

If Display Becomes Materiality by John Chilver

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The toughest painting of the last twenty years compels us to discern a decisive move away from those identifications with materiality that were characteristic of both late modernism and stylistic post-modernism. In this essay it will be argued that this move propels painting into uncharted territory that is significantly removed from modernist as well as supposedly postmodern modes. In turning away from the materiality formerly associated with the object-qualities of paintings, there has been a realignment underway whereby paintings themselves undergo a comparative dematerialisation while materiality is instead increasingly associated with display. The burden of materiality now falls upon an affectively activated and increasingly rhetorical stylisation of display as such and this allows for an interplay with the relatively dematerialised paintings that are inserted in amongst such display structures. To understand the logic of this situation we need first of all to examine the circumstances of high to late modernism in which a particular conjugation of object and image was practised in painting.

At some point within the unfolding of its modern history, painting acquired the dual status of image and object. Paintings asserted themselves and staked their contemporaneity on this duality. We might even say the constant task of the epoch inaugurated under high modernism – and which continued from cubist montage-painting right through to Kippenberger or Lasker in the 1980s – was to inventively correlate image with ‘object-ness’. This was the reign of the *painting-as-object*. Paintings had always been both images and objects, or at least from the time when they became literally separable from the caves or walls upon which they formerly appeared. Yet before modernism the ‘object-ness’ of the painting was only understood negatively as a technical condition of the image, not positively as an affective dimension that could be brought to bear through a dialectical relation to the emergent image. Of course the accentuation of the object-quality of paintings had much to do with painting’s self-conscious territorialisation of its domain at a strategic remove from that of photography. But, without denying that logic of strategic specificity, I want to approach the painting-as-object from the point of view of display. In other words if, as I claim, the painting-as-object is a central thread across a swathe of trans-modernist painting (traceable through cubism, Russian constructivism, Dada, Schwitters, Pollock, Kline, Burri, Rauschenberg, Johns, Klein, Twombly, Ryman, Stella, Palermo, Knoebel, Polke, Kippenberger, Halley, Lasker, Dunham and so forth) then how do we understand the relation it tends to pose between the painting and the space in which it is displayed to be looked at?

To begin to answer that let’s go much further back. What would be a concrete indication of the origin of concern for the materiality or ‘object-ness’ of paintings? Perhaps it began at the moment when paintings were first displayed without frames. Exactly when that happened is a nice question for empirical investigation, a research project for an aspiring art historian. The point is that with the removal of the frame the painting is staged as an icon that is also an insistent object. It is presented as an immaterial thing that must also make itself at home as a material thing. In her 1938 book on Picasso, Gertrude Stein described the epoch of Picasso’s cubism as one in which ‘pictures commenced to want to leave their frames’.¹ Whenever it actually happened, the removal of the traditional frame – which had served both to protect the painting and, more importantly for this text, to bracket off its virtual space from the architectural space around it – was surely already implicit in Georges Seurat’s practice of marking off a painted margin of chromatic contrast around his compositions. When Seurat coloured the perimeter margins of his last paintings so self-consciously he was doing

nothing less than pave the way toward Donald Judd's insight – which we will turn to later – about the profound tension in conventional painting between the literal mark in real space that is or should be self-identical for Judd, and the illusionistic mark that necessarily moves between real and optical space. We will return to Judd's complaint about this duality in what follows. In a work of 1889 titled *Le Crotoy, amont*, for example, Seurat's dotted perimeter margins often went together with matching painted frames or were meant as try- outs for dotted frames that would eventually conceal them. John Russell described this procedure in the case of a tiny 1887 oil study for Seurat's large figure painting *Les Poseuses*:

The vertical bands of colour at the edges gave place at a later stage to the frame, painted by Seurat himself to suit the picture, which so impressed Pissarro when he visited the studio in June 1887.²

The vertical bands Russell cites were at the left and right edges of this oil study and were a rehearsal for a dotted frame that would be attached later. So the point is not whether Seurat actually got rid of the physical frame: frequently he did not. What does matter is that he acted out the issue in many late works, e.g. *Le Chenal de Gravelines, Grand-Fort-Philippe*, 1890, or *Le Crotoy, aval*, 1889. By marking off a visual frame with his coloured dots Seurat translated and then dissolved the frame into his own painting vocabulary. He posed the question as to how paintings might govern their own framing devices and thereby assert themselves as the legislators of their relation to the real space of display. This is no doubt a deeply paradoxical ambition for painting. For it presumes that paintings can both summon up an illusionistic interiority and yet at the same time mark off their boundaries as real surfaces in real space.

Robert Ryman's work stands as the high tide of the painting-as- object. The paradigm remained active well beyond his appearance on the historical scene, but after Ryman there is an evident retrenchment. In other words, there is little sense after Ryman, which really means after approximately 1975, that the painting-as-object could be furthered or intensified. Instead there's a shuffling of the art-historical pack that allows it to drag on through the 1980s. Stylistic postmodern painting produced montages of, for instance, drip painting with grandiose assemblage. But unlike synthetic cubism or Russian constructivism or Schwitters, the extension of the painting-as-object in the 1980s failed to approach painting's relation to the space of display in any genuinely analytic spirit. The contrast with Ryman could hardly be stronger. Indeed in Ryman's work there is nothing less than an explicit and unambiguous co-opting of the technical paraphernalia of painting's display into the constitution of an image, though it is, I admit, at best the spectral remainder of an iconically famished image and even though Ryman himself would reject the term 'image'. In works such as the 1976 *Untitled Drawing* and in a sequence of works from the 1980s, such as *Express* (1984), *Leader* (1987) or *Catalyst III* (1985) Ryman incorporated into the manifest structure of the work the fixings and fasteners that attached the support to the wall. In *Leader* the square 101 × 101 cm fibreglass panel is painted white and punctuated by four steel Allen screw fasteners that are placed symmetrically though not entirely regularly.

