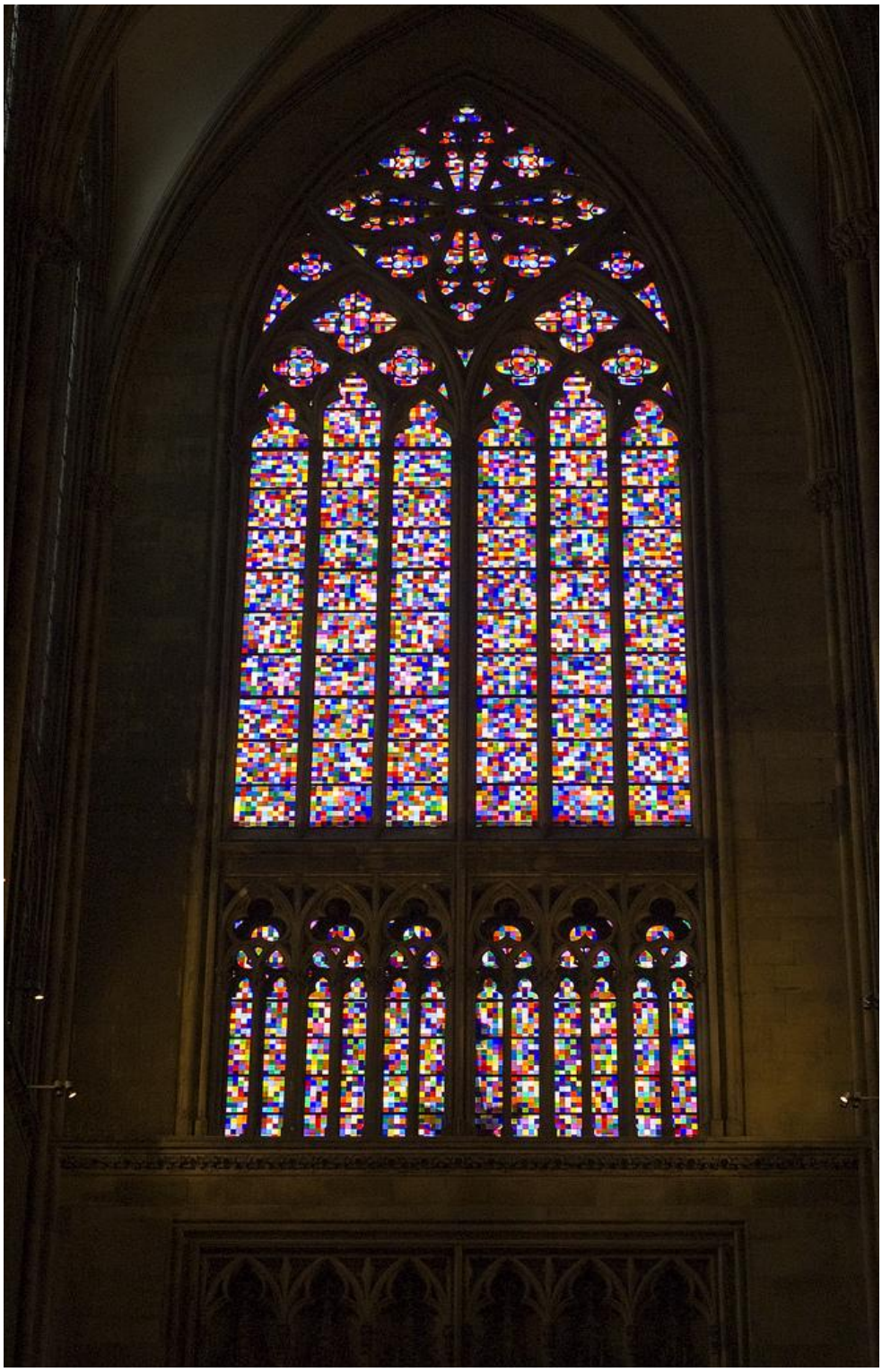

Figure 39-Gerhard Richter, *Cologne Cathedral Window*, (2007),
mouth blown, genuine antique glass, 75’ 5½” x 29’ 6 1/3”. © Design: Gerhard Richter in Cologne /
Photo: Dombauarchiv Cologne, Matz and Schenk.

