

**MARCIA HAFIF**

## **BEGINNING AGAIN**

The options open to painting in the recent past appeared to be extremely limited. It was not that everything had been done, but rather that the impulses to create which had functioned in the past were no longer urgent or even meaningful. Tracing magic images, storytelling, reporting, representing in a one-to-one relationship a scene or figure in paint - none of these acts was credible in the way it once had been. Abstraction appeared to be used up; expression through shape and color was very familiar and had become meaningless. The process of flattening out the canvas had reached an end; formalist painting had soaked color into the canvas and moved shape to the edge, presenting an almost but not quite, unbroken field. We no longer believed in the transcendency of paint and saw little reason to use the medium of painting for making art.

In the middle sixties some expressed surprise that I was still using a brush. By 1975 Max Kozloff could say, "for at least five years. . . painting has been dropped gradually from avant-garde writing, without so much as a sigh of regret." (1) (An odd situation was implied as he went to admit that there were still plenty of artists painting.)

The enterprise of painting was in question, was "under erasure." I use this term of Derrida's (2) to denote a state in which painting appeared to be no longer relevant, not quite right, and yet the only possible activity for one who has been or is a painter - an artist deriving satisfaction from painting, drawings, the ordering of space, with a sensibility directed to paint, to pencil, to materials in general. But there was no dialogue, no discourse.

It was necessary to turn inward to the means of art, the materials and techniques with which art is made. Artists still interested in painting began an analysis - or deconstruction - of painting, turning to the basic question of what painting is, not so much for the purpose of defining it as to be able to vivify it by beginning all over again. That question led to an examination of the discipline of painting, the taking apart of it as an activity; it led to a restatement of what we already knew along with an investigation of it in depth. We pretended in a certain way that we did not know anything about painting. We studied and rediscovered it for ourselves.

This pretending resulted in a kind of extra-consciousness, a looking in from the outside. We were no longer "involved" in painting in the sense of engagement, but now saw clearly what we were doing from an exterior position - an attitude appropriate for the interim period of work which some saw this to be.

The notion that this was the late painting was not difficult to hold. And this greater consciousness could allow parody and the easy summation of painting, including the idea that it was actually possible for its relevance to have expired. Art could merge with other disciplines - science or religion - and

cease existing as an independent activity. The idea of the end of painting had been around for a long time, long before Ad Reinhardt talked about the one size, the one color.

With the invention of photography in the nineteenth century the need for painting as representation had been brought into question. In Russia in 1921 Rodchenko had shown three "pure color" monochromatic paintings and then had stopped painting. Tarabukin declared that this step meant the "death of painting" and the "suicide of the painter." Fifty years later one still asked if an analysis of painting might not lead to mere footnotes and ultimately to the end of painting.

An opposing idea, however, gave the new work strength: a belief in abstraction, and knowledge that in its short history this had been the mode of much significant work. Non-objective painting had existed for us only since about 1910. Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Fauvism had led toward abstraction, searching for ways to be expressive in paint through its own materials and devices, breaking up color and separating color and form from function. In 1910 Kandinsky painted his first abstract improvisation attempting to use painting means as ends in themselves, much as time and sound are used in music. Picabia, Robert and Sonia Delaunay, Kupka, Morgan Russell, Arthur Dove, Leger, Mondrian, Klee, Macdonald-Wright and others were working with color abstraction. In 1913 Malevich showed a painting consisting of a black square on a white ground "in my desperate attempt to free art from the ballast of objectivity. . ." (3) A great deal of non-objective painting has been made since then: De Stijl, Abstract Expressionism, Post-Painterly Abstraction and more. The abundance of work of quality, which has been produced in so short a time, constitutes evidence of the validity of non-representational work. To my mind the significant art of this century has been abstract.

