

# **The Dark Opacity of Making**

Essay by Thomas Zummer



On the Painting of Marjorie Welish

*...a universe comes into being when a space is severed or taken apart. The skin of a living organism cuts off an outside from an inside. So does the circumference of a circle in a plane. By tracing the way we represent such a severance, we can begin to reconstruct, with an accuracy and coverage that appear almost uncanny, the basic forms underlying linguistic, mathematical, physical, and biological science, and can begin to see how the familiar laws of our own experience follow from the original act of severance. The act is itself already remembered, even if unconsciously, as our first attempt to distinguish different things in a world where, in the first place, the boundaries can be drawn anywhere we please. At this stage the universe cannot be distinguished from how we act upon it, and the world may seem like shifting sand beneath our feet.*

—G. Spencer-Brown<sup>1</sup>

*] the inscription of a circle in the circle does not necessarily give the abyss, onto the abyss, en abyme. In order to be abyssal, the smallest circle must inscribe itself in the figure of the largest. Is there any abyss in the Hegelian circulation? To the question posed in this form there is no decidable answer. What does the "there is" mean in these statements? Wherein does the "there is" differ from a "there exists" or "X is," "X presents itself," "X is present," etc.? Skirting round a necessary protocol here (it would proceed via the gift or the giving of the abyss, onto the abyss, en abyme, via the problematic of the es gibt, il y a, it gives [ça donne], and of the es gibt Sein, opened by Heidegger), I note only this: the answer arrests the abyss, unless it be already dragged down into it in advance. And can be in it without knowing it, at the very moment that a proposition of the type "this is an abyss or a mise en abyme" appears to destroy the instability of the relations of whole to part, the indecision of the structures of inclusion which throws en abyme. The statement itself can form part of the whole. [*

— Jacques Derrida<sup>2</sup>

### [ the given ]

In the indeterminable space between these two epigraphs we might compose a series of questions: What is (a) *painting*? What is a *painting* painted over and over again? Where does (a) *painting* take place? Or, one might rephrase the question to ask, what is the space of *painting*? Or perhaps better: what is the given space of painting. And this, in turn, gives us a place to begin.

It is, of course, a question of framing. Of determining limit and extent, interior and exterior, sequence and succession, one and another. At the same time it involves the inevitable questions of reference, of the ostensible signs of painting, of the protocols of manufacture and consent, of the politics of interpretation.

Marjorie Welsh's work tampers with the place of painting. She is relentless, rigorous, and generous (within reason), good humored, and in fact quite witty about it. For Welsh, there is a logic of entailment—an implicative structuring of the place of painting which is constantly in movement towards a serial outside. I use the term 'serial' here to indicate that the move to the outside enabled by these works is not a mere evacuation, nor completion, nor simple circumscription of boundaries, edges, or limits, but a suspension of the determinations *interior* and *exterior*, a suspension, that is to say, of the singularity of painting. There is a deferral, a play of identity and difference set in motion between her works, which brings about an abnegation of the artifact as complete or self-sufficient. It is this strange poverty, figured in the curious lack of 'painterliness,' for example, that sets her work in a very different sort of relation to seriality than one finds tacitly figured in abstract painting, and explicitly so in minimal and conceptual art. Her practice not only questions the process of painting's 'taking place,' but its extent as well. When does (a) painting end? How? And how do we know? Welsh's pluralized space of painting produces a seriality without sequence, a lateral, z-axis occlusion of painting, the performative act of painting multiplied, repeated *ad infinitum*. It is in this sense that her works are excessive. They exceed the bounds of painting, the strategies and *habitus* of contemporary favor. But what, precisely, is meant by such excess?

