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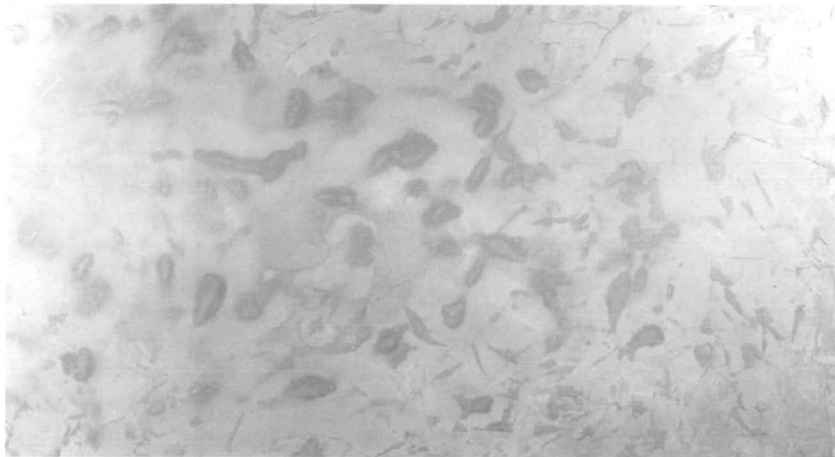
# Noncompositional Effects, or the Process of Painting in 1970

Howard Singerman

1. Daniel Buren, 'It Rains, It Snows, It Paints', included in 'Documentation Conceptual Art: Weiner, Buren, Bochner, LeWitt', *Arts Magazine*, vol. 44, no. 6, April 1970, p. 43.
2. Benjamin Buchloh, 'Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetics of Administration to the Critique of Institutions', *October*, no. 55, Winter 1990, pp. 105–43.
3. Douglas Crimp, 'The End of Painting', *October*, no. 16, Spring 1981, p. 72.
4. James Harithas, 'David Diao', *Arts Magazine*, vol. 44, no. 6, April 1970, p. 48.
5. Gregoire Muller, 'A Fusion of Real and Pictorial Space', *Arts Magazine*, vol. 46, no. 1, September–October 1971, p. 37.
6. Richard Channin, 'New Directions in Painterly Abstraction', *Art International*, vol. 14, no. 7, September 1970, p. 65.

Let me start from someplace that might be familiar: Daniel Buren's 'It Rains, It Snows, It Paints', first published in English in the April 1970 issue of *Arts Magazine*. 'The impersonal or anonymous nature of the work/product causes us to be presented with a fact (or idea) in its raw form; we can only observe it without reference to any metaphysical scheme, just as we observe that it is raining or snowing. Thus we can now say, for the first time, that "it is painting", as we say, "it is raining".'<sup>1</sup> The statement appeared in the pages of *Arts* alongside entries by Mel Bochner, Sol LeWitt, and Lawrence Weiner under the title 'Documentation Conceptual Art', a label Buren rejected, but in the United States, at least, conceptual art was the category that embraced the kind of gesture his work seemed to be. Buren's practice, his refusal of the markers and possibilities of artistic subjectivity and the aesthetic coherence of the individual painting, has long been completely enfolded into the project of site-specific institutional critique, a designation that seems to follow easily along the trajectory Benjamin Buchloh's influential essay plotted for conceptual art, 'from an aesthetics of administration to the critique of institutions'.<sup>2</sup> It is difficult now to see Buren's work, at least that of the late 1960s and early 1970s, as painting made in admittedly difficult relation to the practice of modernist painting and the discourse that informed it, though I will end up some pages from now taking Buren as a painter, and the questions of impersonality and repetition, and of a painting 'at the limit', at least historically, as questions posed to and by painting, rather than, as Douglas Crimp once put it, 'posing as paintings'.<sup>3</sup>

Here, for now, I just want to point to Buren's language, to the rain and snow that are his figures for the facticity and impersonality of the work of art. As it happens, another appeal to meteorological phenomena appears in the April 1970 issue of *Arts*, a few pages further on, in a much more unfamiliar essay on the large poured and squeegeed paintings of the New York artist David Diao, who was, wrote the critic James Harithas, attempting to 'create a natural event on the canvas rather than an image as such'.<sup>4</sup> Approaches such as Diao's were current in New York in 1970 (Fig. 1); there were a number of artists at work in the 'wide space limited on one side by pure painterliness (Lyrical Abstraction) and, on the other, by the most direct dealing with material itself (Process Art)'.<sup>5</sup> One could point, for example, to Helene Aylon's heated and acid-burned paintings in acrylic on steel, where the image is at once the ruins of pigment and the residue of chemical reaction, or Larry Poon's thick acrylic flows, which more than one critic likened to earthworks, and to the same 'sensibility that fostered [Robert] Morris's antiform peat moss and industrial grease mounds'.<sup>6</sup> The critical or polemical likening of the work of art to the work of nature was also not at all uncommon: Clement Greenberg had written of a sensibility and an effect he labelled 'monist naturalism' as early as 1948; two decades later Museum of Modern Art curator E. C. Goossen described a work of art that is 'very much like a chunk of nature, a rock, a tree, a cloud, and possesses much the same hermetic



**Fig. 1.** David Diao, 'Untitled', 1969, synthetic polymer on canvas, 220.98 × 400.05 cm. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of an anonymous donor: 69.148. (Photograph: Geoffrey Clements.)

otherness'.<sup>7</sup> I will return to both of those citations in the coming pages, and, of course, separate Buren's project from Goossen's, as well. Here, I want to think about them together: what motivates their naturalist similes is the desire for a kind of objective validity for the work of art—for a work that, as Buren once put it, 'can only signify itself. It is'<sup>8</sup>—and the attempt to describe the experience of a certain kind of blank objectness. The language that Buren, Diao's critic, and Goossen turn to is an effect of the work as it presents itself, of its presence—maybe just the way Michael Fried used the term—and its refusal. It is, I will argue, one of the effects of noncomposition, of a painting without parts, without elements that are balanced and adjusted or even formed, and of the refusal to draw lines or distinctions through or across the spread of the surface.