Painters today confronting the question "What is painting?" work, in large part, in an abstract or non-objective mode. Essentially uninterested in using the medium to convey messages, they have looked for what was inherent in the medium itself. An examination of the essences of paint materials and methods was expected to release new subject matter. The work was frequently monochromatic or of an undivided surface. Placing colors side by side would produce shapes and relationships, but all these shapes had been exhausted. The figure had moved off the ground; not the painting itself was a figure on the ground of the world around it. An early example would be the paintings of Ralph Humphrey, who, from 197 to 1960, was involved in an analysis of what painting is and who, though he modulated the paint of his one-color paintings to varying aspects of a given color, did no use interior division of the surface because he found the manifest shape of the canvas itself to override any interior shape.

The insistence on no internal division was not new. I have mentioned Malevich's black square and Rodchenko's single color. A little-known Russian, Wladyslaw Strzeminsky, who was prominent in the Polish Constructivism,

may have been the next after Rodchenko to use a field of one color. Writing in *Unism in painting* (1928), he said:

Two colors, hitting one beside the other, break the unity of the picture by their contrast. . . Rather than contrast, it is the unity and the means aiming at producing it that ought to be the standard of a picture's form now. (4)

A monochrome is a painting or drawing in a single hue (Webster's). Many of the paintings I am talking about, however, although they may have an undivided surface, are not merely of one color in one undifferentiated plane, each painting exactly like another. We can examine monochromatic thinking and some of its manifestations, seeing just how dissimilar two monochromes can be and how much in the way of imagery they can encompass.

Strzeminsky, with his concept of "Unism," painted seemingly one-color surfaces that were usually divided up into very small units, so that they are closer to what we think of as "all-over" works. Yves Klein in France, in an art-related gesture, produced thick, pocked surfaces in what he called his "International Klein Blue." Klein related to Surrealism: Manzoni, in the nineteen-fifties in Italy, made "Achromes," often using white materials, but actually concerned with non-color. He was not interested in surface and did not use paint but was making a statement (as part of the Azimuth group (including Castellani, who did make white paintings) toward the un-individual: we can all make art, everything is art.

Robert Ryman paints his surfaces using white because that color does not interfere with paint as paint. His concern has been with the paint surface and the application of paint - with the support for the canvas, the ground, and the means of attaching the painting to the wall.

Stephen Rosenthal does not stretch his canvas, but etches, then subtly dyes it; or he varnishes it and scratches into it along the lines of the threads of the canvas. The final appearance of the work grows out of the characteristics of the canvas itself.

Dale Henry has made canvas paintings covered with transparent materials. One of his primary concerns here is the interaction between the work and light. Often incident in one of his work is discernable only through the action of light.

Doug Sanderson has painted layers of color over each other, finally producing an apparently monochrome surface affected by the underlying coats. Jerry Zeniuk prepares stretched linen and paint it with layer after layer of alternating complementary colors, arriving at a luminous, neutral surface that remains undivided except for brushing incident and the intimation of the many underlying colors.

Rodchenko called his monochromes Pure Red, Pure Blue and Pure Yellow Color, which I would contrast with my own use of Cadmium Red Medium,

Cadmium Yellow Medium and Ultramarine Blue, among others. The specific color replaces the theoretical color and is seen in its pure physical state.

From examining these many distinctions it becomes apparent that the goal of recent artists has not been the depersonalization of the painting and that in fact, one work can be very different from another - both between artists and in the works of any one artist.

The choice of ground will have been made with the coloring materials in mind, and it too affects the appearance of a color.

Although the work may have been determined to be monochrome, certain drawing decisions concerning the edge immediately arise with the idea of applying paint to the canvas. Where is the paint going to stop? The paint may run up to the edge of the support, around onto the sides, or it may stop within the canvas edges. If the paint does end within the front surface, it will probably form a rectangle slightly smaller than the supporting canvas - otherwise it would make a discrete shape on the ground. A neutral solution has been to stop the paint at, but not beyond, the edge of the front surface.

The tool used in drawing or painting may be a pencil, a brush, a pen, and so on; it becomes the mediator between the artist and the ground. The tool chosen leaves its very specific marks influenced by the way it is used. It is chosen for its appropriateness to the medium and for its capabilities in regard to that.

