

Thesis draft

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Lucian Wester

Chapter 1

Parallel History of photography

Intro

The history of photography and painting has been one of conflict and cross-fertilization between the both media in their relation to art. Photography is held responsible for the crisis in painting during the second half of the 19th century, which eventually leads to the glorious discovery of the abstract painting. In this hard avant-garde environment how did photography position itself? In this period in which painting declared itself to be an autonomous art photography began the struggle to make the same claim.

1.1 Early years (classical imitation)

Photography was officially introduced by Dagere in 1839 in France and was in the first years mainly used as a cheap way of making portraits. As early as around 1850 artists start to copy romanticism with photography, but because photography has its limits in what it can represent, especially in those early years the landscapes that they photographed sometimes were combined by a multiple of negatives. So what appears to be a photograph taken in a single shot was actually a collage of two or more separate images. Some artists photographers would even go so far to compose entire scenes from the bible and other myths. One of these works is *The Two Ways of Life* by Oscar Rejlander that was combined of over thirty individual negatives and was approximately 80 cm wide. About the same time, 1858 photographer Lake Price published 'A Manual of Photographic Manipulation'.

This mimicking of romanticism was immediately a point of discussion because the photographers argued that photography could educate the public because it was cheap and multiple producible. Sceptics, mostly painters and art dealers, argued that there is no soul in a photograph because it is just a machine recording light and therefore can never bare the same spiritual load as a painting made by a spiritual sensitive painter. (citation?) (picture)

1.2 (modernism - expressionism)

Entering the modern age photography turns to Naturalism (give one line definition of naturalism), photographers begin to use soft focus lenses through which the artist photographer could emphasize his focus within a picture. The soft haziness and rural environment in which most of these pictures were taken quickly became very popular within the mostly amateur society of artistic photographers. These later called pictorialist may brought an artistic style to photography but they did not succeed in capturing the historic momentum in which they lived, the story of the avant-garde. Their spiritual ideals bear more resemblance with the romantics and expressionist than that of the futurist and cubist at the turn of the century. (example)

Chapter 2

Avant-Garde v.s. Avant-Garde

The origins of abstract art.

Intro

In historical overview, art historians like to point out where a style, as abstraction can be described as a style, be found for the first time. Is it Kandinsky in 1910 who discovered the abstract painting? And is Malevich 'Black Square' the only true abstract work of art, because it is most rigorous proposition? I am interested in how powerful the idea of abstraction is even after a hundred years of abstract art it is still very much alive. So there's seems to be more to it than a simple proposition, a simple statement that a picture is flat.

Abstract art didn't emerge out of nowhere; it slowly grew out of modern styles like Cubism, Futurism and so on. And it literally means to simplify: to abstract parts that distract from pure form. It is this pure form or essence that abstract art seems to be looking for is what kept it alive for all those years.

2.1 European Avant-garde

New times call for new artistic representation. The European Avant-gardes were the political avant-gardes in its warfare connotation; people like Malevich were engaged in the political struggles of their time and chose deliberately sides. Therefore in this section I will speak of the classic, European avant-garde, as opposed to the post-war avant-garde characterized by the American Abstract Expressionist, for instance. The radicalness of someone like Malevich is best quoted: 'imitative art must be destroyed like the imperialist army.' (p.296, art in theory 1900-1990).

Malevich's revolution was the one of the people; he sees a world in which everybody is equal and this absent of order asked for a new form of representation. Art should have a social meaning and not only be aesthetic pictures for the bourgeois. This naturalistic, academic way of painting naturally became the 'imperialist army' that needed to be destroyed because it represented the bourgeois society. Art had to become pure: so ignore the natural world and try to paint the canvas itself, to redirect the viewers attention from the pictorial picture to the object that a painting is; a flat plain. They argued that only through a (color) system art can be made that penetrates the objective, or naturalistic, and art can become more philosophical. Even when an artist's 'construction is non-objective, but is based on the inter-relation of colours, his will cannot but be confined between the walls of aesthetic planes, instead of achieving philosophical penetration.' (Kasimir Malevich, 1919, p.291) So the artist must read philosophy to base him within the discourse of the new world to be able to express these ideas. 'I am only free when my will, basing itself critically and philosophically on that which exists, is able to formulate a basis for new phenomena.' (Kasimir Malevich 1919 p.292) An artist must become a critic, a critic of art and of the world. [again back up with citations/

1.2.1 Avant-garde in America (abstracted photograph)

There were some people that recognized escapism in the Pictorialist method of taking pictures with soft focus and their naturalistic subject matter and that this discards the connection that photography has to science. In the futuristic and cubist sense art is combined to cutting edge science and thereby photography belong to the new arts that are closer to sciences than the metaphysical arts. That is also why photography should be a fine art for its connection to science, this means that pictures need to be sharp and not have the haziness of the pictorialist focus.