The monochrome, the grid, Buren's repeated, predetermined stripes and Diao's accumulations of pigment, at once aleatory and indexical: all of these are ways of not composing, of refusing the meanings of parts and divisions. The unitary, regularised object, the repeated motif or procedure, the 'obdurate identity of a material' taken as 'simply material'—these are terms for painting circa 1970, but they are borrowed from sculpture, or, more correctly, from that work that, in Donald Judd's well-known words, 'resembles sculpture more than it does painting, but . . . is nearer to painting', to that painting after 'Pollock, Rothko, Still and Newman' whose 'parts were few and so subordinate to the unity as to not be parts in an ordinary sense', that presented itself as Stella's did, as 'nearly an entity, one thing'.<sup>9</sup> This essay is about painting around and after 'Specific Objects', and Fried's 'Art and Objecthood'. It traces the project of noncomposition as it crosses a number of familiar critical discussions in New York in the 1960s—drawing, scale, edge, and objecthood; it ends up not in the American 1960s but in France after 1968, with the political deployments and effects of noncomposition, and the positing of painting not as a 'real' object, or a merely 'literal' one, but, after Althusser, as *objet de connaissance*, an object of knowledge. As written by Buren and Marcelin Pleynet and the painters of Supports/Surfaces, such a reading offers another history of modern painting, one that understood the project of painting from Cézanne as a theoretical one, an analysis of its own material conditions and the situations of its production and display, and that could

7. Clement Greenberg, 'The Crisis of the Easel Picture', in *Arrogant Purpose, 1945–1949*, vol. 2 of *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O'Brian (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1993), p. 224. E. C. Goossen, *The Art of the Real USA 1948–1968* (Museum of Modern Art: New York, 1968), p. 11.

8. André Parinaud, 'Interview with Daniel Buren', *Galerie des Arts*, no. 50, February 1968, excerpted and translated by Lucy R. Lippard in her *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (Praeger Publishers: New York, 1973), p. 42. It is striking how close this language is not only to Goossen's but to the studio talk Harold Rosenberg recounted in 'The American Action Painters'.

9. Donald Judd, 'Specific Objects' in *Donald Judd: Complete Writings, 1959–1975* (Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design: Halifax, and New York University Press: New York, 1975), pp. 187, 183 and 182.

entertain, however briefly, the idea of painting as an intervention, a critical possibility.

10. 'Composition' is not a neutral title or a simple designation, see John Welchman, *Invisible Colors: A Visual History of Titles* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 1997), particularly Chapters 6 and 8

11. Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, trans. M. T. H. Sadler (Dover: New York, 1977), p. 34.

12. Piet Mondrian, 'The New Plastic in Painting', in Harry Holtzman and Martin S. James (eds), *The New Art—The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian* (G. K. Hall Boston, 1986), p. 39.

13. Mondrian, 'New Plastic in Painting', p. 39.

14. 'Noncomposition', I would argue, is not the same as van Doesberg's *Counter-compositions*, which continue to assume composing—to be composed—as they turn composition on its side. Again, see Welchman, *Invisible Colors*, pp. 181–5

15. Robbins, 'Morris Louis. Triumph of Color', *Art News* vol. 62, no. 6, October 1963, p. 29.

## I

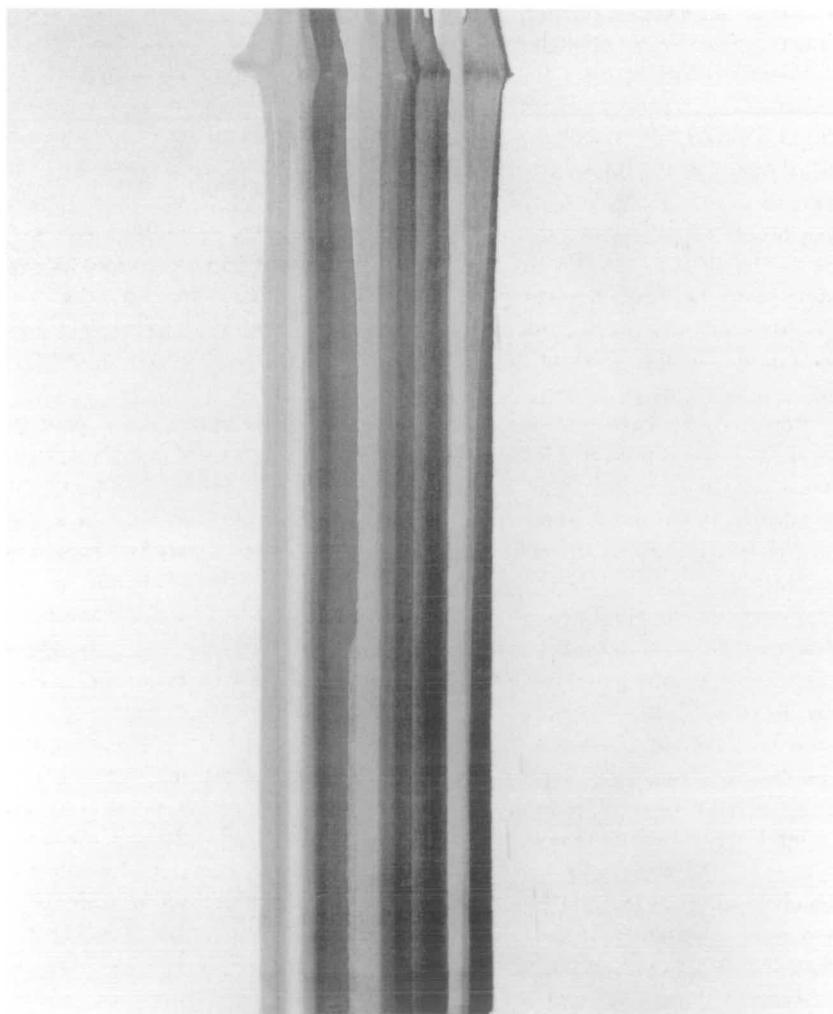
Composition is an old and familiar word; all I will offer here is a short form of its very long modern history. Perhaps the most frequent and meaningful title taken for twentieth-century painting, 'composition' was part of an argument for the autonomy of painting and its means.<sup>10</sup> It designated a subject for painting beyond or beneath representation, a meaning unspeakable otherwise, yet held in—and made concrete by—the organisation of form and colour, the fitting of form to colour, and of one form to another. Kandinsky gave the name composition to his most realised and 'deliberate' pictures after 1910, and in 1912 theorised composition as the pictorial binding of external appearance and 'internal Nature', and more, of the subjective and the objective, both on the canvas and before it. Kandinsky's famous 'principle of inner necessity' powers the binding of composition as it embodies appearance, as it gives appearance the form it must take: 'the subjective element is the definite and external expression of the inner, objective element. The inevitable desire for outward expression of the *objective* element is the impulse here defined as the "inner need"'.<sup>11</sup> The other great theoretician and practitioner of composition, Mondrian worked to eliminate (or, better, transform) the subjective and the particular, and to defeat the interiority that was their emblem. Composition was the name and the method of objectification, of rendering the relation between the individual and the universal 'determinate' and 'equilibrated'. 'It is through composition,' Mondrian wrote in 1917, 'that some measure of the universal is plastically manifested, and the individual is also more or less abolished'.<sup>12</sup> 'Composition is also dualistic';<sup>13</sup> these are Mondrian's words, but the lesson could apply equally to Kandinsky's motivated relation of inside and out. It is this lesson that 'noncomposition' knows best, and I could, I suppose, have drawn it—less arduously—from the word 'composition' itself, from the Latin, to put together.