A mark, a quality, an attribute—perhaps not yet a sign—which spills out of a context or framework. This framework (support) may be of the literal sort, an armature which structures the field of painting, for example, or it may refer to

the conventions which structure that amature. Or to a text, one which exceeds a frame of reference or interpretation, something indecorous, absent or absurd. There are forms of excess which evacuate the senses, by holding a position—*taking place*—differently, problematizing the sense they occlude, becoming, as in the works of Marjorie Welsh, a play between sense and non-sense, one and another, painting and non-painting. One does not even have the solace of the artifact, original, unproblematic, real—all of Welsh's paintings are conditional: arrestments of the virtually (in every sense) endless process of painting. This is what they have in common with minimalism: there is a promissory structure in evidence, and an impossibility of closure. (Welsh's works are by no means considered 'minimalist' and, in spite of sharing certain affinities, they remain absolutely contradistinct.) In serial works, by Donald Judd for example, there is no necessary origin or termination, and the question of precedence—of origin—is deferred. Each (hand-) manufactured artifact coalesces into every other: copies of copies. One might suggest an irony: that they are a *simulation* of the simulation of mass production. (We will use *mass* here as Benjamin suggests, with its connotations of massive, mass-like collective). Judd's sequence/ configuration of objects alludes to a sort of promissory violence: that there is no end, nor a beginning, just a proleptic, anticipatory structuring. All that is accessible is an arrestment, an arbitrary one, of a process which could have begun anywhere, gone on at any time or for any length of time. Consider the 'drawing-machine'/ wall drawings of Sol Lewitt: one might have started such a process anywhere, any time, and continued, uninterrupted, to this day and on into an indeterminate future. Issues of exhaustion, and of the index of labor enter back into the aura of artworks in a curious manner, indicators of the a-subjectivities of mass, and the arbitrary duration of events, rather than as singular forms of productive 'genius.' Again, it is an issue of *gestell* (frame), of enframing the entire process of production into/ as an 'artwork.' Vito Acconci's pretense (it was never very well tested) at working himself into a frenzy beneath a ramp in a Soho gallery

is another form of promissory/ performative violence. Where is the beginning and end of this performance? It's deictic register—it's temporal and spatial coordinates—are coextensive with the location of the exhibition space and the duration of the event/ exhibit. Outside of this frame of reference, Acconci would have been ignored or arrested. Much of Conceptual art might have been understood less as a sequence of constructed contexts, than as a proto-deconstructive discourse on context itself, brokering a critical transition from intertextual to interdiscursive orders of signification. This is the reflexive thread that is to be traced in Marjorie Welsh's project of painting. For Welsh's deconstructive project(ion) on painting it is also a question of the intra-textual, of an interrogation of the place of painting, from an outside, which is at the same time, paradoxically, folded into its (painting's) interior. Welsh causes painting to re-cite (re-site) itself, to arrest its process at another iteration, as a succession of multiple iterations. Marks look like marks, embedded in the transience of each other's meaning, one line looking like another looking like another. Almost. But in the register between lexicon and incident there is also a space for irony, reflection and humour. Welsh's work opens itself to this play of surfaces, de-scriptions and territories by problematizing some of the most basic assumptions that persist about painting.

### **[ plurality and incompleteability ]**

In a sustained critique of the semiotic approach to visual signs, James Elkins<sup>3</sup> points out that what are presumed to be stable and irreducible elements of images—marks, lines, traces, edges, outlines, surfaces, textures, fields, or even relations of figure and ground, tonality and illumination—give way upon close examination to a much more unruly series of historically specific practices and discourses, which are themselves

irreducible to a re-translation into signs or narratives. The graphic mark remains both mysterious (since it is infinitely variable and replete with meaning) and secondary (since it is incapable of becoming a legible sign so long as its meaning depends so intimately on its form). While such elementary marks may be invested with meaning in and of themselves, and recast as elemental pictures or figures, these are determinations which occur almost entirely in language. Rorschach's set of diagnostic designs are an interesting, if extreme, example of this.<sup>4</sup> Rorschach's aggregate collection of stains is a legislated and overdetermined sign-system, one whose use is rigorously controlled, and restricted to psychiatric and psychoanalytical professionals. There are, in fact, strict legal sanctions for misuse. At the same time it is remarkable in its normative anxieties about the proper containment of representation. This discrete set of images, composed by Rorschach, is fixed and arrested, sustained by and constrained to very precise hermeneutic and exegetical rules. While these "blots" may have originated as "random," the recognitions performed by psychological test subjects, and diagnostic interpretations, certainly are not. As 'representations' these stains are fragmentary and incomplete, and entirely dependent upon a complex and exterior process of linguistic determination. As Louis Marin remarks, in his discussion of the works of Poussin,