Construction, by which I mean the way elements are brought together, extends from the decisions necessary in preparing a support and ground through the distribution of paint or marks on the prepared surface, including any other interventions by the artist on the materials. The act of working in conjunction with the chosen materials produces an esthetic or an internal ethic. An inherent logic manifests itself through the use of the materials, and here a set of values arises.

Such values arise from the necessities associated with the material in question. The work is determined through the observation of the materials and techniques chosen for a given project or body of work. Rather than altering material to fit one's needs, material is left to a large degree integral and the art is drawn from it. The qualities of the materials and tools, and also the nature of the discipline, determine the choices made. Rules emerge derived from the material and methods in question, and results become the desired end product. The image searched for, more than simply what happened. With this integrity even the smallest decisions take on great importance, as an interrelated consistency is produced among all the elements of the work creating a meaning. The artist determines how, where, how much, and so on, while the nature of the materials is respected, playing its part in determining the final result. The artist works within the (chosen) givens of the materials.

Choices in these areas are made without reference to a known esthetic, each decision being weighed on its own, taking into consideration the material and

the desired end in a specific process. Often these are traditional time-honed paint procedures being used, the artist restating, investigating, as though for the first time, the use of materials that have been long known to art. The difference is in the kind of consciousness focused on the details of these decisions. This is not necessarily a new focus, but one that had not been used for a while, that of seeing the material and its use more for itself than for what it can do.

The hanging of a monochromatic painting is of prime importance. Since the painting is an object to be related to directly, its position with respect to the viewer indicates something of what that relation is about. The painting may be placed low on the wall. And thus be brought into our own space, or places higher, in which case it becomes to a degree removed from us. It is most often hung alone on a wall. A monochromatic painting does not hold a tight focus in that its own energy spreads out to areas surrounding it, which is one of the reasons why walls today are white or neutral avoiding the color harmony automatically set up between the painting and a wall color.

A reduced rectangle on a wall sets up a composition with any other paintings that may be on the wall, with the rectangle of the wall itself, and with any other physical elements present. Rather than being a surface that holds figures on a ground, the painting itself becomes a figure and is put on the ground of the wall. In placing one or more of these objects on a wall one confronts the inevitability of their composing that wall. It has become necessary in hanging as well as in making the work to acknowledge the concrete and delimited space of the wall and its relation to the concrete object placed upon it. This may be done by using the entire wall either as a ground or as a given area determining the size and location of work, by accepting the relation set up between painting and wall by hanging paintings in groups, perhaps even by ignoring the wall and locating the painting in the room. Ryman placed his Varese Panel on blocks in the gallery. I have made certain stretched canvases whose size as determined by the wall, or have even painted the entire wall, in order to eliminate composition by making the painting congruent with the wall. A small monochrome painting, however, which many tend to be, frankly accepts the relation to the wall.

Most often a painting is seen alone or in a group of similar, though discrete, paintings, although Brice Marden has combined panels of color, as has Kelly. Merrill Wagner lets the work pass through stages, and we are presented with three or four phases of the process it goes through. No doubt one reason realist representation is generally rejected is that we are not content with one single image, we are used to seeing multiple images in movies and on television, and one still image in a painting seems insufficient. Photographs are often shown in groups or pairs for this very reason. Monochrome, on the other hand, is open and receptive and "empty;" it is non-specific and changing according to time, location and the viewer. A monochromatic painting does not need to be supported by the presence of other paintings and, in fact, is generally best seen alone.

When we are seeing one painting, however, we need a clue to that painting; knowledge of other paintings by the same artist and of painting of a similar kind by others. And we are also aided by awareness of the artist's intention, although ultimately of course it is the work that speaks.