Noncomposition is a thornier, and much less familiar word. And it has a much shorter and more local history, one that assumes we know Mondrian and Kandinsky and what composition means and that there are reasons for refusing to compose. The name—or better, the concept; I do not think there are any paintings actually titled *Noncomposition*<sup>14</sup>—enters English-language criticism in the early 1960s. It first appears around the work of Morris Louis; for Daniel Robbins, a curator at the Guggenheim in 1963, Louis' paintings represented 'one of the most extreme conclusions of contemporary painting: the calculated concept of un-compositional painting'.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps Robbins' claim is unfamiliar, like some of the artists I started with; it may even be inaccurate, a point I will let Clement Greenberg pursue in the next paragraph. Certainly Louis' work hardly looks 'extreme' to us now; it is difficult to see from here what definition of composition they do not fulfil. Robbins does not start with what the paintings look like, though; he derives the concept from Louis' procedure—an issue raised for painting by Pollock, and that should, I think, be understood quite differently from technique, a word that belongs to an older vocabulary. Robbins' prose is clearly impressed, and punctuated, by the newness of Louis' process: 'The effect, the content and meaning of Louis' works are separate from the structured organization of form—even the form of the canvas'. Instead, 'the entire canvas is a sort of guided accident: no brush strokes (no brush used!); impersonal in that no imprint of guidance is left;

poured paint showing its contours as the canvas absorbs it'.<sup>16</sup> Louis' poured colours are something other than forms. They have, in a strong sense, not been formed, and their lack of intention and relation is what provokes the stuttering list of nouns that Robbins wants to explain: 'the effect, the content and meaning'. It might be more accurate to read that list in reverse order, and to imagine in it a kind of progression: the passage from meaning, to content, to effect charts a path not unlike the one I would like to chart in this essay, from ontological depth—the motivated depths of Kandinsky's 'inner need', perhaps—to the division of signification, and then to a phenomenology of the surface.

Robbins' insistence on Louis' refusal to form continues from the individual pours to the 'entire canvas'. His argument that Louis eschewed not only the relation of part to part but, even more insistently, of part to whole derives from another, more anecdotal narrative of procedure—from a story of what Louis neglected to do. Unpacking *Burning Stain*, a painting Louis had shipped to the museum unstretched and rolled (Fig. 2), the Guggenheim's installers

16. Robbins, 'Morris Louis', p. 58.



**Fig. 2.** Morris Louis, 'Burning Stain', 1961, acrylic on canvas, 220.98 × 182.88 cm. Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery and Sculpture Garden, University of Nebraska-Lincoln; Nebraska Art Association Collection—Thomas C. Woods Memorial: 965.N-175.

17. Robbins, 'Morris Louis', p. 29.  
 18. Robbins, 'Morris Louis', p. 29.  
 19. Greenberg, 'Letter to the Editor of *Art International*', in *Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957–1969*, vol. 4 of *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O'Brian (University of Chicago Press Chicago, 1993), p. 211.  
 20. Robbins, 'Morris Louis', p. 29.  
 21. Robbins, 'Morris Louis', p. 57.

were confronted with 'pure unsized canvas for several yards, then an area of dazzling vertical color bands, and then more unsized canvas'. Nowhere on the roll was there any 'indication of its dimensions; no indication of top or bottom; no marks of any kind on the expanse of canvas'. On the loan form Louis had written, 'I will leave the actual measurements to you, once it is stretched'.<sup>17</sup> The lesson Robbins drew from the absence of marks and edges—from Louis' refusal to draw distinctions—was that the artist had got rid of 'one of the fundamentals of painting: the establishment of formal limits, the definition of the field within which painting was to take place. Morris Louis was utterly unconcerned with what, for most painters, is an initial premise of their works. He became involved only peripherally after the painting was finished, on the occasions when a gallery or museum would force him to give final dimensions—arbitrary though he considered them'.<sup>18</sup> Louis' unconcern, and even his neglect, may well have been imaginary; Robbins does not bother to mention that the paintings are only seen stretched, on and as a defined field, and that someone finally takes a decision. (In response to Robbins, and the 'inane' idea that 'anybody's' art could be uncomposed, Clement Greenberg insisted that Louis 'agonized over the size and shape of his pictures', although the critic was evasive enough to allow himself to make the compositional cut if need be: whether or not Louis had marked the canvas, its limits were 'always indicated in the *paint* itself'.<sup>19</sup>) Still, the ramifications of Robbins' story clearly limn the project of noncomposition. The refusal to determine the limits of the visual field meant a refusal to adjust the image to the shape of the support or to balance one form against another within that shape. It meant, that is, the negation of relational painting, a painting of parts, as well as of the relation of part to whole, or even, for Robbins, of means to ends. 'He has eliminated the more and the less, the comparative', and their departure leaves Louis' paintings unified, whole, not only spatially, across their surfaces, but also temporally, in the moment of seeing, and of judgement: 'Each painting is either all right or all wrong'.<sup>20</sup>