"...(t)he legible and the visible have common spaces and borders; they overlap in part, and each is embedded in the other to an uncertain degree."<sup>5</sup>

Similar sorts of investments in the materiality of the mark as an aesthetic signifier are made in certain forms of abstraction or material reflexivity, such as occurs in the painting of Jackson Pollock or Cy Twombly, or the systematic deployment of marks that one finds in works by Hanne Darboven, Sol Lewitt, Richard Long or Jonathan Borofsky. These idiolectic 'sign-systems' are embedded in the heterogeneity of play between the



visible and legible, sutured together, yet irreducibly different. There are many other examples of the reflective insistence on the material and linguistic conditions and constituents of the art work that take place within the modernist framework, and persist in sometimes exotic forms in contemporary, postmodern, mediated practices. Another register of materiality and insistence takes place in artworks which appropriate, simulate, cite or mimic other works and things. Different types of paratextual formulations operate to secure an image as a specific type of depiction. The relation of contingency between (para)text and image is irregular, unstable, provisional, and plural, and extends even to the implications of the unsaid. Certain works, in fact, operate by strategically leaving the obvious unsaid, by saying something else, or by deferral to the linguistic/textual 'outside' of the work, as is the case with certain performative or site-specific works and processes which engage the unconscious reflexes or interaction of a given audience in the completion of the work. Some works are made or unmade in language, as has been the case with the determination of forgeries, where, as attribution (signature) changes, the status of a work, which had been a particular thing for a certain duration, is radically altered. Consider too, the difficulties that arise with technical reproducibility, where even in the simplest photographic recording of events or situations, it is impossible to make a clear determination of, for example, identity, originality, truth, culpability, causality or consequence. Where even the index of the photo-chemical trace is under suspicion, a suspicion which is exterior, as it always has been, to the work.

**[ rhetoric and temporality ]**

*Paronomasia*: a play upon the sounds and meanings of words which are similar but not identical in sound. <sup>6</sup> A pun, in other words, which, insofar as

it is wrong, is nonetheless closely related in sound or shape to the correct, but absent, term, and so alludes to that term, calling it into presence, causing a kind of fibrillation in its place, a coextensive cohabitation of meanings, without the fixity of determination. One term echoes the other, in a form of reply, a constant 'turn(ing) back' or 'fold(ing) again'—*pli*—but also, etymologically, a *replica*, 'a copy, duplicate or reproduction of an original,'<sup>7</sup> the effect of which is to pluralize the space of representation, to set it in motion, a play of identity and difference. It is, in a sense, a species of the performative. A pun—the wrong pun—by occupying the place of the correct term, recalls that term, alluding to it without itself evacuating the space. *Allusion*: an indirect reference, figurative, covert, implied.<sup>8</sup> Something which is alluded to is, by definition, not exactly present. Nonetheless, its referential claims are predicated on the presumption of a presence, or proximity of even a marginal or conditional sort, which is consonant with, and fulfills, the rhetorical requirements of allusion. Painting's allusion to other painting, extant outside the work itself, defines, in Welsh's *oeuvre*, the function of individual instances of painting, and constitutes the cause of their coming into being, 'taking place' as arrestments of painting, i.e., as 'paintings' of a provisional sort, each and all standing for/ in the place of painting.

### [ neither inside nor outside ]

Derrida's text on painting enframes and is enframed by other texts—Heidegger, Shapiro, Hegel, Kant—and Derrida, who has occupied himself with "writing... around painting," with

folding the great philosophical questions of the tradition... onto the insistent atopics of the *parergon*; neither work (*ergon*) nor outside the work (*hors d'oeuvre*), neither inside nor outside, neither above nor below,

it disconcerts any opposition, but does not remain indeterminate and it gives rise to the work. It is no longer merely around the work. That which puts in place—the instances of the frame, the title, the signature, the legend, etc.—does not stop disturbing the internal order of discourse on painting, its works its commerce, its evaluations, its surplus-values, its speculation, its law, and its hierarchies. On what conditions, if it's even possible, can one exceed, dismantle, or displace the heritage of the great philosophies of art which still dominate this whole problematic...? <sup>9</sup>