Paintings were once seen as surfaces on which were created illusions representing real life; or they were seen as the "flat-bed plane" on which to place objects. Now they exist (perhaps since Suprematism) to be related to other objects in the world. The experience of seeing such works is very different from the earlier way of looking. The eye stops on the surface, where once it expected to go within. Where we used to read a surface, ignoring the material it was made of, we now look at that surface's very materiality. This work accepts the objectness of the painting. No illusion is created in terms of three dimensions, and associations outside the object are almost nonexistent. Although it is an object, the painting is painted like the particular kind of object it is - a painting. The paint is applied by an artist and the brushstrokes are visible. The surface is painted, but not the edges.

A frame is not needed to separate this thing from space around it as we accept its material limits. In fact, the edges are left unframed in order to allow verification of the kind of object it is.

The close-up focus implied by one-color painting is consistent with the enlargement of scale within a format that has taken place throughout this century to the point that finally one brushstroke, one color, can make up the entire painting. Artists concentrating on limited aspects of painting or exploring its various attributes one at a time, have, inadvertently or consciously, put together an informal catalogue or inventory of art materials and techniques. An early example from sculpture would be Carl Andre's table of elements, with which he catalogued metals that could be used in sculpture, rather than actually making sculpture of them yet at the same time making them into a sculpture. Dale Henry showed an 80-piece work in which he catalogued methods of drawings and painting in relatively colorless materials, outlining areas of work he planned to investigate. Lucio Pozzi's drawings have made subject matter out of the various processes of drawing - addition, removal, etc. In my own work I have examined the pigments used in making paint, as well as formats, media and mixes, and have used those separately in making paintings in order to make visible the qualities and attributes of a specific pigment color in a specific medium and format.

Much of what I am taking about has had to do with the emptying of the field of work. A surface apparently without incident reveals to the artist the impossibility of eliminating it altogether and gives to the viewer the experience of seeming emptiness and the option of dealing with her/himself in that emptiness. What is there when we have taken everything away? What happens when there is very little to see? Painting has long flirted with emptiness. Think of Malevich, Humphrey, Reinhardt, Marden, Ryman. We could not say of any of these painters' work that everything else by one color has been removed. It is not a difficult task to distinguish between these "empty" paintings. The removal of known subject matter opened the way for

other content to enter in. A painting without interior relationships of color and shape is not empty.

Although in these new explorations decisions are limited, one painting being very much like another - perhaps otherwise the same, but with minor changes - a differentiation should be made here between repetition and series.

In order to treat one concern in depth the artist may indeed repeat work, knowing that repetition leads to a similarity and not to the same. This is very different from extending permutations, working in series. Every painting is complete in itself and, rather than being a variation on earlier work, is more like the earlier work that it is different. The desire is not to work out all the possibilities so much as to refine central decisions, not to search for the new and different so much as to move toward the one.

With the elimination of drawing on the surface, painting is freed from the structural necessity, so strongly felt in the sixties, of relating shapes to the outside edge. The painting is the shape, and the horizontals and verticals of the canvas shape relate to the space it is expected to occupy; but the surface is, in a sense, free. The use of the grid in the sixties also represented that kind of rigid structure, although it could be used with a certain purity and a retaining of the personal - at least by Agnes Martin. In relations to the new work, however, the grid - as well as its atomized expression, the all-over - represents a control far too structural for acceptance of integral imagery that is now searched for. The grid provides a way to divide things into manageable chunks that is too easy. It is now too known.

The new, often monochromatic work, insisting on a restatement of the essentials of painting, was begun with the idea that quality might be in some way definable, that at least painting must have meaning, must have credibility in our present way of seeing. The issue of "quality" has been discussed at length in recent years and I do not want to go into the entire question now. The quality which is felt to be definable here is felt in a wholeness existing in the work, through an integrity of the factors involved in its making, and it is measurable by the criteria set up in the work itself. Although the work is not pushing a message, the meaning inherent in it is crucial to its viability, and, on some levels at least, is very direct.