Paul Strant is one of these artists that were inspired by pictorialist conception of expressionism but who turned away from the kitschy soft focus and made abstracted photographs of shadows and buildings. Paul Strant was highly supported by the most influential photographer at that time in New York: Alfred Stieglitz. Stieglitz had connections with the major avant-garde artist working in and visiting New York. These avant-garde artist were mostly painters so through these connections to the fine arts Stieglitz tried to elevate the medium of photography to be equal to a medium like painting. Stieglitz argued that photography like cubist painting must search for qualities that are essential to the medium for example: 'Stieglitz praised Picasso's "antiphotographic" work, meaning that is had renounced the simple vanishing-point perspective imposed by the camera. He advocated that art photography should be similarly antiphotographic, not necessary through abstraction, but by reaching beyond subject-matter for personal and spiritual expression.' (Mary Warner Marien, p.181)

Stieglitz was one of the first to open a gallery that supported photographers like Strant who practised photography as a fine art. (picture of strant)

None of the American photographers made abstract photograms or other experiments, but they took on a more abstracted view to their subject matter; abstracting reality like Paul Strant. Unlike Europe, America wasn't in crisis and was in the beginning of the 20th century that's why the 'Americans did not identify non-object, or abstract, art with political revolt and social change to the degree that may European experimenters did.' (Mary Warner Marien, p.250) In America the photographers became political/social involvement in a different way than that in Europe, through the Farm Security Project a number of photographers started to show social disparity in a photojournalistic way. This is a radically different approach to social change and the medium of photography, one being an artistic one and the other a documental one.

The photographic artistic movement in the United States kept on rebelling against the pictorial, which in their view had nothing to do with the photographic image, but tried to imitate painting. To make this statement clear some photographers, like Ansel Adams and Edward Weston gathered together to form a group that they called Group f.64. The f.64 referred to the smallest opening of the lens on their cameras, the aperture that would give a picture the most sharpness. Although it was a movement against pictorialism they actually made a combination of pictorialism, in the sense of expression, and the abstracted photography of Paul Strant.

Some people argue that the photographs by for example Ansel Adams are the first real art

quotes][simplification and purity – all abstraction does not involve simplification... explain the emphasis... and your own interest in this re the whole thesis]

2.1.1 De stijl and Piet Mondriaan

In the Netherlands a group of revolutionary artist like; Piet Mondriaan, Theo van Doesburg and Gerrit Rietveld united under the name De Stijl (the Style). The artist connected to De Stijl were collectively looking for new visual languish that could represent the modern times in which they living, and they came to something that they called neoplasticism. Neo or new is used in this term to distinguish and give an urgency to their project. Plasticism reveres to plastic art, the materials art is made from, for Mondriaan and Doesburg these where paint, colours and the flat plane of the canvas.

This new plastic art focuses upon the essence of art and the materials or media in which the works are made. Theo van Doesburg argues that in paintings, painters use natural subjects, like people, to create an artistic composition that is self-reflective but it hides it behind a natural scene. The painter uses the natural world as pretext to demonstrate his skilful painting, which makes the painting empty shell. 'Arms, legs, trees, and landscapes are not unequivocally painterly means. Painterly means are: colours, forms, lines, and planes.' (p.280, art in theory 1900-1990, Theo van Doesburg) Van Doesburg calls the technique that they use to construct the painting cancellation; 'One element cancels out another.' (p.281, art in theory 1900-1990, Theo van Doesburg), for example a flat plane is cancelled out by a line to make perfect harmony.

Neoplasticism is a translation from the Dutch term Nieuwe Beelding. It was interesting for me to read text about these Dutch artist in English because as Charles Harrison and Paul Wood notes that: 'It should be noted that the Dutch term beelding carries connotations of forming and making absent from the more basically material sense of 'plastic'.' (p.282, art in theory 1900-1990, Charles Harrison and Paul Wood)

In the Netherlands fine art is called: Autonom Beeldende Kunst, which carries the word Beelding. The Dutch word Beeld literally translates into image so the Dutch term that Mondriaan used, Nieuwe Beelding has a much closer connotation to the essence of an image than its relation to material from which an image is made. Also as noted by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood the word Beelding carries a connotation to the making of an image, or working on images, which makes it less static than plasticism.