Robbins may have oversold Louis' noncomposition, and I have perhaps worked too hard to derive it from what remain for us 'formal' paintings, even under his description. Robbins' other example of noncomposition, Ad Reinhardt, might make some of the refusals easier to see; certainly we know how to link Reinhardt and refusal. 'Only a standardized, prescribed form can be imageless, only a stereotyped image can be formless', Robbins quotes Reinhardt, continuing in his own words, 'and he forces us to agree that almost total regularity is almost totally compositionless'.<sup>21</sup> While we may speak generically of grid paintings or of monochromes—to take two descriptions that Reinhardt's black paintings might fill—as compositions, in a quite specific sense they are not composed. The continuous, all-over grid reduces difference and the intentional ordering of parts; drawn out, offered as the image, it leaves no space for balance, opposition, or differentiation, for parts in relation, or for an interior. Its order is automatic, merely systematic, particularly, as Robbins insists, in its repetition from one painting to the next, as though the standardisation of the image demanded its systematic repetition outside, over and over. Painted in in its entirety, or just painted out, the monochrome shares with the continuous grid and the repeated painting the same refusal of differentiation and of parts; it is only the surface and its limits. The 'guided accident' that Robbins imagines made Louis' paintings—or, to use my opening example, that made David Diaó's paintings in 1970—mirrors the grid's automaticity. Like the grid, chance, too, is a strategy for not arranging, or more correctly for not intending or 'meaning' the arrangement. It devalues,

even voids, the formal relation of part to part: form requires a depth that surfaces in relationships, an intentionality that grounds them; chance unforms. The link of intention to form—the belief that form is certain and determinate, that it is necessary—is crucial to the idea of composition, and to what is obviated, at least in Robbins' story, by Louis allowing the poured paint to take its own shape, and by his refusal to decide. Composition is an intended, ordered relationship of discrete parts, a relationship that suggests—that at once builds and needs—an interiority, a solid, plotted depth that fills both the artist as intentional actor and the visual field, however flat, that underpins the painting: one is an analogue for the other. That space and its meaning are what is at stake in the work against composition.

Composition names the pictorial relationship of discrete parts across a field, parts arranged according to a visual order that both underlies the whole, and of which it—the painting as a whole—is an individual instance, proof of laws and orders. I could have begun my historical discussion of composition's modern history and its dualism even earlier, with John Ruskin on just this point, this mirroring. Composition was at once 'the operation of an individual mind' and the evidence 'in the arts of mankind, of the Providential government of the world'.<sup>22</sup> In addition to securing the painting as a whole, composition as intentional formal relation models an individuality. The work's composed and purposeful internal relations make it available for the projection, and even the production, of an interiority within the viewer—and around the figure of the artist. The composed object, the structured or designed one, appears right—and it appears necessary and specific—because the ordered relationship between the parts of the object structure a relationship between the object and the viewer, and more, between vision as conception and the world. Arguing for a necessary relationship between the part and the whole, between one constructed, articulated field and another, Walter Gropius continued and multiplied the mirroring—the allegory—that Ruskin fashioned for the term composition; he is writing here of 'the basic laws of design'. 'No longer can anything exist in isolation. We perceive every form as the embodiment of an idea, every piece of work as a manifestation of our innermost selves'. In transit from the order of thought to the order of the world, through the work of art as a structured whole, 'the laws of the physical world, the intellectual world, and the world of the spirit function and are expressed simultaneously'.<sup>23</sup> The model for a number of worlds and the deep and surfaced interface between another pair of layered interiors—the artists' and the viewer's—composition appears as the very illustration of a specific model of subjectivity, the image of consciousness as interior to the self and anterior to the world.

Composition was once, for Ruskin, and for most nineteenth-century commentators, academicians, and reformers alike, 'unteachable' in both its individuality and its spirituality. After the innumerable early-twentieth-century studio classes and instructional manuals that promised to teach it—after, for example, the dozens of reprintings and translations of Arthur Wesley Dow's American manual *Composition* (which advertised composition as the 'basis of all work in drawing, painting, designing and modelling—of home decoration and industrial arts—of normal courses and of art training for children'<sup>24</sup>)—the subjectivity that composition proposed came to be felt as merely subjective, and the laws it professed, simply conventional. The philosophical program of composition is threatened early on, perhaps from the outset, by 'surface design', by the corruption of utopia by usefulness, and soon by commerce. Kandinsky's inner need—a need he imagines belongs first to the ontology of the forms themselves—is haunted by Dow's 'good choices',

22. John Ruskin, *The Elements of Drawing: Three Letters to Beginners* (John Wiley and Sons: New York, 1886), pp. 169 and 167.

23. Walter Gropius, 'Theory and Organization of the Bauhaus', in Herbert Bayer, Walter Gropius, and Ise Gropius (eds), *Bauhaus, 1919–1928* (Museum of Modern Art: New York, 1938), pp. 22 and 24.

24. Arthur Wesley Dow, *Composition: A Series of Exercises in Art Structure for the Use of Students and Teachers*, 13th edition (1913, reprint, Doubleday, Doran and Company: Garden City, NY, 1931), p. 5.



25 In Bruce Glaser, 'Questions to Stella and Judd', in *Minimal Art. A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (1968, reprint, University of California Press: Berkeley, 1995), p. 150.

26. Yve-Alain Bois, *Painting as Model* (MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, 1990), p. 126. This is the first time I have cited Bois directly in the text, but his work has been present all along. His writing on Strzeminski and Katarzyna Kobro in *Painting as Model* and his catalogue essays on Ad Reinhardt and Ellsworth Kelly together form the most extended and valuable address to noncomposition currently available. See, in particular, 'Ellsworth Kelly in France: Anti-Composition in its Many Guises', his contribution to *Ellsworth Kelly: The Years in France, 1948–1954* (National Gallery of Art: Washington, DC, and Prestel Verlag: Munich, 1992). Perhaps I can remark here that I will be indebted, as well, to his more recent writing on French painting at the turn of the seventies in the essay's closing pages.

27. Robert Morris, 'Some Notes on the Phenomenology of Making: The Search for the Motivated', in *Continuous Project: Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris* (MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, 1993), p. 78.

28. Morris, 'Anti Form', in *Continuous Project*, p. 43.

29. Clement Greenberg, 'The Crisis of the Easel Picture', p. 224. My thanks to David Summers for reminding me of the oddness of Greenberg's phrase.