Painting can be understood on at least four different levels. First, the painting exists physically, as an object in the world that can be responded to directly - it is tactile, visual, retinal. Secondly, technical factors exist in the making of the painting, inherent qualities of material determine method, formal aspects of the work can be examined and understood, and therefore must stand up to certain criteria. Thirdly, a painting exists as an historical statement; it is made at a particular time and represents the artist's view of the state of painting at that time, whether consciously or not. Finally, the painting represents a form of thought, indirectly reflecting the world-view of the artist, and the time, and transmitting philosophical and spiritual experiences.

While it maybe possible to speak of universal meanings, it is doubtful that content is communicated solely by eye contact. Primitives do now understand

our photographs, as we have learned to do. Meaning can be communicated nonverbally, but this is at the same time a relative phenomenon, learned by experience, as one learns to read, by looking and by familiarizing oneself with the problems attacked. The body of work of one artist provides clues to the meaning of given work, as the works together of a group of artists have meaning in relation to each other. Masaccio's painting was significant in relation to the work that preceded it and to that contemporary with it. At any period in history various works have enhanced the meaning of each other, and this continues to be true now.

There is a certain passivity evident in much of the new work. Size is often small - there is no attempt to overwhelm or to change the world. Decisions go with, rather than against the givens of a location or a chosen material. Considerations of construction take precedence over taste. Necessities in the making of a painting direct how it will be made, the final appearance, consequently, being a result rather than a predetermined effect. The work is built from the inside out. In this way form results from necessities inherent in the bringing together of elements, creating an open space in which unknown and unexpected images become active. Interior logic allows a distancing of the esthetic judgment of the painter.

Unlike previous aleatory work, decisions here derive from materials themselves, so that no foreign content is brought in. With this defining of inherent rules, the content of the work that originates in its physical aspect is transferred from the material worked on to the artist. The real subject becomes the experience of making the work, the information derived from the work, the set of values interconnected with and refined through the work.

As the making experience becomes a prime activity, the time in the studio is given greater attention. The preparation of materials is as important as the use of them. Grinding paint or preparing canvases is an equal activity with the application of the paint. Time must be arranged in order not to be interrupted; the extension of time required for work is as much to be desired for itself as for the purpose of accomplishing something.

Related to that is a certain focus of attention to one detail, one form, counteracting the fragmentation of the world around us. Eating a banana is different from eating a banana and reading a book. As a society we use our minds in McLuhan's "mosaic" manner - we deal with several subjects at once, trying to read the news while having full-page clothing ads compete for our attention. We keep our minds on any one subject for a very limited period of time, interposing another subject, then returning to the first, but the time span is always broken. We infrequently read an entire article from start to finish. Life demands pull us from one subject to another. If meditation helps some re-experience a focus, certain work carried out by artists performs a similar function. Both in life and in art these artists attempt to give attention to one thing at a time and to avoid interruption. When attention is divided nothing is experienced completely, and the artist can communicate that intimation to the viewer.



The work I am talking about is involved with the experience of being. It begins with givens. The material exists; decisions are made as to format, combinations of materials, tools, arena. Given one choice others are made on the basis of that. A certain integrity pervades the whole. The artist is involved in being as a way of doing and in letting be, developing materials worked with. The experience is one that few other activities allow us to know: the possibility of direct action in work with final materials, of seeing what was visualized materialize itself in our own hands.

In that search for the present, for perception of being, the artist discovers a wholeness, a means of deriving beauty from within the area set out, from the nature of the materials together with the techniques and human attributes chosen to be dealt with.

I use the word "beauty" cautiously. One wonders if the term is valid, if it any longer has meaning, but we do need some way of indicating the psychotropic action of visual stimuli. It is undeniable that an effect is felt in the presence of certain phenomena - an awe, an excitement. That can be as simple as a reaction to a landscape undergoing the change of autumn colors, or the sense of grandeur felt in the face of dramatic mountain scenery. The courtyard of an Islamic mosque can provoke that feeling as can a simple bowl of calligraphic inscription. We respond to the ingenious economies of shaker furniture and to present-day work in similar ways.