Mondriaan

To me, and to the art world in the Netherlands, Mondriaan is the most important figure in De Stijl movement and the Dutch avant-garde. The way Mondriaans work evolved throughout is whole live is extraordinary, by looking at his oeuvre you can clearly see where and how he made his decisions what way to go. He started by painting from the natural world and mastered it very young, he went to Paris and became influenced by the avant-gardist movement and gradually his work

photographs that do not copy painting but are highly photographic and artistic in their own terms. One argument supporting this is that up to the 1980s art photography was black and white and based on the printing techniques that Ansel Adams developed during his lifetime. On the other hand photography was not exhibited by the major art museums and supported by art galleries until the late sixties.

1.2.2 Avant-garde in Europe ('abstract' photograph)

In Europe and especially in Russia after the communist revolution a lot of artists turned to photography as a medium because it could speak to the masses, which enabled the revolutionist to spread the word of the new world. El Lissitzky was an artist who was deeply involved in creating a new visual language that could communicate the new ideals, that of the communist. He used photography for the mass reproduction and to reshape the everyday life through technology, the artist becomes engineer.

Aleksandr Rodchenko an European avant-garde artist thought that an artist should discover a medium specificity something that he called: *faktura*. He worked in multiple media and made collages which seems to point to a different *faktura* than that of the American photographers who did not make collages and thought that a single photograph is the essence of photography: straight photography.

Rodchenko also experimented with photographing at different angles, for example 'belly button' style something that had become possible through the invention of a handheld camera in 1923. He made pictures with strange angles, close-ups and multiple exposures to abstract or unfamiliarise the photographic reality. From the 1930s the socialist party didn't support the avant-garde artist anymore because they grew decadent in search for *faktura* and the communist party began to promote Social Realism.

Picture without a camera

Alvin Langdon Coburn is the first photographer that made abstract photographs called Vortographs around 1917. Inspired by futurism and cubism he created photographs using mirrors, which have very little indexical information in them. 'Coburn experimented with abstraction, building a Vortoscope, a combination of mirrors that produced an image like that of a kaleidoscope, and photographing the result.' (Mary Warner Marien, p.197) He did this only for one month.

After him dada artist Christian Schad made so called Schadographs, which has a connotation to the term Shadowgraph used by Talbot and to the German word *schaden* (damaged). These Schadographs were the first abstract photographs made without a camera something we know by the name of a photogram. Which leads to the avant-garde artist László Moholy-Nagy who also favoured search to *faktura* and he thought that it could be light. Moholy-Nagy made photographs of shadows but also camera-less photos that he called: photograms. Although this technique had been used before in the 19th century for scientific purposes it hadn't been used in an artistic context. This picture made without a camera seem to be the most abstract a photograph could get, and yet the object that Moholy-Nagy placed on the paper to create his photograms are in a sense still readable or recognizable. (picture)

(momentum)

evolved from naturalistic into the abstract works that we are so familiar with. With his abstractions Mondriaan focuses on the relationships between lines and colors on the canvas to come to a universal expression that is more pure than art that represents nature. He tries to brake the bondage between subject matter and plasticity to make the plastic into a subject matter. 'In painting you must first try to see composition, color, and line and not the representation as representation. Then you will finally come to feel the subject matter a hindrance.' (p.283 Piet Mondriaan) What Mondriaan tries to explain here is that the essence of a painting is not the picture that it represents but structures from which it is made, therefore Mondriaan eliminates the subject matter and turns to abstraction. Subject matter is only a layer that covers the truth of a painting and thereby has become a hindrance to experience the essence in paintings.

Through his New Plastic art Mondriaan combines two opposites, the particular and the universal, to come into equilibrium. For Mondriaan this equilibrium is the essence to keep on working, in every painting that he makes he tries to come as close to this as possible. [quote and citation here] The oppositions in his paintings are of course that of horizontal and vertical lines, and lines versus color plains. He makes these into an aesthetic equilibrium. 'Although art is the plastic expression of our aesthetic emotion, we cannot therefore conclude that art is only 'the aesthetic expression of our subjective sensations.'" (p.287 Piet Mondriaan) Through this quote you see immediately the relation with someone like Malevich; searching for a new representation of the times in which they lived. They searched for universal qualities within the medium of painting to be able to communicate to everyone the ideas that they had about painting and life.

These concepts might be better understood by the fact that in the beginning of the 20th century the first structuralist theories about language were developed. These first investigations into linguistics by Ferdinand de Saussure were important to the Avant-garde artist because they gave a concept of how language works and how communication is established. Saussure semiotics theory breaks language up into the smaller concepts: sign, signifier, signified and referent. The Avant-garde artist took this structuralist method of deconstruction to find what the signs, signifiers and referents for a painting are. They used this method because they wanted to be able to communicate with their audience through their new developed visual language. Mondriaan developed a language of horizontal and vertical lines to create a composition; by doing so he clearly tries to communicate to us through signs and signifiers but the signified and the referent are maybe less clear to us.