Ryman's work puzzles me. Whatever one's feeling about it, it's hard to write about.³ Ryman devised an unprecedented vocabulary for a mode of painting whose five key terms were: surfaces, signatures, markings, fastenings and the (non-)colour white. Consequently one obvious way of writing about it is simply to describe the facticity of these variables as encountered in individual works, which is more or less how commentators like Naomi Spector⁴ approached it and is exactly how Ryman himself talks about it.⁵ Reading the more eulogistic and celebratory catalogue texts you get the sense that commentators struggle to articulate any critical affirmation and are driven to fall back on notions like 'radiance'.⁶

Perhaps the word does give a clue by implying a response informed above all by sensibility and a special connoisseurship. Some sense of the oeuvre could well be made in terms of a discourse of late modernist connoisseurship. Ryman's work, even at its best, falls awkwardly between a vigilant interrogation of painting's taken-for-granted conventions and a complacent poetics of liminality and blankness. And if it is not self-evident, I should spell out that I understand connoisseurship as a conservative mode since it presumes to encompass or master a domain. Nonetheless, the connoisseurial dimension in Ryman remained subterranean up to 1980 or so. In the 1960s and 1970s his work seemed fearlessly to test out certain of painting's materialist tendencies, together with its inherited conventions. We can understand earlier modernist art as being concerned with the disclosure and affective activation of material mechanics of painting that had previously remained hidden and subordinate. When, for instance, Courbet first allowed the trace of the palette-knife to stay visibly unsmoothed and unedited; when Cézanne left areas of primed canvas unmarked in a finished work; or when Pollock, Frankenthaler or the young Stella exploited the qualities of paint bleeding into raw cotton canvas; so in a comparable spirit, Ryman proposed to draw an explicitly aestheticising attention to the fastenings and fixings that held a flat thing against a wall at eye level, but which had never previously been declared as visible elements of a painting.

The thinking behind the fasteners has to do with the way a painting hangs on a wall; usually paintings if they're pictures, hang invisibly on a wall, because we're not so interested in that. It's the image we're looking at in the confined space.... My paintings don't really exist *unless they're on the wall as part of the wall, as part of the room.*⁷

For the narrative I want to spin, Ryman's work can serve as a hinge. It marks, on the one hand, a longer continuity with the problematic of Seurat's dotted margins; one which was preoccupied with how painting might assert control over its own framing devices. On the other hand, it connects powerfully with those artists (Palermo, Oiticica, Buren among them) who sought even more forthrightly to integrate painting with its architectural container – 'as part of the room'. Perhaps it is fitting then to identify Ryman as the *non plus ultra* of the painting-as-object. For although he activates the materiality of whatever holds the painting to the wall, he nonetheless arrives at compositions that remain visually discrete and which are by no means strewn in fragments or in any way *dis*-integrated. Indeed, the relative self-containment of these works is remarkable given the openness to foregrounding the material interface with the wall. Ryman then marks a certain limit that is very much germane to this narrative: beyond him it is impossible to further the painting-as-object without abandoning it, or at least without fatally diluting it by embracing the surrounding space and truly becoming 'part of the room'. Ryman's paintings were perhaps the last ones that could happily draw attention to their dependence upon the surrounding structure of the room, while all along looking resolutely undistracted by the room and whatever else it might contain.

I've dwelt on Ryman and Seurat although they are hardly mainstream exemplars of the painting-as-object. For that one could cite the Picasso of the 1912 *Still Life with Chair-Caning* and then Schwitters, Pollock, Rauschenberg, Johns et cetera. In vastly different ways, these exemplify how the painting-as-object was a matter of embedding broadly imagistic effects in the particularities of object-qualities. Hence a painting's outcome qua image was made to be inseparable from its condition qua object. The aim – surely one that theory would determine as impossible – was to reconcile the immanent materiality of the object with the immateriality of the image. But the advantage of entering the discussion via Seurat and Ryman is that we thereby approach the painting-as-object in terms of a contest of limits and of framing, where the painting attempts both to contain and crucially to *pictorialise* its own limit markers. Ryman takes this to a logical and unsurpassed extreme in his move to incorporate into a painting the fastenings and brackets that would normally

coincide with a boundary where the painting meets the space of its display. Many theoretical texts⁸ have reflected upon the question of whether and how in general a finite entity or field might define its own limits without first overstepping them. If, however, the overstepping was a necessary move before marking the limits then it must have been strictly impossible for the entity to determine its limits from within. The painting-as-object inherited just such a paradoxical jurisdiction when it claimed a resounding sovereignty over its boundaries. It presumed to legislate the relation between painting and the architectural space in which it was displayed purely from within the sovereign bounds of painting. That dream of adjudicating an interface or transition between painting and architecture was also the hope of mediating between the virtual space of the illusionistic image and the physical space of display. The painting-as-object arrogated to itself the immodest task of effecting this unlikely mediation. But it was always going to be a precarious undertaking. At any point painting could be swept up into an embrace of the space of display in which it would become indistinguishable from its surroundings, as already happened as early as Kurt Schwitters' *Merzbau*. A work like Hélio Oiticica's *Grande Núcleo* seems to state the problem while still fending off full assimilation into the space of display. In outcomes such as these there would be scarcely an interface between pictoriality and architecture left to mediate.

If Robert Ryman was the artist who carried the painting-as-object to an attenuated and unsurpassed extreme, it was surely Donald Judd who most perspicuously understood the tension at its core and who most purposefully and ruthlessly opposed it. In his widely cited, though, one suspects, seldom scrutinised text *Specific Objects*, Judd told his readers why he disliked illusionism in painting. The problem for him was that the marks in an illusionistic painting have to be both real marks in real space and signs for a virtual interiority. Hence they lack integrity, are neither one thing nor the other. With characteristically impatient clarity Judd identifies the tension between (material) object and (immaterial) image and prefers to solve the tension by erasing it altogether:

Three dimensions are real space. That gets rid of the problem of illusionism and literal space, space in and around marks and colours.⁹

Here I take Judd to mean that the 'space around' marks and colours, which he calls real space, cannot reside as the happy neighbour of 'space in' those same marks and colours, meaning illusionistic space. The difference between them constitutes, for him, an insurmountable tension. The tension for Judd is all at once visual, ethical and ontological.