This work is quiet, contemplative, and, as I have suggested, even meditative. This is a most difficult quality to discuss. We are used to talking in terms of materials and formal elements but not of subjective content. Perhaps we feel that too much discussion dissipates the fact of it. We are trying to talk about an experience that is essentially personal. All monochromatic painting has something of this in it. (Other artists one might think of here are James Bishop and Susanna Tanger.)

Recent monochrome has been called Minimal or Reductivist. Because of the apparently reduced surface, it has been easy to relate this work to Minimalism. However, the recent work is not involved in modules, fabrication or industrial finish. This differentiates it, too from Suprematism and Constructivism, where the marks of the hand were largely eliminated. The new painting accepts the marks of human touch and idiosyncrasies of the artist in conjunctions with the varying results obtainable from given materials.

From process art such work took its tendency to set up a procedure and to accept the results of carrying that out. Conceptual drawing also works this way: rules are given, and the work carried out. The product is the result of that action, although here personal content is allowed to enter. Arte Povera contributed another concept, that of using simple methods and materials rather than difficult and costly ones. A term to consider is "esthetic primitivism" (borrowed from Robert Goldwater's *Primitivism in Modern Art*), which Carter Ratcliff says "appears whenever an artist of any period intends to work with formal 'essential,' either to establish the fundamentals of his medium or to engage perception at the deepest levels. (5) Both of these intentions are basic to recent work.

There have been in Europe such shows as "Fundamental Painting," "La Peinture en Question," "Analytische Malerei," "Bilder ohne Bilder," "Pittura." The Supports/Surfaces group and related artists, analyzing the materials of painting and influenced by color-field painting, have written and theorized about their work. Claude Viallat has made work out of the elements of canvas, the stretcher, color, location. Dezeuze elaborates on the components of the stretcher. Louis Cane showed paintings in which even elements of figurative art were abstracted and incorporated in his generally flat color surfaces. Work shown in Italy, Holland and Germany, as well as the American work discussed here, grew largely out of a rejection of color-field painting and its atmospheric quality. More than the French, it tends to put elements together into a whole, rather than opposing them; it is less involved in binary opposition and Structuralism.

The artist I am talking about keeps work whole and within the vision of one author, rarely using an assistant, ordering work from a factory or working in a group. Painting has been able to gather new energy by throwing things out and starting afresh. Although much of it has seemed to continue reduction, it has been, more precisely, involved in a deconstruction, an analysis of painting itself. With belief remaining in the potentialities of abstraction, and in reaction to the apparent exhaustion of painting, the artists cited above, and others, began the inventory - the cataloguing, the examination - of the parts I have spoken of. Painting became demonstrative, conceptual, a thing to be examined, more passive than it had been. The artist was making personal work. Thus certain changes came about. The format became generally smaller. Color became opaque, seen for itself rather than being used to create an illusion or to express. Line was used for itself rather than to delineate shape or form. Personal touch was readmitted as the sign of the brush and the artist's hand was again visible. These are elements of painting.

A certain span of this analytic period appears to be concluded now, although much about painting remains to be investigated. The whole area of relational color and shape has barely been touched upon. Devices for creating illusion, and the history of painting itself, could provide further subject for study. Individual artists will decide whether or not this is necessary, but there has been through this analysis a reaffirmation of the strength of non-objective means of artistic expression. If one phase of this period of analysis is coming to an end, we may be ready to enter still another phase of abstraction, a synthetic period.

- 1) Max Kozloff, "Painting and Anti-Painting: A Family Quarrel," *Artforum*, September 1975, p.37
- 2) Jacques Derrida *Of Grammatology*, Baltimore 1974
- 3) Kasimir Malevich, *The Non-Objective World*, Chicago 1959
- 4) Wladyslaw Strzeminski, *Unism in Painting* (Praesens Library, No. 3), Warsaw 1928, quoted in the catalogue by Ryszard Stanislawski and others for the exhibition "Constructivism in Poland 1923-1936; BLOK, Praesens, a.r.," Essen and Otterlo 1973, p.92
- 5) Carter Ratcliff, "On Contemporary Primitivism," *Artforum*, November 1975, p. 58