2.2 American Avant-garde

In the 1940s a lot of the European avant-garde artist fled to the United States because of the Second World War in Europe. This is one of the factors that created in New York a blooming of abstract painting. At the same time an instrument becomes more and more available to be used by artist, maybe not directly but art criticism begins to shape the art world. Where before art criticism had to do with good taste now it became an avant-gardistic project on its own by explaining what

After the political orientated avant-garde and the Dada movement came the Surrealists, a movement that is less political and more inspired by the ideas of Freud's subconscious. In photography and the camera the surrealist see a good tool to make visual equivalent of their subconscious writings because photography gives an instant image. One of these Surrealist is Man Ray who invented a technique called solarization, a technique whereby a photographic print is exposed to light while it is being developed, the result is that the whites in a photo become black but the grey remains the same.

The influential photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson was inspired by the Surrealists for their conception that a photograph in a fraction of a second could capture an image of inner truth: 'The decisive moment', 'the simultaneous recognition, in a fraction of a second, of the significance of an event as well as of a precise origination of forms which gave that event its proper expression.' (Henri Cartier-Bresson, p.258) (picture)

1.3 (Abstract expressionist)

Photography in the fifties was dominated by romantic personalised photography like that of Minor White. For example Aaron Siskind made abstracted close-up photographs of walls with peeling paint as if they were abstract expressionist paintings. In these close-ups he saw a human inner drama, the wall and the photograph of the wall both where an expression of an individual inner state of mind.

An other artist Lotte Jacobi made what she called photogenics, by exposing photographic paper to light she made paintings with light. These might be considered true abstract expressionist photographic works; they bare the actions of the artist inside of them, like a Pollock the movement of Jacobi is captured by on the paper.

1.4 The Conceptualist

Although photographers had been searching for what the Russian avant-garde called the *faktura* of photography the medium did not have a distinct identity when in the sixties and seventies when artists began to use it as material to make art. The diverse way in which photography is used; as documentation, scientific research, commercial and artistic material that makes photography into an indistinct medium in opposition to painting that had become a distinctive medium. Within the post-medium condition in which the arts find themselves those days photography was a unique medium to work in because it is used in so many ways, from everyday life to art. So in the sixties pop art begins to use photography from magazines and make it into works like collages that reflect on the consumer society that begins to unfold itself. Other artist began to use photography in a more direct way and for its objective authority that it gained from institution of science and law. This link to everyday life would become a major advantage for photography in comparison to other media. This brings us to conceptualism 'A largely retrospective term, it is applied to an art that wanted to put ideas, investigations and definitions first.' (David Company, p.17)

Conceptual art can be traced back to Marcel Duchamp and the fact that he shifts the questions relating to art from 'What is beautiful?' to 'What is art?' For example a readymade the Fountain asked the viewer to nominate an everyday object to become an art object by

the artist involved in the abstract expressionist movement meant with their work.

2.2.1 Clement Greenberg (b. 1909)

Clement Greenberg is one of these critics that gave himself the task of explaining the newly formed art movements and to interpret what they meant. In his essay 'Towards a Newer Laocoon' (1940) he begins by making a historical basis from which the American avant-garde or abstract expressionist emerged. Greenberg claims that there can be one form of art that is dominant for a period in time, for example literature in Europe by the 17th century. This dominant art becomes the prototype for all other art. All other arts will imitate the dominant art form, but at the same time the dominant art tries to absorb and incorporate all the other arts which leads to confusion and eventually to a shift of the dominant art. So in the 17th century Mannerist painting tried to imitate literature: 'All emphasis is taken away from the medium and transferred to subject matter. It is no longer a question even of realistic imitation, since that is taken for granted, but of the artist's ability to interpret subject matter for poetic effects and so forth.' (Greenberg, p.556) This poetic effect is maximized in the Romantic movement of the beginning of the 19th century in which subject matter had to evoke deep existential feelings in the beholder of the painting. As we have seen earlier that against this romanticism the avant-gardes arose, who felt that art had become decadent and they focused upon social struggle of their time and the formal side of painting.