30. Greenberg, 'Crisis of the Easel Picture', p. 223.

31. Greenberg, 'Crisis of the Easel Picture', p. 224.

32. Judd, 'Specific Objects', p. 184.

which belong, quite clearly, to the appreciator, to the consumer. At some point, also probably early on, composition could no longer 'crystallize', to use a term from Mondrian, the dualism or even the formal relations on which it was founded; or perhaps it is better to say it could no longer 'Cratylyze' them, to make them seem as necessary and as one. 'As soon as you use any kind of relational placement', Frank Stella explained to an interviewer in 1964, making clear the gender that composition had assumed across the century, 'you get into a terrible kind of fussiness, which is one thing most of the painters now want to avoid. When you're always making these delicate balances, it seems to present too many problems; it becomes sort of arch'.<sup>25</sup> To use a word Daniel Robbins has already spoken for us around the link of form and intention, around a decision an artist might make visually, formally—it becomes 'arbitrary'.

In his discussion of the work of the Polish modernist painter Wladyslaw Strzeminski—and of the difficulty of making even a single division on the canvas, of believing that division to be necessary, unequivocal—Yve-Alain Bois argued that 'modernism in the broadest sense of the term' was 'a vast enterprise of motivation, of *motivation of the arbitrary*'.<sup>26</sup> Before Bois turned to Saussure's distinction, it seems to me worth noting that Robert Morris used the same terms to define process art as that 'strain of art making as behavior that has the motivating urge to reduce the arbitrary',<sup>27</sup> taking Louis as an immediate precursor to that systematisation of behaviour in relation to material, to the 'process of "making itself"'.<sup>28</sup> As it surrenders the choices of making, as it refuses to divide forms, or even means and ends—as it proposes the systematisation of 'making itself'—noncomposition continues the project Bois has offered to modernism. It is yet another attempt to claim the objective necessity of the work of art, however pragmatic or systematic or simply causal that necessity might be. But against composition's inner necessity, noncomposition stakes its claim to validity outside—that is, precisely exterior to—individual subjectivity. It proceeds through a kind of onomatopoesis, through something very like what Clement Greenberg termed a 'monist naturalism'.<sup>29</sup> The phrase appeared in the 1948 essay 'The Crisis of the Easel Picture', his attempt to describe not just a new painting, but an emerging sensibility that might take Pollock as its emblem rather than Mondrian: Greenberg pauses to say, 'I am not thinking of Mondrian in particular'.<sup>30</sup> The primary characteristic of this new naturalism was its refusal of division or relation in favour of uniformity; hence its monism, which stood as evidence of 'the feeling that all hierarchical distinctions have been exhausted, that no order of experience is either intrinsically or relatively superior to any other'. Here, broached in 1948, and assumed through much of the 1960s and in that painting of the 1970s I began with is something very close to the sensibility that Michael Fried will label 'literalism': 'the only valid distinction [is] that between the more and the less immediate'.<sup>31</sup>

## II

'Painting and sculpture have become set forms', wrote Donald Judd in 1965. 'A fair amount of their meaning isn't credible'.<sup>32</sup> Judd was not writing about subject matter, meaning in its most conventional sense, I would argue, but about that vision that imbeds meaning inside the object, that makes it private and interior. One could read his argument as further evidence of a transformation that we imagine was firmly in place by the 1960s: the passage from the subject of hermeneutics to the functions of structuralism, from

meaning as depth, indwelling and intrinsic, to signification, the process of meaning-making in material practices and public space. But the shift Judd announces is not from meaning to signification; rather it is from representation to presentation, as if Greenberg's monist naturalism had come true, as if works of art were real or at least singular and, in direct contrast to Gropius' call or Mondrian's, unrelated. Roland Barthes had claimed Mondrian's practice as a 'structuralist activity' in 1963, but Judd, too, was not thinking of Mondrian in particular. Barthes had linked Mondrian to structuralism, to Claude Lévi-Strauss and Vladimir Propp, around the term composition—'what will be called, precisely, a *composition*'—the functional, determined relationship of one part to another.<sup>33</sup> In New York in 1965, it was just that relationship that Judd felt as 'rationalistic and underlying'; his exemplary painter is Frank Stella, who paints 'slabs' and whose order is 'simply order', an order that does not relate, but only repeats.<sup>34</sup> Stella, at least as Judd writes of him and as he answers his questioners, brackets both meaning and signification. When Stella insists that we can only look at his paintings, that 'what you see is what you see', he is not arguing their visual 'rightness' as compositions—the sense that they fit the order of vision—but their visible facticity as objects: there they are.<sup>35</sup>

'Today's "real"', wrote E. C. Goossen in his essay for the Modern's 'The Art of the Real USA 1948–1968', 'offers itself for whatever its uniqueness is worth—in the form of the simple, irreducible, irrefutable object'. Goossen's model for the work of art as an object, and for this new experience of the real, is not human, as it was for composition, or even the human-made. Rather, the work he describes is 'very much like a chunk of nature, a rock, a tree, a cloud, and possesses much the same hermetic otherness'.<sup>36</sup> The distinction he makes repeats an old hermeneutic one between the cultural object, an object open to history and indeed interpretation, and the object of nature, which is necessarily closed. As Wilhelm Dilthey put it, 'we explain nature, but we understand mental life'.<sup>37</sup> In interpreting the artefacts and histories of other times and cultures, 'there is here a special interdependence of fact, law, feeling of value, and rule . . . [which] can be recognized only in self-reflection'.<sup>38</sup> The humanist or hermeneut feels those feelings, 'recognises' them in a human-made object, in the positing of an intentionality in the other—or, in Dilthey's well-known phrase, in the 'rediscovery of the I in Thou'.<sup>39</sup> The undivided work, the work of noncomposition, resists that transport and the imagination of intention; it presents itself as an object, as if an object of nature. Its 'nonrelational, unitary character *distances* the beholder', Fried wrote of minimalism's noncompositional effects. 'It is, one might say, precisely this distancing that *makes* the beholder a subject and the piece in question . . . an object'.<sup>40</sup> The title of Fried's 'Art and Objecthood' rhymes the hermeneutic division, and it is, perhaps, just that peculiarly new attraction of the exaggerated experience of objecthood that makes the shift that Judd announced an episode in the 'history—almost the *natural* history—of sensibility . . . the expression of a general and pervasive condition'.<sup>41</sup>

Goossen's exhibition was a survey of the practices of post-war American noncomposition, and it included the major protagonists on both sides of Fried's battle lines. Among the thirty-three artists included in the exhibition were the artists he decried as literalists, Andre, Morris, and Judd, and the painters he championed, Louis, Noland, Poons, and Stella; as well as painters such as Ellsworth Kelly, Agnes Martin, and Ad Rienhardt, who stood just outside or, perhaps, just before the lines he drew in 1967. The divisions mattered—reviewing the exhibition, *Artforum's* Philip Leider complained

33. Roland Barthes, 'The Structuralist Activity', in *Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (Northwestern University Press: Evanston, 1972), p. 215.