The 72 colours of the 11,500 hand-blown squares of glass in the resulting *Cathedral Window* were generated and distributed by a computer program, in an abstract orthogonal grid pattern of squares. The notable exceptions to the idea of the artist maintaining objective distance, where all is left to chance and computer, are found in Richter's initial selection of colours, the inevitable variations of colour in hand-blown glass, and deliberate intercessions to eliminate formation of images or potential imbalances in colour areas.

Of all possible subsets to choose from, it is telling that Richter opted to revive the Colour Charts as the basis of design for the cathedral window, for here, colour is the only voice that speaks, while the grid form supports this affirmation of colour and its appeal to the senses. Given the religious context for this project, Richter's professed atheism, and the publicized resistance of the Cardinal of the Catholic Diocese to a window without conventional religious figuration, we can see this work as a project to rehabilitate the perception of colour within his art.[200] The cathedral window declares the intrinsic power of colour to engage spiritual, mystical and contemplative values, without the props of representation or reliance on religious attitude. In becoming "about the joy of looking" it re-opens doors deliberately closed in the middle of the last century against open acknowledgement of the symbolic, emotional and expressive resonances that colour elicits from the observer.

Richter continues to provide for scholars and critics the same kind of opacity that elicits doubt, uncertainty and skeptical wariness of whether the artist's intention is to save painting or destroy it, that he has been subject to himself. There is nothing to say about the coloured grid permutations of *4900 Colours,* those optical, gem-like expanses that

[200] Peter Gidal, "Endless Finalities, Part II," *Gerhard Richter: 4900 Colours,* 91.

engage the visual brain in endless play without imposing meaning. These are the clouds Richter offers us with which to make our own version of reality.

Chapter 5. Conclusion

Reinhardt responded to what he saw as the failed promises of Abstract Expressionism and the dilemma for colour in abstract painting by seeming to erase chroma from his paintings, and instead proved how crucially important colour is. The faintest visible suggestions of red, green, and blue that allow exposure of the nine-part grid in his sustained final body of work, are the "sensational" gift to the patient observer willing to view these paintings as reminders of states of being, objects of meditation, and *art-as-art*. Agnes Martin strove to embody her notions of "the perfection found in the mind" by employing variations on the orthogonal grid as formal structure to partner her subjective and consistent colour palette. Originating in early experiences of land, sea and their atmospheres, Martin's highly diluted and tinted colours required a "masculine" form to give them weight; nevertheless, it is colour that proclaims light and the possibility of transcendence. Gerhard Richter's two strategies – working simultaneously in different modes of painterly analyses and obscuring signs of subjective interest in colour through an "anti-art" screen – gave him room in the Colour Charts to fully explore its optical properties. The most recent paintings (2007) still catalogued by Richter as Colour Charts have moved a great distance from the commercial colour chart and now openly declare "the joy of looking," and colour's equality with form in painting. Colour is as much "idea" as the grid structure, as it determines any semblance of composition in these works.

In my introduction and following three essays, I pointed to the absence of discussion of colour in otherwise thorough analyses by scholars who have focused on the

grid structure in which it is found. If, as I describe it, the grid structure in painting is a form that aside from respecting the boundaries of the painting arena is content to take a supporting role to the active sensations of colour and light, this absence is particularly significant. By the early 1960s, the orthogonal grid had appeared in dozens of paintings and a short time later declared the "emblem of modernity" by Rosalind Krauss, without any notice by scholars that the pressure colour was under to conform to unstated rules of rationality might be a reason for the grid's presence. Perhaps explaining the presence of "irrational" colour might contaminate the perceived "rational" purity of the grid.

Of scholarship within the most immediate context of these three artists, the silence that followed Max Kozloff's exhortation on the need to address colour in art has been profound. However, we can go all the way back to Aristotle's bias against colour, seen as the necessary price for protecting art and the pleasure of mimesis from Platonic iconophobia, to account for the paucity of its interpretation in painting. For Aristotle, "the repository of thought in art was line. The rest was ornament, or worse." Within his hierarchy, "A random distribution of the most attractive colours would never yield as much pleasure as a definite image without colour." [201] Such longstanding prejudice has been recognized, but not yet undone, as Batchelor reminds us in his important address of the subject, *Chromophobia* (2000).