Greenberg makes an interesting comparison, logical to his theory of a dominant art form, that the abstract avant-garde art is imitating music: 'It was when it was discovered that the advantage of music lay chiefly in the fact that it was an 'abstract' art, an art of 'pure form.' It was such because it was incapable, objectively, of communication anything else than a sensation, and because this sensation could not be conceived in any other terms than those of the sense through which it entered the consciousness.' (Greenberg, p.557)

In the end what Greenberg concludes is; what the avant-gardes achieved is that they accepted the boundaries of the medium that they used. 'The history of avant-garde painting is that of a progressive surrender to the resistance of its medium; which resistance consists chiefly in the flat picture plane's denial of efforts to 'hole through' it for realistic perspectival space.' (Greenberg, p.558) He also gives us the explanation to why the avant-gardes used the square: 'Under the influence of the square shape of the canvas, forms tend to become geometrical – and simplified, because simplification is also a part of the instinctive accommodation to the medium.' (Greenberg p.558)

2.2.2 Harold Rosenberg (1906-1978) from 'The American Action Painters' 1952

An opposing critic named Harold Rosenberg argued that the abstract expressionist like Pollock didn't so much emphasize the flatness of their picture plain, but that their performance, their action of making the painting is what gave a meaning to their works. So where Greenberg focused on the support structure of painting

calling it art. This shift towards self-reflection or self-criticism is one that is essential to the practise of the conceptualist movement.

The conceptualist inherited the use of photography from their teachers of who were some Minimalist that photographed their installations in exhibitions to document the context of their works and the relation to the space. The conceptualist began to use photography in the same documental mode but documented work that was objectless and therefore the documentation became the art object. Photography was to the conceptualist a cheap and easy way to record their ideas in an image, to them it was a kind of non-medium. 'There was no scramble to define its essence and no programme about what it should be.' (David Campany, p.18) The conceptualist where more focussed upon the bigger picture of what art means than the questions surrounding the media the used, but above all photography wasn't considered to be an artistic medium but a means to create truthful images.

The post war modernism is mostly concerned with purity of the medium that is used, for painting this is the flatness of the picture plain like in the works of Pollock, Rothko and Newman. For photography this essence might be the fact that it's always representational. 'photography is inherently representational, inherently descriptive.' (David Campany, p.18) Therefore it can never be pure or autonomous.

'Within conceptualism photography reflected on itself not by looking inwards to define a special or essential character but by looking outward to reflect on how mass culture understood photography, how it put its descriptive character to use in everyday life.' (David Campany, p.18)

So photography found its modernist ideal in representation, which is the direct opposite of paintings abstraction. The document value of photography became the most important function in the medium and the reason why artist used photography.

'In some senses that wide gap between art photography and artist using photography can be read as an ideological one: aesthetic conservatism versus radical vanguardism; or formalism versus post-formalism; or a defence of the 'soul' of photography against the claim that it doesn't have one; introversion versus social engagement.' (David Campany, p.19)

Rosenberg focused upon the performance of making; so we have a formal approach against a preformative one.

Rosenberg argued that a painter had not an image in mind but the confrontation of the artist with the painting became the picture, the picture is the result of this confrontation. The act is the most important thing, therefore abstract expressionist painting is not a purist one; it doesn't have anything to do with aesthetics [citation – quote] . The painting produced by an abstract expressionist is directly related to the artist's biography. 'The new painting has broken down every distinction between art and life.' (Rosenberg, p.582) Rosenberg claimed. Rosenberg's concept of a painting as a residue of a performance by an artist is radically different than Greenberg's opinion that an abstract painting is a quest to the essence of painting. With his historical overview Greenberg tries to point to a narrative in the history of painting that has lead to essentialist form of abstract painting. So for Greenberg Pollock's big achievement is that he laid the canvas on the floor instead it stood on an easel, which created a different perspective to the support structures of a painting. But for Rosenberg Pollock's radical statement is that his performance above the canvas with the paint were frozen in a painting that functioned as an equivalent for his own state of mind. For Pollock his paintings originated out of his subconscious, which meant for him that, there was a deeper truth in them than a picture that was created with a conscious mind.

To get a clearer picture of the ideas surrounding the abstract expressionist paintings it is interesting to see what the artist had to say about their work. For, the critical notes by art critics helped the artist to sell their work, literally and figuratively, but they published also their own statements. For example Adolph Gottlieb and Mark Rothko together with Barnett Newman:

1 To us art is an adventure into an unknown world, which can be explored only by those willing to take the risks.

2 This world of the imagination is fancy-free and violently opposed to common sense.

3 It is our function as artist to make the spectator see the world our way – not his way.

4 We favor the simple expression of the complex thought. We are for the large shape because it has the impact of the unequivocal. We wish to reassert the picture plane. We are for flat forms because they destroy illusion and reveal truth.

5 It is a widely accepted notion among painters that it does not matter what one paints as long as it is well painted. This is the essence of academism. There is no such thing as good painting about nothing. We assert that the subject is crucial and only that subject-matter is valid which is tragic and timeless. That is why we profess spiritual kinship with primitive and archaic art.