In an age whose art routinely fetishizes the traumatic and the irrational, as ours does, I say we should thank Judd for his commitment to reasoned argument as a basis for art-thinking. But that's quite different to loving Judd on Judd's terms. His work found a way out of the painting-as-object. It proposed instead the object-as-object: which was alright so long as one was prepared to abandon painting. For the object-as-object can only function if it has been resolutely purged of illusionism and pictoriality and – or so Judd believed – composition. So although there is usually the sense that Judd's works have been constructed out of the stuff of painting in that they are mostly three-dimensional assemblies of essentially planar components, nonetheless there is a drive to root out anything that might create illusionism or conceal a contrivance of visual effect. For instance, it's notable that Judd never permits a mitred cut along the seams of his boxes. I take this to be an insistence on congruity between how something looks and how it is constructed. Judd is the exemplary case of what happens to painting, or at least in the void left by the subtraction of painting, when its illusionistic interiority is rigorously excised, leaving only a syntax of exteriority.

The heuristic value of Judd's work is great. But let this be acknowledged: by answering the painting-as-object with a declaration of the *object-as-object* Judd performed a *reductio ad*

absurdum. His misgivings were less to do with finding false premises behind the painting-as-object and more concerned with demanding that its assumptions were taken far more seriously and followed more faithfully through to their logical conclusion in the object-as-object. OK, says Judd, – as it were – so you want to respect the immanence and the object-ness of paintings? Then let's fully, obsessively and rigorously respect it as never before! And if we are to respect the object qua object then we cannot attend to the illusionistic effects of colours and marks that are separate from the object and which, by definition, must contradict the object qua object in that they construct a virtual domain that is logically and phenomenologically distinct from the physical space that the object inhabits. The point to grasp is that Judd's strategy amounts to one of taking the painting-as-object more seriously than it takes itself. To that extent Judd's project therefore is one that questions the fidelity of the painting- as-object rather than challenging its values at their roots.

If the rise of stylistic postmodernism in the painting of the 1980s must be associated with a return to a pre-minimalist painting-as-object, then I claim it is notable that afterwards, from a time roughly corresponding with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the painting-as-object is neutralised, but not at all in the minimalist manner. Instead painting returns in a spirit of sheer pictorial illusion and very often as an unbroken continuous surface, very much under the spell of photography in general and Gerhard Richter's photo-derived painting methods in particular. The term disappearance is introduced here in a double sense. It will refer in the first instance to this neutralisation and dissolution of the painting-as-object: then in the second instance, to the disappearance of the painter qua present and expressive author. In neutralising the painting-as-object, artists have had to invent technical and intellectual solutions to the dematerialisation or dis-incarnation of painting itself, a task that of course borders on impossibility, since, as we know, every painter must navigate the materiality of display as well as exploit the possibilities of pigments. However, the condition of and foil for that disappearance through the dis-incarnation of the paintings themselves, has been an increasingly insistent assertion of the materiality of display. Let me emphasise at this point that the disappearance in this account is not to be identified with the so-called deaths of painting. But it does have plenty to do with the demise of the painting-as-object.

For me the two exemplary figures in this dialectic of disappearance and display are Ad Reinhardt and Glenn Brown. For the timelines of my account Reinhardt looks awkwardly premature. But painting shifts historically at uneven rates, sometimes glacial, sometimes breakneck, and endlessly looping back on itself. Ad Reinhardt was perhaps the first painter to intuit that the most strenuous challenge for painting after the high tide of modernism would be the task of disappearance. But it's important not to confuse this with the rhetoric of the many modernist 'last men' and prophets of the end. The challenge of this new task of disappearance was not, and is not, simply one of enacting a gesture of finality, be it poetic (Lucio Fontana) or cynical (Yves Klein). Crucially, it was never a question of approaching disappearance *expressively* or through metaphor. It was not a matter of depicting or symbolising disappearance. The problem was much more fundamentally structural than that: it was the question of how a pictoriality could be invented at the very scene of disappearance, and moreover and more stringently, as an operation conditional upon painting's dematerialisation. Reinhardt was explicit about eradicating materiality from painting, calling for 'The re-dematerialization of pigment matter'.¹⁰ On another occasion, speaking in a simultaneous telephone seminar organised by *artscanada* in 1967, Reinhardt indicated a link between his choice of black and the desire to suppress materiality, or the semblance of it, in the late paintings:

There's something about darkness or blackness that I don't want to pin down ... And it has *not* to do with ... *the color of matter*.¹¹

By moving into exclusively black (though, of course, never straight-forwardly black) paintings from around 1960, Reinhardt stayed faithful to his avowed ambition to 'push painting beyond its thinkable, seeable, feelable, graspable limits.'¹² He was clear about the decisive advantage of black, and especially matt black, for the task of dematerialisation. Although for his own largely generational-ideological reasons he would reject the category of the pictorial, I think it is clear from his impossibly paradoxical remarks on space in his meta-ironic 1957 polemic 'Twelve rules for a new academy' that he was absolutely conscious of the knotting together of three crucial terms in the late works: black, de-materialisation and what we might call a virtual-void (which I call an instance of inventive pictoriality):

[Rule] 7. No space. Space should be empty, should not project, and should not be flat. 'The painting should be behind the picture frame.'¹³

Black is what would allow this paradoxical destination to be approached by dematerialising the painting-as-object: unlike the latter, Reinhardt's black painting would 'not be flat'. Almost infinitely demanding, it would also 'not project' and yet still 'be behind the picture frame'. The truly aporetic intensity of these multiple and conflictual demands are, I claim, best grasped by the notion of a pictoriality of disappearance.