34. Judd, 'Specific Objects', p. 184.

35. In Glaser, 'Questions to Stella and Judd', p. 158.

36. E. C. Goossen, *Art of the Real*, p. 7 and 11.

37. In Michael Ann Holly, *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History* (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, 1984), pp. 36 and 199, n.37.

38. Wilhelm Dilthey, *Selected Works, volume 1, Introduction to the Human Sciences*, ed. Rudolf A. Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1989), pp. 168–9.

39. In Holly, *Panofsky*, p. 37.

40. Michael Fried, 'Art and Objecthood' in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1998), p. 154. Ellipsis in original.

41. Fried, 'Art and Objecthood', p. 149.

42. Philip Leider, 'Art of the Real, Museum of Modern Art', *Artforum*, vol. 7, no. 1, September 1968, p. 65

43. Goossen, *Art of the Real*, p. 9.

44. Mel Bochner, 'Serial Art, Systems, Solipsism', in Battcock (ed.), *Minimal Art*, p. 102. Bochner clearly understands this distinction in reference to composition, or to the refusal to compose. Describing the gridded, arithmetic order of Carl Andre's work, he notes, 'the word "arrangement" is preferable to the word "composition"' (p. 94).

45. Brian O'Doherty, 'Minus Plato', in Battcock (ed.), *Minimal Art*, p. 253

46. Fried, 'Art and Objecthood', p. 140.

47. This is the subtitle of Fried's *Manet's Modernism, or, The Face of Painting in the 1860s* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1996).

48. In Fried, *Manet's Modernism*, p. 592, n. 204.

49. Fried, *Manet's Modernism*, p. 405.

bitterly that its catalogue had been 'written as if not a single item of criticism in the entire bibliography had ever been read by Mr. Goossen, . . . as if Michael Fried's formidable essay, "Art and Objecthood", had never been written"<sup>42</sup>—but let me argue naively that the works shared something as well, something that in Goossen's description sounds very much like Greenberg's monist naturalism: a mode of presentation, a stance, or behaviour, that felt quicker, more present, more insistent, than earlier modern art did. They shared, as well, a set of strategies for achieving that speed: 'the common application of simple and regularized patterns and systems: the grid, the modular, and the radial as well as close-packing, stacking, etc. The result is a democratic ordering of similar parts brought together into a totality. Hierarchical passions and dynamics are left behind, and we are faced instead with self-evident, crystalline structure, the objectively (instead of subjectively) real'.<sup>43</sup> Goossen has done much work for me here: he has reassembled the practices of noncomposition and tied them to the crossing of painting and sculpture—with particular ramifications for painting. Moreover, and more curiously, he has cast those forms in decidedly motivated geo-cultural terms: the contrast between democratic order and hierarchical passion might make us think of the difference between Stella and Mondrian, as Stella and Judd did, as the difference between America and Europe. Goossen, Stella, and Judd are not alone; there are other places to turn in the 1960s for theorisations of the 'real', and for attempts to grasp the experience of objecthood, an experience Mel Bochner described as 'being forced to view things not as sacred but as they probably are—autonomous and indifferent'.<sup>44</sup> Brian O'Doherty, writing in 1966, cast the experience of recent art in language borrowed from Robbe-Grillet, whom he took as a theorist for American minimalism: 'The world around us turns back into a smooth surface, without values, on which we no longer have any purchase. Like the workman who has set down the tool he no longer needs, we find ourselves once again facing things'.<sup>45</sup> Facing things was one of Fried's problems with minimalism, with its bitter division between the subject and the object that badgers him, that 'refuses, obstinately, to let him alone—which is to say, it refuses to stop confronting him, distancing him, isolating him'.<sup>46</sup>

Michael Fried has long been a theorist of the stance of paintings, of their entreaties or their inattention. He has written most recently of faces in *Manet's Modernism*, situating one of modernism's beginnings in painting's turn toward the viewer, in what he terms its 'facingness': there is a new 'face of painting in the 1860s'.<sup>47</sup> At the same moment as Walter Benjamin's Baudelaire, Manet's painting mimics the effects of a new public, urban, face, one that neither turns away nor allows itself to be penetrated, but flattens out as if a screen. Fried's Manet is not yet Stella; Victorine Meurent, as Olympia, in the *Dejeuner*, or in the costume of an espada, returns our gaze, to borrow Benjamin's formula for the aura, but she does so unsettlingly, and far too quickly. Fried draws on Meyer Schapiro's perception that a 'face turned outwards is credited with intentness, a latent or potential glance directed to the observer'; the face turned toward us is given an interiority that is, once again, as it has been throughout this essay around the term composition, linked to intention.<sup>48</sup> But the gaze Manet has painted does not so much mirror our own—opening up to us an equivalent, empathetic interior in its return—as parry it; Meurent looks at us first, and all at once. 'Facingness' is one of a cluster of words Fried uses to describe the force and directness of that look, and the 'effects' of Manet's modernism: 'intensity, instantaneousness, facingness, and strikingness (*the key term . . .*)'.<sup>49</sup> These are not just attempts to describe the model's face, but to

name that face as it spreads across the canvas, continuous with it. That, Fried argues, is Manet's innovation; he has realised a 'portrait-tableau', a mixing of genres that gives the slowly absorbing, fully realised, and 'finished' *tableau* the humanised particularity and presentational theatricality—the speed—of a portrait. The paintings of the 1860s come at us all at once—that is what facingness describes—as if they beat us to the act of looking, or catch our gaze at the surface. They are marked, Fried writes, by 'an obduracy or opacity (or "blankness" or "indifference")' that 'rebuffs or at least strongly resists all attempts at hermeneutic *penetration*'.<sup>50</sup> He writes as if Manet's paintings were specific objects, the objects of noncomposition, but he claims their blankness and their rebuff finally for modernist painting, and for an interiority: "'presentationality" in Manet's work is not simply presented (what could that have meant?) but rather is *represented*'.<sup>51</sup> Fried's parenthetical question is a rhetorical one: what it could mean is minimalism's objecthood. The redoubling representation of presentation he credits to Manet makes all the difference; it secures the boundaries and the realm of painting as separate, virtual, meaningful. I would want to say, it composes them.