What is interesting in this statement that there is a combination of the thoughts of the two opposing critiques; 'flat forms' and 'expression'. On the one hand they speak of destroying the illusion of the pictorial and at the same time they speak

about subject-matter. From a photographers point of view this seems a paradox, but within the painters discourse they move the subject-matter from pictorial real to the mind and intellect of the artist. The artist himself becomes subject, not in the same way as the European avant-garde who tried to make an universal language, the abstract expressionist made their own language and within this they thought a something universal will reveal itself. For: 'we do not intend to defend our pictures. They make their own defence. We consider them clear statements. Your failure to dismiss or disparage them is prima facie evidence that they carry some communicative power.' (Gottlieb and Rothko p.562)

The shift in subject-matter of the abstract expressionist gave a new élan to the concept of abstraction. Because: 'It was a common assumption among the American avant-garde painters of the 1940s and 1950s that painting could be a kind of equivalent for an individual person, at least in the sense that it invited the spectator into a form of one-to-one relationship.' (p.565 Charles Harrison and Paul Wood) This idea of work being an equivalent demolishes one of the problems of abstract art; its relation to the pictorial. Because if an abstract painting is only a proposition, a painting is flat, than after Malevich Black Square nothing really changed, but now there is a different relationship; the one with the artist.

2.2.3[SHIFT TO SUBJECTIVITY VIA FREUD (see also Pollock), NEWMANN—SUBJECTIVE SUBLIME]

In 1948 Barnett Newman writes a text entitled 'The Sublime Is Now'. In this text he describes how art has always been looking for beauty and it's relation to a sublime message within these arts. The word sublime that describes a paradoxical feeling originates from the mid seventeenth century. 'Between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Europe this contradictory feeling – pleasure and pain, joy and anxiety, exaltation and depression – was christened or re-christened by the name of the sublime.' (Lyotard, p.92)

Lyotard relies on text from Burke about the sublime, although Lyotard disagrees with Burke on the question if paintings can be sublime. Burke writes that painting cant be sublime because it is bound to visual representation, this was of course in a time before the abstraction, a however poet for example can write a sentence that gives the reader the opportunity to associate freely with these words. The reader can generate his or her own feelings and pictures, a painting cant do such a thing. For Lyotard paintings can be sublime and generate these sublime feelings.

For Lyotard and Newman the sublime is a moment, hence the title 'The Sublime is now'. Newman's work deals with this moment of conception, a sublime moment that cant be understood. 'Occurrence is the instant which 'happens', which 'comes' unexpectedly but which, once it is there, takes its place in the network of

what has happened.' (Lyotard, p.82) Newman states: 'My paintings are concerned neither with the manipulation of space nor with the image, but with the sensation of time.' (Newman, 1949, p.86) This time is the here and now, something that is emphasised by Newman's titles like 'Be' and 'Here'. Newman 'Thus, when he seeks sublimity in the here-and-now he breaks with the eloquence of romantic art but he does not reject its fundamental task, that of bearing pictorial or otherwise expressive witness to the inexpressible.' (Lyotard, p.92/93) 'Instead of making cathedrals out of Christ, man, or 'life', we are making it out of ourselves, out of our own feelings.' (Newman p.574) So it seems that the individual experience becomes the sublime messages, and this is something that is very true to that time, which is the birthplace of our individuality.

Newman describes how and why the aesthetic always comes fore everything else: 'that the aesthetic act always precedes the social one.' (Newman p.568)

2.3 [ART AS AUTONOMOUS OPBJECT]

In the late 1950s and early 60s the claim of expression in abstract art had become a hegemonic one. Whenever an artist made something abstract it became immediately an expression of deep feelings and subconscious urges. Abstract art seemed to have lost something; it became a window not on the pictorial real but a window to the inner being of his creator, the artist. Abstract art lost the promise of being empty, being something in its self and reflecting its own being.

2.3.1 Ad Reinhardt (1913-1967) 'Art as Art' 1962

Ad Reinhardt is one of these artists who consider abstraction not to be merely an expression of a subject but as an entity in itself. In 'Art as Art' Reinhardt defines art as something independent from everything else, something that refers only to itself and nothing outside. Therefore art can only be described by what it is not. 'The one thing to say about art is that it is one thing. Art is art-as-art and everything else is everything else.' (Reinhardt p.806) Within Reinhardt's world art is an institution that functions purely on its own and needs to have no connection to anything else, art is autonomous. That's also why an abstract work of art only reflects its own being.