Understood from this perspective, Reinhardt's is then one of the very greatest inventions in modern painting. It is the first to derive pictoriality from disappearance, (*as distinct from symbolising it*). Radically liminal, it removes light itself from the painting. In Reinhardt's black paintings this forces the viewer to greatly prolong their viewing time, in order to allow the eye to readjust until it can recalibrate its perceptual thresholds to the liminal chromatic effects of the blacks. These are complex works whose profound consequences are yet to be worked through by subsequent artworks. In the 1960s Ad Reinhardt was constantly sending black paintings off to exhibitions where viewers would touch them and mark their fragile, ultra-matt surfaces;¹⁴ the paintings would be sent back to the studio where they were then often repainted.¹⁵ Surely what these viewers were reacting to was the extreme difficulty of visually judging where exactly the canvas surface was in space. In a glossy painting, or with the varnish of an Old Master picture, light bounces off the surface¹⁶ and it's easy to see where the real canvas surface is and so to distinguish real surface from spatial pictorial illusion. With Reinhardt there is only a liminal chromatic illusion that demands sustained durational viewing. The paint surface itself is so matt that almost no light bounces off it and it becomes difficult and quite irritating to decide exactly where the surface is. This explains why the paintings got marked up: viewers needed to find where the surface really was, and to do so they had to check by touch.

Reinhardt spent some time investigating how to reduce the glossiness of his oil paint.¹⁷ In removing much of the binding linseed oil medium from his paint Reinhardt came close to applying sheer pigment to his canvases, resulting in extremely fragile paint films. Such was the technical price to be paid for a liminally chromatic painting that could deny its own literal materiality without needing to take the detour through any conventional illusionism. The black paintings implode on themselves. They are painting's unsurpassed rendition of the cosmologist's black hole. Like the black hole they stand for an apparent radical evacuation of energy that is found subsequently to equate with an excess of invisible energy. The first viewing of a black painting presents the beholder with a seemingly homogeneous black square. Given some minutes to readjust the eye, the painting then reveals itself as nine component squares which, usually, the viewer can then confidently assign to the individual primary colours. Here a certain cognitive impasse is encountered that is nonetheless experienced without discomfort: the viewer becomes well aware that something known to 'be black' and indeed previously seen as black is experienced now as red or yellow or blue. In this way the durational viewing tends to bracket off the experience of blackness as such. Only by returning one's attention once again to the painting's surroundings, which are of

course routinely white walls, does one re-encounter the paintings as black, homogeneous and internally undivided. In other words, the full effect of these paintings demands and rewards attention to an interiority or virtuality of the paintings that is conditional upon a bracketing off of the real space of the display environment. This insistent interiority set Reinhardt's work apart from his contemporaries who either still respected the paradigm of the painting-as-object, or took the minimalist road associated with the object-as-object.

This interiority had as one of its key conditions the temporalisation of painting. The black paintings generate appearance from disappearance. Here something had to be abandoned in order to make disappearance constitutive of painting's pictoriality. In Reinhardt's case, his black paintings had to abandon painting's primordial separation from time, or to put it more precisely, they abandoned painting's separation from the involuntary perception of temporal duration as a precondition for adequately viewing the painting. A conventional painting is spatially unique while it endures in time, which is to say that it is static and unchanging. It does not require a determinate durational viewing: you can see a Louis, Guston, Matisse or Heilmann painting in an instant. But by their extreme subtraction of light, the black paintings compel the viewer to an experience of optical duration in which the configuration of the painting as chromatic division emerges incrementally out of a dark fog. This is because the paintings pitch their colour effects at an optically liminal level that the eye can only reach by readjusting itself over several minutes. This injection of an optical temporality into painting is remarkable in its radicality, though it risks surrendering all the affective potential associated with painting's previous separation from time. The black paintings stand as perhaps the single most daunting avenue of contemporary painting's unfinished business.

Modernist painting developed the *painting-as-object* as an immanent mediation¹⁸ between the (virtual, pictorial) domain of the image and the (material, architectural) domain of display. The dissolution of the painting-as-object is irresistibly signalled in the 1960s by the minimalist strategy of eradicating illusionism and metaphor in favour of a project of literalisation. Reinhardt, himself often mistakenly identified as a minimalist or proto-minimalist, prepared the way for a different response, one that both superseded the painting-as-object and rejected the literalist strategy associated with Judd's version of minimalism.

This alternative path I understand as a pictoriality of disappearance. Disappearance here is intended to denote both [1] the disappearance of the painting-as-object and [2] the disappearance of the expressive artist-author. Both aspects were already evident in both Reinhardt's practice and in his rhetoric of refusals and negations. These two senses of disappearance are evident in a much more self-conscious and even programmatic way in the work of Glenn Brown, and in particular the works he has done since the early 1990s based on portrait heads by Frank Auerbach.

Since he began the sequence of Auerbach heads in the early 1990s Brown has worked inventively to open up the paintings. From their beginnings as largely technical exercises in controlled and flattened reproduction to their far more freely interpreted recent manifestations, the Auerbach heads have become increasingly removed and independent from their sources and therefore separable from a logic of quotation. Brown has acknowledged that he was aware of Mike Bidlo's work – consisting of copies of canonical modernist paintings – in the late 1980s, and has spoken of the profound influence that Sherrie Levine's early work had on him.¹⁹ Brown's milieu is assuredly rooted in the 1980s and in the critical reaction of the Metro Pictures artists and their fellow travellers against the previously dominant expressivist post-modernism. But largely because he had a more complex historical view of painting, informed also by an affection for Beckett's exhortation to 'fail better', Brown was able to find a path from Sherrie Levine to Arcimboldo to a new way of painting disappearance. Brown has described the effect that Arcimboldo's work had on him,

and how possibilities were suggested by seeing an Arcimboldo portrait as 'A painting of a sculpture of a person made out of fish, if that makes sense.' He compared that to his own painting:

So I was trying to do ... a painting of a sculpture of a person made out of paint. So the person became as if made out of brushmarks.²⁰

The conception of the work as a painting of a sculpture is crucial. For it places materiality at a remove from the painting and in so doing it fictionalises that materiality. In the Auerbach-derived paintings *materiality is depicted in order to be evacuated, to be eradicated*. The paintings are dematerialised by their painstaking depiction of materiality. The intense pictorial affect of these paintings is embedded in this paradox whereby appearance is created by disappearance. It is the creation of an appearance by the subtraction of a materiality. But that's not all. It wouldn't be quite right to say that the end product of Brown's painting is a condition of pure dematerialisation. Rather *the paintings operate as the material sites of a subtraction of materiality*.