This text is itself a reply/ *re-pli*, a fold, a *parergon*, a boundary or frame exterior to painting as such, and yet which in-forms painting in surprising ways. It is a theoretical text, operating upon theoretical texts, and so often occupies a somewhat suspect position with regard to the practices of painting. It is a theoretical tampering with texts which have attempted to secure the proper place of artworks, with a theory of art. But etymology deserves close consideration: the term *theoria* in its original Greek context, referred to a process whereby a designated group of citizens in the *polis*, the *theoros*, bore the responsibility for determining the import or significance of an event or occurrence such that it could be represented to others, in public discussion, so that a judgment could be rendered and an appropriate series of actions undertaken. *Theory* in this original sense referred to a process of mediation demarcating the passage of an action or event into language, such that it could take place (appear) in a discursive public sphere. In the contemporary aesthetic sphere it is a commonplace of artworks that they support a wide range of paratextual supplements: titles, signatures, inscriptions both interior and exterior to the work, rumours, price tags. The profound complicities and resistances between artwork and language are often displaced or deferred, circumscribed by a language, critical or economic, presumed to be wholly outside, which is folded in. But the space of painting is permeable and plural. It is bounded and occupied by a range of liminal devices and conventions, forming a complex mediation between

inside and outside, image and spectator, inscription and mark, signature and text, title and account. These paratextual elements have an illocutionary force which constrains, and also shapes, the spaces of painting, and, while it often circumscribes their uncertainties, it also underwrites their legibility. Paratextual elements—grids, fields, armatures, means, proportions, rules of composition, perspective; inference, reference, text, intertext, paratext, style, genre, oeuvre—generate and constrain the contours of painting's unconscious habituations.

### [ exemplars ]

There is a small drawing by Frederic Edwin Church in the permanent collection of the Wadsworth Atheneum. It is a delicate rendering of a tree, probably a beech tree. In the margins of this study Church has left a note to himself, remarking that the dissymmetry of the tree as it is was unconvincing, and reminding himself to correct it at a later date. Is this notation a part of the work, since it resides within the visual field of the work, or is it in fact exterior to the drawing? How would such a determination be made? What is the nature of such exteriority, when it is coextensive with the interiority of the artifact? Or is it prescriptive, a proleptic constraining of a work not yet accomplished, one prior to a space of painting *in potentia*, and so exterior to a work not yet, perhaps never, complete or completeable, a form of precession which frames the possibility of a work?

...

In a similar manner, it is impossible to paint a wave. A wave, moving through water, *is* water; how many waves, what duration of their passage, might be necessary to the persuasive manufacture of an image of waves? With such

simple observations representation unravels, and the phantasy of a referential mimesis collapses into the relentless logic of the simulacrum: a mimesis that imitates nothing, a copy of a copy, producing an effect of identity without being grounded in an original, a copy too distant to partake in the essence it copies, a false semblance, or similitude, a model—that is, a synthetic judgment—which precedes, and so takes the place of an empirical referent. A copy of a copy, within an order of pure signification, at an infinite, or at least incommensurate, distance from a reference that might serve as a point of origin. In the absence of the original, a copy stands in relation only to other copies. That is to say, a painting of waves standing in relation to other images of waves. Empiricism as such, exceeds the space of painting.

...

There is a point, in Claude Lanzmann's film *Shoah*, where two men—Lanzmann and a former intern of the Treblinka concentration camp—are walking in a meadow. It is morning, and everything is a muted shade of green. They are conversing in French and Polish. Lanzmann keeps asking, "is it here? Or there?" They continue walking until the man stops, and points to a place indistinguishable from any other in the landscape, and says "it's here" referring in the present tense to the place where the terminal boundary, the outer fence of the camp, once was.

...