To be able to express these theories about art in works they needed to be accompanied by statements and conceptions about the history of art. Reinhardt describes this history like this: 'The one history of painting progresses from the painting of a variety of ideas with a variety of subjects and objects, to one idea with a variety of subjects and objects, to one subject with a variety of objects, to one object with a variety of subjects, then to one object with one subject, to one object with no subject, and to one subject with no object, then to the idea of no object and no subject and no variety at all. There is nothing less significant in art, nothing more exhausting and immediately exhausted, than 'endless variety.'"

(Reinhardt p.808)

Reinhardt emphasizes the formalness of art and radicalizes the idea that art is autonomous and reflects only its own being. 'The one meaning in art-as-art, past or present, is art meaning. When an art object is separated from its original time and place and use and moved into the art museum, it gets emptied and purified of all its meanings except one. A religious object that becomes a work of art in an art museum loses all its religious meanings.' (Reinhardt p.807)

2.3.2

Another artist that took this formal approach to abstraction was Frank Stella. Stella even rebelled/fomalized by letting Carl Andre, a friend of him write an artist statement, which stated that: 'He is interested in the necessities of painting. ... His stripes are the paths of brush on canvas. These paths lead only into painting.' (Carl Andre 1959, p.201) Stella, the same as Reinhardt, rebelled against the sentiment of that 'In the forties and the fifties, there was a revival of the late-romantic cliché of the artist as instinctive resource of creativity. (Duve, p.202) Stella began by using household paint and brushes instead of expansive oil paint and tool to create paintings that were constructed from geometrical shapes and forms in an attempt to demolish his own persona and to create works that had credibility through its being. This meant that 'Harold Rosenberg's concept of 'Action Painting' became suddenly trite and hopelessly romantic, whereas Clement Greenberg's understanding of "American-type Painting" in terms of formal results, historical conventions, and flatness of the medium gained momentum and credibility.' (Duve, p201) Greenberg's theory became the template for a generation of artist, called the Minimalist to justify their abstract works.

'The essential norms or conventions of painting are also the limiting conditions with which a marked-up surface must comply in order to be experienced as a picture. Modernism has found that these limiting conditions can be pushed back indefinitely before a picture stops being a picture and turns into an arbitrary object; but it has also found that further back these limits are pushed the more explicitly they have to be observed.' (Greenberg 1973 p.202)

Greenberg thought that Stella's work and that of other Minimalist were painting or sculptures that were not successful and therefore bad paintings and sculptures. This had mostly to do with the fact that works by Stella or someone like Donald Judd couldn't be judged as paintings but neither as sculptures, something that in Greenberg's could not exist. For Greenberg's concept of Modernity is a discipline that is self-critical; every artistic medium must display its own unique nature (specificity), for painting this was its flatness, two-dimensional space. This means that Modernistic painting is specific and minimal art is generic, because it is interdisciplinary and therefore Minimal art is bad art nevertheless bad art is still art. So Stella and the minimalist pushed the boundaries of Greenberg's Modernity to a point where their works become arbitrary object, but exactly this became an interesting concept to refute Greenberg. Arbitrariness became a central quality of a

work of art, something that made it autonomous. As said before Judd's art works are neither paintings nor sculptures and therefore they are generic, they become arbitrary objects. 'What we have is generic art with only logical, not aesthetic, ties to history.' (Duve, p.232)

Judd's justifications for his work are based within Greenberg's theory, but he turns the negative connotation of Greenberg's to the arbitral around and diminishes the aesthetic side of an artwork: 'A work needs only to be interesting.' (Donald Judd 1965, p.239) This radical turn to the reason, which makes bold claims and pointy statements like: 'The one thing to say about art is its breathlessness, lifelessness, deathlessness, contentlessness, formlessness, spacelessness, and timelessness. This is always the end of art.' (Reinhardt p.809) would eventually lead to artist like Joseph Kosuth, a conceptualist.

2.3.3

This struggle continues with Michael Fried and Joseph Kosuth:

'Judd himself has as much as acknowledged the problematic character of the literalist enterprise by his claim "A work needs only to be interesting." For Judd, as for the literalist sensibility generally, all that matters is whether or not a given work is able to elicit and sustain (this) interest ... Literalist work is often condemned- when it is condemned- for being boring. A tougher charge would be that it is merely interesting.' (Fried 1967, p.243)

Joseph Kosuth wrote an essay entitled 'Art after Philosophy' that basically claims that philosophy is dead and that it will be taken over by art, because they both work with the same materials namely language or linguistics. In the process of going from Minimalism to Conceptualism the art object has vanished and only the concept of art has survived. As we have seen in the first chapter the Conceptualist based themselves in the footsteps of Marcel Duchamp who went from the specific (painter) to the generic art (artist). The Conceptualist had to do the same to become an artist. 'You may become an artist without being a painter, but hardly without having been one. As we have seen, this holds true for all minimal and conceptual artist.' (Duve p.252) Almost all Conceptualist and Minimalist artist had a background in either painting or sculpture but moved to 'non-media'.