The word 'disappearance' tilts in various directions in this. There is a disappearance of the painting as a self-sufficient thing in the world; instead, the painting almost consumes itself in the relation to the Auerbach work that it quotes. *Almost*, but not entirely. There is a strange remainder that allows the quotation to become something new; something that passes beyond quotation. Since about 2000 there has been an evident mutation in the paintings. The clumps of *trompe l'oeil* brushmarks that make up the Auerbach figures have begun to lift away, floating in shadowy recesses, starting to evaporate here and there. Brown now plays much more freely with his vocabulary; for instance, in some places we are invited to see round the back of the brushmarks, so that they seem to be making a mask, but for a figure that is absent or has been hollowed out.

Like Reinhardt, Brown addresses what has emerged as perhaps the most exacting problematic of contemporary painting: that of deriving pictoriality from the disappearance of the painting-as-object. But as with any problematic in art, this is not reducible to a formula, not a brief that artists could tabulate and dissect. It is resistant: difficult to address technically and hard to grasp imaginatively. In his remarkable ability to go on extending, elaborating and reconfiguring the Auerbach sequence, Glenn Brown demonstrates the invention of a pictoriality.

It is a commonplace that one of the massive transitions in late modernist art is associated in an alteration to the status of the exhibition. As Brian O'Doherty wrote in the 1970s about the shifting role of the gallery interior:

The history of modern art can be correlated with changes in that space and in the way we see it. We have now reached a point where we see not the art but the *space* first.²¹

There was a crucial mutation according to which the gallery or museum exhibition changed from being the mode of public *distribution* of art to being the privileged mode of its *production*. While this is universally understood, there is still a dearth of critical commentary on its consequences for painting. The ambition of the present text is then, in part, to redress that dearth. I claim that the historical contingency of the rise of the exhibition is what did for the painting-as-object. As the exhibition asserted itself increasingly as *the dominant mode and site of art's production* (and not merely of its *ex post facto* distribution), so the credibility of the painting-of-object, which had evolved to mediate between pictoriality and display space, diminished. In a central claim of this essay I argue that the most effective recent painting is characterised by a dual logic whereby [1] the dematerialisation of painting

is allied to [2] the stylisation or activation of the space of display. I now turn to the second strand in this duality. In his first solo show, at Karsten Schubert, London in 1995, Glenn Brown covered the gallery walls, floor and ceiling with panels painted with an almost mirror-like high-gloss finish. There were Auerbach-derived and sci-fi paintings on the walls and a sculptural rendition of an approximation to an Auerbach head made of plaster and oil paint placed on the floor. Visitors were required to take their shoes off. In this exhibition one saw an attempt to think through the shift that I've invoked in the relation between painting and display: the very material encounters that were evacuated from the paintings were simultaneously made available, albeit in a spirit of melancholy scepticism, by the textures and sculptural elements of the installation.

Around the same time Michel Majerus was forging a reputation as an artist who seemed able to combine elements of Pop with those currents in conceptual art that sought to confront the viewer with a reflection on the conditions of possibility of the exhibition itself. In his solo shows like *Demand the best, don't accept excuses* at Monika Sprüth, Cologne in 2000, Majerus employed his characteristic tactic of inserting eclectic paintings and reliefs into exorbitant display structures that very explicitly materialised the space of display. They did so by loudly invading the space, occupying and colouring it, stylising it and obstructing the viewer's path through the gallery. *Demand the best, don't accept excuses* contained three big painting-like things on the walls: one was an affectionate de Kooning pastiche; another an aluminium relief with an interplay of coloured discs overlaid on their negative equivalents; and the third carried the words of the show's title in a blend of gestural abstraction and pastiche advertising. Elegant yet obtrusive white buttresses ran in parallel across the floor and intersected with a perpendicular buttress thereby dividing the floor into sections. Viewers had to step over them. At some points the buttresses curved at the meeting of floor and wall to form side arches and continued up the walls. The aluminium relief piece became incorporated into one such arch. The de Kooning pastiche was fixed to two buttresses that ran up the wall.

Although Majerus' work was in most respects quite unlike Brown's, I see a crucial common measure in the two exhibitions described. Of course Majerus' work was not concerned with disappearance in anything like the sense Brown's can be said to be. But what is notable is how in both cases the space of display is not just acknowledged or interrogated but strategically marked, materialised, stylised and affectively staged.

With Majerus there was always a feeling that the installation design threatened to overpower the paintings, not just because of its intense allure, but also because it tended to look much less arbitrary than the paintings that were inserted into it. This was because there was an evident pragmatic logic to the way the installation designs responded to the gallery interiors. They could be seen to map and interpret their architectural containers. Yet the paintings themselves, however smart and sharp, seemed substitutable. In Majerus' final show for neugerriemschneider, Berlin in 2002, titled *controlling the moonlight maze*, the paintings, as usual, were witty, energised, eclectic, resolutely anti-humanist and occasionally topical (including a 9/11 theme); yet it was only in their deliberate dissonances and variety that they seemed to amass any weight of necessity as an ensemble. Taken singly the paintings lacked the intensity and authority of the installation design. Here though it is worth noting the comparative 'surfacelessness' of the four 'paintings' in *controlling the moonlight maze*. These comprised: a billboard-scale oil-painting with brushmarks smoothed out, in the manner of Rosenquist; an image printed onto a shiny enamelled steel panel; an image laser-printed onto canvas; and finally, a wall-painting borrowing from designer graphics. In other words, here too it makes sense to speak of a comparative dematerialisation of the paintings and a deactivation of their surfaces. Moreover, the question of the arbitrariness and substitutability of the paintings, in contrast to the evident motivation of the display designs, requires qualification.