Painting is made of colour as well as form, and suppression of that perception has created deeply entrenched cultural and phenomenological "blind spots" in contemporary Western art. Because colour resists language so successfully, it is easy for it to "disappear" from conscious perception. This is what happened in the mid to late

[201] David Batchelor, *Chromophobia*, 29 found in Aristotle, *Poetic*s 6.50a 38 et seq., 38, and quoted in Jacqueline Lichtenstein, *The Eloquence of Colour*, 59.

twentieth century, well after the birth of abstraction had upset the balance between colour and form, and the proclamation of early twentieth century American art critic, Willard Huntington Wright, that modern painting was to be not an "art of painting," but an "art of color".[202] Wright's belief in the importance of colour and his insight into its effects was acute:

> But whereas the destiny of painting was a decorative one, the art of color fills no such utilitarian place in the aesthetic scheme of things. Not only is the very nature of this new art opposed to so neutral and passive a function, but the psychological needs which brought it forth preclude its being relegated to such a purpose. The art of color does not belong in the home. It is not an unobtrusive form of beauty which can be enjoyed or ignored at will; and it is essentially inappropriate as a constant accompaniment, or background, to our everyday existences. As I have pointed out, it is a highly intensified emotional stimulant – a stimulant, in fact, whose very intensity is its *raison d'être*.[203]

For a brief moment at mid-century it seemed Wright's prophecy for an "art of color" might be fulfilled, but instead, a great silence descended on the subject, as historians, critics and theorists alike behaved as though it was not there, or, that it was non-essential or arbitrary. There were so many other forces at work in the battles for the relevance of art, its styles, forms and purposes, in this period, that it appears it was easier to dismiss colour as something that merely fills and identifies the space of shape and form, thus re-delegating it to the secondary position long-held in representational art.

Artists continue with the "spectacularly anti-rational strategies and the fictionalized maneuverings"[204] noted by Kozloff in 1967, as we see from the proliferation of the monochrome in art in recent decades, but they are not well served by the neglect of colour as integral to the study of art work by scholars.

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[202] Willard Huntington Wright, *The Future of Painting* (New York: B. W. Huebsch Inc. 1923), 9.
[203] Wright, *The Future of Painting*, 30.
[204] Max Kozloff, "Venetian Art and Florentine Criticism," *Artforum*, 42.

One of the consequences of this neglect is the minimal attention colour study receives in art schools, which by now have almost all been absorbed into the university, where the time necessary for the freedom to explore working materials, methods and processes is often subsumed by academic requirements, critical and theoretical bias. Artist James Welling tells of the absence of a "colour" class during his years as an art student at UCLA in the 1970s, and of teaching the first such class there only recently. Even then, its course designation was apparently far removed from the core prerequisites of the program.[205]

In 1958, Yves Klein said in a lecture:

> As soon as there are two colours in a painting, combat begins; the permanent spectacle of this battle of two colours may give the onlooker a subtle psychological and emotional pleasure, that is nonetheless morbid from a purely human, philosophical point of view.[206]

Klein echoes Wright's previous statement here concerning the intensity of colour's powerful effects, and with the choice word, "morbid", reminds us of how bodily we are engaged, and must continue to be, with a sensation that fills all of our visual spaces.

Perhaps it is time we began unpacking the "bigger silence surrounding the subject of colour" that David Batchelor alerts us to in *Chromophobia*. This might mean a return to, or renewal of, questions of metaphysical, existential and spiritual dimensions to allow colour's expressiveness in painting.

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[205] James Welling, "Notes on Colour//2007", in David Batchelor, ed. *On Colour and Colours*, 229.

[206] Yves Klein, "The Monochrome Adventures," 1958, lecture typescript, published in *Yves Klein 1928-1962: A Retrospective* (Houston: Institute for the Arts, Rice University, 1982), 220, as quoted in, "The Rise, Backlash Against and Recent Revival of Colour Field Art: An Illustrated, Anthological Timeline by Raphael Rubinstein", *The Shape of Colour* (Toronto, Art Gallery of Ontario, 2005), 112.

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