Not long ago I gave a lecture under the title "Shoebboxes." I had thought it a somewhat clever title, since my task was to address certain 'accumulations of texts,' bodies of work such as Benjamin's *Passagenwerke*, Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Zettel* and various notebooks, Humphrey Jennings' *Pandaemonium*, Georges Bataille's *Atheology*, and works by Charles

Sanders Peirce, Arno Schmidt, Athanasius Kircher, and others, all of which are, in a sense, archives (one might call them accretions) of texts, notes, aphorisms, and diagrams, which were collected—more or less—into the metaphorical equivalents of 'shoeboxes.' Benjamin's unfinished project, for example, has two German editions, a French edition, and an English edition, and numerous commentaries. Each are organized differently, with a different taxonomy, apparatus and emphasis. Bataille's project had so many contradicting promised variants that it is difficult to sort out just what the final shape of such a work might have been, or, for that matter, which of Bataille's promises should be regarded with suspicion. The point is that the sequential organization of such textual ensembles do not have a necessarily determinate form, thematic configuration or extent, but operate more as 'virtual'—that is as conditional or possible—assemblages, and thereby admit of a number of possible concrete forms. Simultaneously. In a very real, pragmatic, sense they are incompleteable, and only the most likely variants, or iterations, are arrested and fixed into a published form. The analogy I wish to draw out here goes something like this: the notion of the page as a ground or space of writing is relatively little concerned with actual pages, since they may vary greatly in composition, trim size, ratio, etc. As an armature which 'holds' writing it is a metaphor, and so not unlike the 'space' which supports iteration after iteration of painting. In Marjorie Welsh's work it is a frame, or field, a relay, or machinery, of which we—artist and spectator—are elements, in a radical re-questioning of the ground of painting, which originates neither wholly inside nor outside painting, as neither act nor institution, production of consumption.

The question of self-reference presents an *aporia* in representation. It is not a question of identity, but of the temporal articulations of an abyssal structure: in order to refer to itself a work must differ from itself, so that even if its contours are exact, it must displace itself in time, trading places, and priorities, a *mise-en-abyme* modified by deictic determinations (spatio-temporal markers: *here, there, now, this, that*).

## [ process and transmission ]

There is a curious form of paratext that one often sees on the screens of contemporary television broadcasts, a word all the more curious for its degree of familiarity: the word *live* residing somewhere on the surface of an image, simultaneously outside and inside the visual field. One may see this image/ text configuration many times over, always indicating that it is a "live transmission." What is going on here? What precisely is being indicated? It is useful to note that the term *live* arose at a particular historical juncture, as the dominion of uncontested naturalness of presence (life) diminished, entering into mediation. In early radio broadcasting, the term *live* was invoked in an effort to sever the connection between death and distance, between the past and present of events, people, and things. *Live* is the prosthetic form of life, something that announces its authenticity against potentially deceptive substitutes; the fundamental sense of *live* was therefore contrastive: "*live*" means "not dead." By the end of the 1920s, *live* had come to mean "simultaneous broadcasting," where the "live" performances or events were coextensive with their technical transmission. The notion of "dead air" is interesting in this respect, almost like a kind of Turing test for broadcast media. In today's mediated public sphere, *live* has come to mean something quite different: *live* means something like "present = having-been-present"—a present-tense of media that seeks to reassert an authoritative authenticity by a claim to presence having been—in front of the camera—at some point. The shifting contours, attenuating boundaries of the specular event, are thereby pluralised, abstract. A *live* broadcast

"...does not transmit 'dead' material as does the phonograph, but present and 'living' events..." (E. W. Burgess)<sup>10</sup>

in a generalized space of "having-been-present"—i.e., as a virtual and continuous presence. Between radio and phonographic recording, the

explicit equation of simultaneity with life, and recording with death, is propounded and exemplified, over and over again. Television is figured as an explicitly "live" medium; the signal is "live" whether what is transmitted is currently unfolding or has been previously recorded. There is in television, within its carefully wrought artifice of intimate familiarity, an irruption of the uncanny that occurs with the displacement and repetition of live images. As familiar as furniture, the television screen is still a dangerous membrane with the possibility of overturning its domesticity at any moment. Why else would so much energy be expended in circumscribing its use as an appliance, containing it as a live medium? The capacity to discern whether or not an image is a live image, or even whether that might matter, is evacuated in an architecture of evidentiary invisibility, to be relocated—in fact, domesticated and repressed—only in the most conventional manner, and via the most minimally intrusive paratextual elements: as captions, titles, notes, attributions: "LIVE."