If the substitutability and hyper-eclecticism of the painting's imagery is understood as an equivalent to web-browsing, then its arbitrariness itself becomes something motivated. This interpretation makes a good deal of sense for Majerus. What's more, it is significant for this text in that the internet is an infinite repertoire of images that are never spatially unique. Contrasted with the spatial instantiation of display then, the infinite image-bank of the internet appears as a crucial horizon of contemporary dematerialisation. Majerus' project can be understood as a heady and exuberant venture to think the consequences of this for painting.

In setting up this ludicrous-sounding triad of Reinhardt, Brown and Majerus, I've tried to sketch what painting might be and how it might proceed when it dissolves the painting-as-object in a movement towards disincarnation. Following the contours of these examples in all their awkward and disobliging actuality, we find no happy resolutions and no tidy textbook case studies. The overarching diagnosis of a *disincarnation of painting aligned with a materialisation of the space of display* remains valid, I claim, despite the actual paucity of instances where artists really do cash out all the terms of my account all at once. The three names of the triad are each consistent with a disincarnation of painting and a corresponding transfer of the burden of materiality away from painting and instead onto the space of display. In Glenn Brown's case this transfer of materiality is made more or less literal when he displays encrusted sculptural blobs alongside the continuous surfaces of his super-flat paintings. But however powerful Brown's paintings are at their intense best, the sculptures that frequently neighbour them rarely succeed. Whatever Brown's subjective motivations are in making them, the sculptures seem to me to answer to a deeper structural anxiety about how a display space can be mobilised if its star performers are going to be radically dematerialised and disincarnated paintings, like Brown's.

At this point it is hard to avoid measuring the argument against Michael Fried's discourse of absorptive pictorial virtues and theatrical vices. It is surely right to link the paintings of Reinhardt and Brown to some notion of absorption, though not quite to Fried's version of it. The constant claim Fried makes about absorptive images is that they present themselves as indifferent, even oblivious to the presence of the viewer or what he calls the 'beholder'. Now while it makes sense to say that one must absorb oneself in looking in order to see a black painting by Reinhardt, this however does not equate with Fried's absorptive qualities. The very fact that the black paintings impose an involuntary temporal experience of duration on the viewer as a condition of the work appearing adequately at all would in itself count against the work for Fried; because the imposition of an involuntary temporalisation of vision by the work would mean that it does the opposite of remaining oblivious to the viewer. Thus Reinhardt would precisely violate the critical value that Fried based on 'a distinction between high modernist *presentness*, which denies duration, and minimalist/literalist *presence*, which positively exploits it'.²² Or so it might seem. But without wanting to sound gnostic, there are, so to speak, many durations. The kind of duration that drew Fried's disdain was associated with the temporal sequence of the viewer's ambulatory passage through a gallery space and *around* the 'literalist' artworks displayed in it, meaning for the most part, works placed on the floor, not the wall, by Morris or Judd or Andre. Reinhardt's temporality in the black paintings is entirely distinct from this because it operates only for a stationary viewer as a kind of phenomenological valve, or optical threshold that has to be crossed in order to enter the paintings. And as an aside, the same point explains why Reinhardt's works are not quite Op Art either, since the typical Op painting imposes duration not as a perceptual threshold to be crossed, but rather as an unrelenting rhythmic visual stimulus. The black paintings then are anomalous from the point of view of Fried's schema since they are neither theatrical nor absorptive in Fried's sense of those terms.

The critical project staked out by Fried since the 1960s is sign-posted by terms like 'anti-theatrical'. But it often seems to me more illuminating to think of Fried's criticism as not so

much anti-theatrical but rather as *anti-architectural*. For isn't it precisely the spatio-temporal experience produced by architecture that corresponds to the kind of embodied durational experience that Fried decried and contrasted to the operations of art in his essay 'Art and Objecthood'?²³ The issue for this text is not one of accurate exegesis. It is instead to pose a Friedian discourse as a co-ordinate in thinking painting's relation to its space of display, which implies its relation to architecture.

Here I propose four distinct claims, which then inevitably become mutually entangled. One: Painting is the invention and investigation of pictorialities. Two: Pictorialities as such are not susceptible of architectural investigation. Three: Contemporary art in general is in thrall to an other that it invokes under the name architecture, and which it envies on account of its fantasised social-political concreteness and engagement. This widespread thirst for a suture of art to architecture is in part the search for an alibi, in part genuine striving for a model distinct from that of art's autonomy. But also, as Peter Osborne has rightly identified, 'there is a spatial deficit in the established critical discourses of conceptual art as a result of its polemical absolutisation of anti-aestheticism. In this respect, architecturalisation, or the use of "architecture" as a model for the work of art, is the antidote to the *spatial deficit* of the self-understanding of conceptual art; this spatial deficit is at the same time a socio-political deficit.'²⁴ Four: Art's contemporary demand for the stylisation and performative activation of its space of display is over-determined by its mode of production and the demands of its infrastructure. Infrastructure here must refer both to the networks of art fairs, museums and galleries that need to be filled, as well as the systems that distribute images, names, texts and thereby generate and service reputational goods through websites, magazines, events, talks and so forth.