Conceptual art is generic art; Kosuth states that every artwork should question art at large. 'Being an artist now means to question the nature of art. If one is questioning the nature of painting, one cannot be questioning the nature of art ... That's because the word art is general and the word painting is specific. Painting is a kind of art.' (Kosuth 1969, p.245) In quotes like this you immediately see the influence of Greenberg and how his theory was read in a different way than he intended.

For Kosuth a work of art is a proposition, a statement about what art should be: 'Works of art are analytic propositions... One begins to realize that art's "art condition" is a conceptual state ... In other words, the propositions of art are not factual, but linguistic in character-that is, they do not describe the behaviour of the physical or even mental objects; the express definitions of art, or the formal

consequences of definitions of art. Accordingly, we can say that art operates on a logic.' (Kosuth 1969, p.245)

This eventually leads to that: 'A work of art is a tautology in that it is a presentation of the artist's intention, that is, he is saying that that particular work of art is art, which means, is a definition of art. Thus, that it is art is true a priori.' (Kosuth 1969, p.244) An artwork is a definition of art, a tautology. For Kosuth art is the most important thing that exists and is something that is completely autonomous and therefore can and has to be tautological. For the tautological status of an artwork frees it from any connection to the real world, it creates its own truth and logic.

'A work of art is a kind of proposition presented within the context of art as a comment on art ... The "art idea" (or "work") and art are the same and can be appreciated as art without going outside the context of art for verification.' (Kosuth 1969, p.270) For Kosuth context means the 'art world'.

'All art depends in one way or another on context.' (Greenberg p.270)

This is the final statement of Reinhardt, long before post-modernist declared the end of art, is more interesting because Reinhart claims that every new work of art will be the end of art.

This line of thinking was later taken over by Joseph Kosuth, one of the conceptualist.

'At the time they were written, his strings of negations offered a strategic resistance to the types of claim for meaning in abstract art which had become prevalent in the literature of Abstract Expressionism. They also served to clear some theoretical space for the 'pure', contentless abstract painting on which Reinhardt had been working since the early 1950s.' (p.806 Charles Harrison and Paul Wood)

Conclusion

All three stages of abstract art described above seem to have a strong relationship with the political climate in which they emerged; the European avant-garde where highly involved in the class struggle in the beginning of the last century, the abstract expressionist celebrated the American freedom and individualism [in the context of the cold war – in which communism opposes capitalist individualism see 'who paid the piper'] and the conceptualist tried to get away from the ruling politics and art marked to purify it so it would be autonomous. [see critique of kosuth in Kant After Duchamp]

Art in theory 1900-1990

By Charles Harrison and Paul Wood

Chapter 3 Syntheses

In the classical philosophy of dialectics the theses and antitheses can be combined into a syntheses.

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To day I googled the words 'Salon' and 'the Avant-garde' and looked what kind of result I would get; apparently there are a number of beauty salons which name themselves Avant-garde, something that I find quite ironic and a nice contradiction. Apart from the beauty salons and some articles explaining the situation in the art world around the beginning of the 20th century I didn't find much.

It is only after the conceptualist realized their naïve trust in the indexical nature of photography that it became truly accepted as art. The conceptualist brought photographs into the art world, but to them the fact that the medium was not accepted gave it an authority outside the art world and an unloaded artistic history that would transfer the emphasis to their conception of art rather than to the medium. This became problematic, because the presence of the medium was always visible. For an artist like Jeff Wall precisely this problem of media presence and the indexical nature of photography became a major subject in his work. By making large staged photograph that appear to be taken in a moment he questions the truthfulness of photography and its indexical nature. It is through artist like Wall that photography became reflective towards its own Modern essence: its indexical nature.

How does this all relates to my work? One of the major concepts in my work regarding photography is the fact that the medium is by default indexical, or what you might call 'blind sight'. To be able to focus upon this I have chosen to work with light and photosensitive paper and in some works with optics, because the medium photography is more the photosensitive agent reacting on the light than it is the black box that a camera is. It is through the photosensitive agent that an image made by a camera can be recorded and fixated instead of disappearing.

As we have seen in the first chapter the combination of the abstract and the photographic image have never been fruitful. One of the reason seems to be the fact that most of the attempts where heavily influenced by abstract painting, they seemed to be imitating abstract art but lacking the introspective necessity from which abstract painting grew.

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