With every new technology, space and time have appeared to collapse. The interval is attenuated, and, paradoxically, extended ad infinitum. But it is the very appearance of collapse, one might suspect, that gives away the foundational slip, the elision, the phenomenological sleight of hand, wherein at the moment of its greatest weakness—the recuperation of these categories as forms of life—that the loss is most profound. Consider again that most common paratext, found now, almost everywhere, the term LIVE inscribed on the surface of a screen, indexed to a transmission, literally written into an event, a textual marker that something is taking place now (and, tacitly, here), at this very moment. Event and transmission are coextensive, and the question of origin has apparently been recuperated—snatched at the last moment—from an inaccessible real. Despite its deictic distance (its remoteness from a terminal spectator), this now phantom event has become, in its mediality, both document and event, sense and memory, at the same time. Perhaps it was this sort of spatio-temporal aporia that



Heidegger refers to, asking himself "What is nearness if, along with its failure to appear, remoteness also remains absent?" <sup>11</sup>

The remote as a mediated suspicion: "LIVE" as a deictic marker that is no longer bound by the constraints of sense, marking and indicating time, to be sure, but of what sort? Not the present as such, which passes away, but a present-perfect, which persists. Sense returns, arrested. Once having been, the presence of what has transpired before the camera is always accessible. But this deixis also marks another form of loss: the photo-chemical index of the photographic linkage to the real vanishes, just as the hope of recuperation takes up residence in the word: LIVE.

The image passes before us, in its real time, just as it does, we suppose, as we see it. There are only flashes, *Aufblitzendes*, arrested and fixed to the continuity of their endless passage: a persistence of vision. It is not that they have ended as fast as one sees them, but rather that their continuity has been parsed so that they no longer (re)attach to any subsequence (history), but only to other consequences (representations). This may be what Benjamin implies by considering History as photographic. The place of the image has been changed, and there are certain governances, and consequences, to such modifications.

Even the wrap-around digital signage in Times Square, on the Reuters or NASDAQ buildings, for its part arrests, momentarily, the subject of its gaze, even if its seductions take place in a fraction of a second, and only then in our peripheral vision. This architectural/ digital phantasmata is more and more a constant within our environment, a "background condition," less on the order of a direct address than a constant and probabilistic conditional: always ready to be there. It is a variant of what Baudrillard has called the *hyperreal*, a precession of signs before, or without, referents, or even a concatenation of conflicting and absent referents adduced from the seductive

collusion of sign-effects. Unlike the cinema, to which they are nonetheless related, architectural projections do not impose a form of present-tense direct address; they operate in the marginal space of peripheral vision, as something almost already past, its import lying in having been, in enframing rather than engaging. Cinema's forms of address, whether one is present or not, are always directed as if to "you," the phantasmatic/structural subject-position mitigated by the consensual suturing of ourselves into the specular apparatus. The architectural progression of images claims only to have taken place; "you" are not its subject-position. Like delirium, a dream, an impression, it addresses the peripheral, the unconscious, in a reflexive marking—like a flash or an afterimage—of the body in its passage. This is the territory of our contemporary mediascape, our cities, our theaters, our stadiums, our homes. It is a world where everything is always already an image, where reflection and phenomenality occupy the sort of position formerly circumscribed by the notion of a "soul," where the referent is inscribed into the field of signs as a questionable and dangerous evidentiary trace.

But it is not my purpose here to examine the constant, hidden tropes of televisual transmission. The task is to point out that a certain transformation of the space of events has taken place, a certain mutation in duration and extent. In other words, in the process of enframing (*gestellen*) an event. Even the event of painting, as Marjorie Welsh so well knows, is subject to this, and efforts to preserve its sanctities as a discrete array of objects become more strenuous, as paintings slip away from reference, exceed their supports, or contradict standards of classification as work, diptych, series, oeuvre, etc. Painting, too, operates in a generalized space of 'having-been-present' as presence, legitimated by its referential variability, marking its excession of, or inscription into, the body of tradition. Marjorie Welsh's painting brilliantly addresses the vicissitudes of this process, reflexively probing the purity of the act of painting, and the troubling evidence of its

residues. No single canvas of Welsh's makes sense—it is only in collective apprehension that her task becomes clear, only when one comprehends—in a series of flashes (*Aufblitzendes*)—the occlusion of the space of painting by its myriad possibilities, a series of material remainders through which one might momentarily glimpse *painting* in the present-perfect tense.