But if the historical diagnosis of recent painting that this essay proposes is correct, in terms of a dematerialisation of painting that aligns itself with a materialisation of display; and if this development was born out of a certain crisis of the painting-as-object, – insofar as the painting-as-object arrived at both culmination and closure with Ryman as described above – then how does the contemporary moment compare with the conditions of that crisis? I suggest that there is a different crisis emerging today. We can call it a crisis of the exhibition. The social fact of art's contemporary infrastructural saturation has increasingly temporalised the economy of the exhibition in terms of a heightening of the competition for viewers' attention. More and more artists are heard wondering out loud why exhibitions conventionally last for a month. More and more one witnesses curatorial tactics that wrestle with infrastructural conventions, for instance, by programming a six-week exhibition that changes every two weeks.²⁵ More and more one sees elaborate performative exhibition openings that seek both to trump competing calls on viewers' attention and to maximise the spatio-temporal uniqueness of the exhibition as event. In a further development that is, if not symptomatic of a crisis, then at least the symptom of a profound alteration to the spatio-temporal rhythms of the exhibition, we see everywhere now, as Boris Groys has observed, the rise of quasi-cinematic video exhibitions in which, as Groys argues, it is strictly impossible for a viewer to see everything that is shown over the course of the exhibition. In this situation the viewer is torn between behaviour appropriate to a cinema and that appropriate to a museum. 'The visitor to a video installation', according to Groys,

... no longer knows what to do: Should he [sic] stop and watch the images moving before his eyes as in a movie theatre, or, as in a museum, continue on in the confidence that over time, the moving images will not change as much as seems likely? Both solutions are clearly unsatisfactory. ... there cannot be any adequate solution. ... Each individual decision to stop or to continue remains an uneasy compromise – and later has to be revised time and again.²⁶

It wouldn't quite make sense to say that contemporary dematerialised painting answers to the experiences of spatio-temporal dissonance described here. Nevertheless, it is notable that while Groys' essay tends to lay its emphasis on a conflict between overlapping but incommensurable *temporal* experiences – where the time of the film is in disharmony with the time of the viewer's visit to and passage through the exhibition space – it implies, however, no less a description of irreconciled *spatial* experiences: the spatial experience of the domain of the film-world itself as distinct from and irreconcilable with the spatial experience of the exhibition space. In this precise sense Groys' scenario *does* indeed parallel the central argument of this essay: for it was implicit throughout the above critiques of the modernist painting-as-object and the minimalist object-as-object that both were ultimately unsatisfactory precisely because they could not imaginatively accommodate or mobilise the ontological and phenomenological gulf between the space of display and the space of pictoriality. To return then to the context of Groys' remarks, let's note too that the condition of film is fundamentally distinct from painting in that film can be screened on a laptop or TV screen without any need to consider matters of display at all. Painting's relation to the spaces of its display is necessary and constitutive, however fraught and contradictory. Film's is not.

In the discussion of exhibitions by Majerus and Brown I applauded the dematerialisation of painting as a development that was fundamentally tied to the reacceptance of inventive pictoriality as the central task of painting. I do agree with Judd's analysis of the tension between marks that serve illusionism and marks as features of real space. But I draw entirely the opposite conclusion from it: it is surely the pictorialising, illusionistic impulse that is more ontologically complex than the anti-illusionistic response. In other words it is the Juddian object – whatever its affective power was upon its appearance more than four decades ago – that is foreclosed, condemned to self-identity, as contrasted with the pictorialising mark which cannot be self-identical for the very simple reason that if it were it would thereby fail to operate pictorially. The contemporary dematerialisation of painting is to be welcomed as a moment in which we can rethink and reconfigure the centrality of the pictorial in painting. In his book *Conceptual Art and Painting* the late Charles Harrison proposed a comparable argument about the primacy of picturing in painting:

One strong reason for associating painting with the making of pictures is precisely that it brings to the fore the question of how paintings... may be seen as the occasion for some critical and self-critical exchange between work and spectator ... The kinds of pictures that I have in mind are those that involve some form of illusion.²⁷

He continued:

... the form of 'seeing' involved in responding to illusion-bearing surfaces is a socially significant activity; an activity, that is to say, that involves co-operation, exchange, self-criticism, and learning, and that goes to compose a culture of ideological resistance.²⁸

While I am utterly sympathetic to these rhetorical manoeuvres, and of course one observes here a particular generational distaste for pictoriality against which Harrison is kicking, nonetheless I detect a certain inertia in the argument insofar as it implies that pictorial seeing is in itself inherently proto-critical or somehow embryonically resistant. But considered in relation to my earlier accounts of the demise of the painting-as-object, Harrison's affirmation of picturing could also serve to sanction a modernist conservatism whereby the painting-as-object is said to be inherently proto-critical simply by virtue of its staging of a minimal pictorial effect. But for historical reasons, many of which have been developed already above, the painting-as-object cannot now serve as the engine of painting's contemporaneity.

It is instead cast in the role of victim of or fall guy for painting's contemporary dematerialisation.

Through the critical affirmation of Brown, Reinhardt and Majerus, and moreover, the delineation of a commonality of purpose in their very different painterly projects, I have sought above to situate a contemporary horizon for painting that is distinct both from modernism and from stylistic post-modernism. The task that I describe as one of extracting pictoriality from disappearance is, I claim, both unprecedented and ontologically ambitious. Yet the coincidence of the dematerialisation of painting with the materialisation of display is no happy partnership. It is fraught, conflicted, irresolvable. Pictures have to be displayed if only to become public things available to public conversations. But as pictorial occurrences they are ontologically distinct and disengaged from the space of display as such: or almost so. Again an emphasis has to be placed on 'almost' because the dematerialising operation described as exemplary in Brown and Reinhardt is not quite total: it is conditional upon the assertion of paintings as *material sites for the subtraction of materiality*. This too is something unprecedented in the work of painting today.

Endnotes

¹ Gertrude Stein, *Picasso* (New York: Dover Publications, 1984), p. 12.

² John Russell, *Seurat* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1965), p. 206.

³ Though I admit I'm hardly the first to say so. See, for instance, Yve-Alain Bois' essay 'Ryman's tact' in Bois, *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The MIT Press, 1990), p. 215: 'why is it so hard to write about Robert Ryman's work?'