Maybe I could say that Manet's paintings under Fried's description exaggerate and tense the face, they make it felt—tightening, reddening. They turn a face that is both seeing and seen, both inhabited and surfaced. 'A broad face with white cheeks, a chalk face with eyes cut in for a black hole':<sup>52</sup> this sounds like a caricature by one of Manet's period critics, a description of the too whiteness of Meurent's flesh, the broadness of her face as it turns to the face of the picture. It is instead Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's description of the face as a system, the '*white wall/black hole system*'.<sup>53</sup> Theirs is a particularly structural face, an abstract faciality created by, and situated at the 'intersection' of the two great Western meaning regimes: subjectivity and signification. 'Significance', the incessant and circular trade in signifiers and their binding in interpretation, 'is never without a white wall upon which it inscribes its signs and redundancies'. 'Subjectification', the depths dug and plumbed by philosophy and psychoanalysis, 'is never without a black hole in which it lodges its consciousness, passion, and redundancies'.<sup>54</sup> The mechanism of their intersection, the face 'constructs the wall that the signifier needs in order to bounce off'; at the same time, 'the face digs the hole that subjectification needs in order to break through; it constitutes the black hole of subjectivity as consciousness and passion'.<sup>55</sup> Deleuze and Guattari make it quite clear that their face is also the face of painting, whether the turned face of the portrait or the deep hole of the landscape.

Even when painting becomes abstract, all it does is rediscovers the black hole and the white wall, the great composition of the white canvas and the black slash. Tearing, but also stretching of the canvas along an axis of escape (*fulte*), at a vanishing point (*point de fuite*), along a diagonal, by a knife slice, slash, or hole: the machine is already in place that always functions to produce faces and landscapes, however abstract.<sup>56</sup>

Even as a Franz Kline, a Lucio Fontana, painting remains at the crossing of signification and subjectivity, and that crossing is figured in—it requires, it seems—a relationship on the surface, the formal, oppositional relation of black and white, slash and surface. The proof of Deleuze and Guattari's machine is our need to read (or our just reading) any relationship as 'significant', as intended, as meaningful; that is, as a face. Indeed, even when the relation is reduced to its simplest, even when it is disavowed in the work of noncomposition, in the blank canvas or the monochrome, the face is still

50. Fried, *Manet's Modernism*, p. 401.

51. Fried, *Manet's Modernism*, p. 406.

52. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 1988), p. 167.

53. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 167.

54. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 167.

55. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 168.

56. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 173.

57. Kasimir Malevich, quoted in Margaret Betz, 'The Icon and Russian Modernism', *Artforum*, vol. 15, no. 10, Summer 1977, p. 42. And in that new face, Malevich insisted, was 'what people at one time used to see before the face of God.'

58. Greenberg, 'After Abstract Expressionism', in *Modernism with a Vengeance*, p. 131.

59. Greenberg, 'Louis and Noland', in *Modernism with a Vengeance*, p. 97.

60. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 139

61. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, pp. 186–7.

62. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 498.

63. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 138.

there: Malevich called his black square the 'new face of the Suprematist world'.<sup>57</sup>

Perhaps this vision of every painting as a face, as signifying, is what Clement Greenberg noticed when he wrote that 'the observance of merely those two norms'—flatness and the delimitation of flatness—'is enough to create an object which can be experienced as a picture: thus a stretched or tacked-up canvas already exists as a picture'.<sup>58</sup> We already know how to look at it, and to make it enact its intersecting regimes, even without a mark. Still, as Greenberg will caution, such a painting is not necessarily a successful one. The blank canvas, the monochrome, the all-over painting: uncomposed paintings do not sit like a Manet; they are not held in tension, and we are not held to their surfaces or given their depths in the same way. Rather than facing us, appearing to us as a face, the work of noncomposition seems to press toward one or the other of Deleuze and Guattari's poles, to be either hole or wall, to spread or to implode, as if attempting to escape. One could point, for example, to the all-over and the scale it carries with it, that it spreads out as its surface, an extension that refuses to let us figure, that continues and repeats the wall. Greenberg wrote that Morris Louis was "'confined" to the huge canvas', but even on that scale, the paintings leak: 'pictorial space . . . seem[s] about to leak through—the framing edges of the picture into the space beyond them'.<sup>59</sup> On the other side of the wall work, the exaggerated extension of the all-over, there is the centred, punctual, and yet always repetitive—'redundant'—hole of the monochrome: Robert Ryman's whites, Yves Klein's blues, and, to take Daniel Robbins' other example, Ad Reinhardt's blacks.

Escape is a key word for Deleuze and Guattari, and the escapes they plot look not unlike painting in the post-war years, or rather, they sound like the scale, the discourse, and the geography of that painting. 'Experiment, don't signify and interpret! Find your own places, territorialities, deterritorializations, lines of flight!'<sup>60</sup> And as if they had been reading the pages of *Art News* or the catalogue for 'The Art of the Real', the artists who follow those directions—and indeed the directions themselves—are insistently American. While French work 'spends its time plotting points instead of drawing lines, active lines of flight' (Deleuze and Guattari are writing here of the French novel, but as if it were a very late cubist painting), escape 'is a question of speed',<sup>61</sup> and the lines of flight are clearly Pollock's:

*A line that delimits nothing, that describes no contour, that no longer goes from one point to another but instead passes between points, that is always declining from the horizontal and the vertical and deviating from the diagonal, that is constantly changing direction, a mutant line of this kind that is without outside or inside, form or background, beginning or end and that is alive as a continuous variation.*<sup>62</sup>