⁴ Naomi Spector in *Robert Ryman* (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1977), pp. 9–15.

⁵ See his ultra-dry comments on individual works throughout the catalogue *Robert Ryman* (London: Tate and New York: MoMA, 1993).

⁶ In the commentaries by Christel Sauer and Ines Goldbach in Christel Sauer (ed.), *Robert Ryman at Inverleith House Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh/Raussmüller Collection* (Basel: Raussmüller Collection, 2006).

⁷ Robert Ryman in Robert Storr (ed.), *Robert Ryman* (London: Tate and New York: MoMA, 1993), p. 156. Emphasis added.

⁸ Such questions arise in the problematic of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* and recur in the later *Philosophical Investigations*; in a different philosophical moment and register they are foregrounded in Derrida's *Limited Inc.* and *The Truth in Painting*.

⁹ Donald Judd, 'Specific objects', reprinted in James Meyer (ed.), *Minimalism: Themes and Movements* (London: Phaidon, 2000), p.209.

¹⁰ Among his 'Art planks: programs for "program" painting (art-as-art dogma, art VII)', which first appeared in *Art Voices* in 1963 and was read out at the 'Destruction in Art Symposium' in London in 1966, Reinhardt lists "The re-dematerialization of pigment matter". Ad Reinhardt in Barbara Rose (ed.), *Art as Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), p. 69. "Dematerialization" was a phrase that Reinhardt had used while speculating on the nature of his late paintings.' Michael Corris, *Ad Reinhardt* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), p. 136.

¹¹ Ad Reinhardt, 'Black as symbol and concept' in Rose, *Art as Art*, p. 87. Final emphasis added.

¹² Reinhardt: unpublished, undated notes. Rose, *Art as Art*, p. 104.

¹³ Reinhardt, 'Twelve rules for a new academy' (1957) in Rose, *Art as Art*, p. 206.

¹⁴ '1963: Six paintings in New York and six paintings in Paris get marked up and have to be roped off from the public. 1964: Ten paintings in London get marked up.' Reinhardt, 'Chronology' in Rose, *Art as Art*, p. 8. See also Yve-Alain Bois, 'The limit of almost' in *Ad Reinhardt*, Exhibition catalogue, Museum of Modern Art, New York and Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (New York: Rizzoli 1991), p. 12: '... Reinhardt was at last invited to send some of his recent work to one of the Museum of Modern Art's "selection" shows ("Americans 1963"). ... Once again however Reinhardt was right to feel ill-presented. ... The canvases were badly installed (much too brightly lit, roped off, and hung too high so that people would keep their hands off them).' Final emphasis added.

¹⁵ By 1967 Reinhardt had come to discover the limit of the darkening of the "black" painting; effects that were especially vivid and clearly controlled in works dating from 1964 gave way to canvases so dark as to appear to be uninflected monochromes. It is likely that Reinhardt learned this gradually through the experience of restoring, by literally repainting, previously damaged work. Coupled with Reinhardt's desire to discover how dark a "black" painting could be before it "failed", the process of restoration resulted paradoxically in the darkest works of the series of paintings initiated in 1960. Corris, *Ad Reinhardt*, p. 147. And see also Lippard: 'The greatest barrier to chronological accuracy [in dating works] is the fragility of the later paintings, which resulted in damage virtually every time they were exhibited. Back in the studio they were repainted according to the original scheme with the same colors and tones, which were saved and labelled for such emergencies.' Lucy R. Lippard, *Ad Reinhardt* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1981), p 114.

¹⁶ Reinhardt often voiced his principled disdain for glossy or reflective paint surfaces. For example: 'There should be no shine in the finish. Gloss reflects and relates to the changing surroundings.' From Reinhardt, 'Twelve rules for a new academy', p. 207. Or again: '... the glossier, texturier, gummy black is a sort of an objectionable quality in painting. It's one reason I moved to ... [what is] a matte black.... If you have a look at a shiny black surface it looks like a mirror. It reflects all the activity that's going on in a room. As a matter of fact, it's not detached then.' From Reinhardt, 'Black as symbol and concept', p. 87.

¹⁷ 'The effect ... that was soon to invade even the red paintings, resulting in the earliest "black" (red, green, and blue) ones, was *due to the oil being drained from the paints*. The slightly grayed, matt surface also further de-emphasized disparities of hue, enabling Reinhardt to bring ochre, for instance, into a "black" range. The motive for such destruction of standard paint surfaces (making his work increasingly susceptible to damage from any oily substance, especially fingerprints) was a concern with light that finally overwhelmed concern with color as it is generally understood.' Emphasis added. Lippard, *Ad Reinhardt*, pp. 97 – 102.

¹⁸ And here the oxymoronic ring that there is to the phrase 'immanent mediation' reflects precisely the fantasy – which is to say the impossibility – embodied in the painting-as-object.

¹⁹ Glenn Brown in a conversation with John Chilver recorded at Brown's London studio on 28/05/2008.

²⁰ Conversation with John Chilver 28/05/2008.

²¹ Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1999), p. 14.

²² Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters As Art As Never Before* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008), p. 352.

²³ Michael Fried, 'Art and objecthood', *Artforum*, 5:10 (1967) and reprinted in Fried's collection of the same title: *Art and Objecthood* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998).

²⁴ Peter Osborne, 'Where is the work of art?' in Edward Whittaker and Alex Landrum (eds), *Nonsite to Celebration Park: Essays on Art and the Politics of Space* (Bath: Bath Spa University, 2007), p. 23.

²⁵ A major precedent for which was Robert Morris' *Continuous Project Altered Daily*, at the Castelli Warehouse, New York, March 1969. Here too the exhibition is explicitly rendered as the mode and site of the artwork's production.

²⁶ Boris Groys, *Art Power* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The MIT Press, 2008), p. 89.

²⁷ Charles Harrison, *Conceptual Art and Painting: Further Essays on Art & Language* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The MIT Press, 2001), p. 171.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 173.