My aim here is not to link compositional painting to the face and to Europe, and noncomposition to its American escape; that is, I do not want to play Donald Judd or E. C. Goossen. Indeed, the painting I will turn to in this essay's closing pages is that French work circa 1970 that came to understand noncomposition's refusals and its implicit anti-humanism in explicitly political terms. Still, here at least, I do not want to credit the work of noncomposition with better politics or more advanced theory, or to make their difference an ethical one. After all, Deleuze and Guattari caution, 'significance and interpretation are so thick-skinned, they form such a sticky mixture with subjectification, that it is easy to believe you are outside them when you are in fact still secreting them'.<sup>63</sup> In any event, I want to avoid plotting yet another opposition over the difference between composition and noncomposition;

given the ubiquity of noncompositional practice in the 1960s and 1970s, it is not clear that all these dualities align so well. As John Welchman has put it, 'the destiny of counter-compositional discourse cannot be aligned unproblematically with avant-garde anti-formalism'.<sup>64</sup> Fried, after all, was an early theorist of noncomposition and, as we have seen, the term enters American criticism around painters like Morris Louis. It emerges there in the aftermath of Pollock's line of flight, his violent wrenching of line from drawing. Pollock had, for Greenberg and Fried, and for post-war painting, destroyed the sense of line as a division, a putting into relation—as a mode of composition, or to use Derrida's word, a *trait*. '[T]he single edge of a contour: between the inside and the outside of a figure. . . . The *trait* joins and adjoins only in separating'.<sup>65</sup>

### III

At some point in the early 1960s, drawing came to be felt as a problem, an interruption from elsewhere, from another sort of making. Its appearance on the canvas marked a failure and a retreat, and, perhaps, too great a presence. For Clement Greenberg in 1962, where Rothko 'fails is . . . in trying to draw, as in his disastrous "Seagram" murals'.<sup>66</sup> For Frank Stella in 1965, the problem with the abstract expressionists was that they had learned to draw: 'The one thing they all had that I didn't have was an art school background. They were brought up on drawing and they all ended up painting or drawing with the brush. . . . It was basically drawing with paint, which has characterized almost all twentieth-century painting'.<sup>67</sup> Drawing was a problem in Louis, too, the problem on which his work hinged. Reviewing a group of paintings from the early 1960s in which broad rivulets of colour cross the surface diagonally, interrupted at the middle by a vertical gap, Lucy Lippard was, she wrote, 'surprised to see light pencil marks on *Ro* marking the point where the strokes stopped in the center. This seems contrary to Louis' much discussed principles of non-composition, his supposed lack of interest in formal relationships to the extent that he refused to decide the final dimensions of his canvases'.<sup>68</sup> Louis did not belong there: however small and gentle they might be on the more than eight-by-twelve foot surface, the pencil marks clearly announced a different order. They were evidence of a kind of decision-making that seemed intrusive, arbitrary, or that, like Derrida's *trait*, 'separates and separates itself'.<sup>69</sup>

When a couple years later Fried argued that the 'role, function, and status of *drawing*' was what linked Louis to Pollock—and that drawing was 'central to Louis's achievement'—he was not disagreeing with Lippard's assessment or her sense of surprise.<sup>70</sup> The link and the achievement depend on drawing's suppression; Louis' successful paintings, Fried agreed, 'resist being read as *drawn*. This is important because as soon as the periphery, or part of the periphery, of one of Louis's stain images strikes us as drawn—as soon as we are made to feel that the painter's wrist, and not the relatively impersonal process of staining itself, determined the configuration—the image tends to come detached from its ground and to be perceived in tactile terms'.<sup>71</sup> The paintings fail when we can 'feel' the wrist, but what is it that we feel: what feels like failure? The answer might be signalled by the word impersonal; what is implied for us in the feel of the wrist is the body, and more, the subject of the artist—the painting's authorship. When the paintings succeed, when they suppress drawing, they seem to come into existence 'as if of their own accord, without the intervention of the artist'.<sup>72</sup> Here again, on the one side, is the promise of monist naturalism; and on the other, the conjunction of the

64. Welchman, *Invisible Colors*, p. 267.

65. Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind. The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1993), pp. 53–4. See also Fried's discussion in *Manet's Modernism*, pp. 365 and 367.

66. Greenberg, 'After Abstract Expressionism', p. 131.

67. In Glaser, 'Questions to Stella and Judd', p. 157.

68. Lucy R. Lippard, 'New York Letter', *Art International*, vol. 9, no. 1, February 1965, pp. 34–5.

69. Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, p. 54.

70. Fried, 'Morris Louis', in *Art and Objecthood*, p. 105.

71. Fried, 'Three American Painters', in *Art and Objecthood*, p. 229.

72. Fried, 'Morris Louis', in *Art and Objecthood*, p. 126.

73. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence', in *Signs*, trans Richard C. McCleary (Northwestern University Press: Evanston, 1964), p. 45.

74. Merleau-Ponty, 'Indirect Language', p. 46.

75. In William C. Agee, *Kenneth Noland. The Circle Paintings 1956–1963* (Museum of Fine Arts: Houston, 1993), p. 22.

76. Greenberg, 'Introduction to Jules Olitski at the Venice Biennale', in *Modernism with a Vengeance*, p. 229

opening of the picture, its division into figure and ground—however isolated and momentary that division might be—and the palpably arbitrary particularity of the artist, as if he were meddling, as if he did not belong.

The drawn line—the line that in Fried's description carries with it always a wrist, an arm, the figure of the artist—not only buckles the surface visually, but slows and inhabits it. The drawn edge embodies the two-step process of circumscribing and filling in, the temporal restatement of the spatial inside and out. Moreover, as it cuts and begins to describe space, drawing encodes a personal, hidden time; it produces the artist as a question and answer alongside it. Drawing opens a narrative of the time of artistic decision making, of pauses, hesitations, and possibilities not chosen: that opening is what Merleau-Ponty saw in Matisse's brush as it hovered in slow-motion and 'meditated in a solemn and expanding time'.<sup>73</sup> For Merleau-Ponty the lesson of Matisse's brush is precisely compositional; it demonstrates the organised and tensed relation of the figure as it is formed on and from a ground: 'we must consider speech before it is spoken, the background of silence which does not cease to surround it and without which it would say nothing'.<sup>74</sup> The relation of shapes—or simply of inside and out—depicts and enacts the drama of coming into being; it requires a story of struggle and only then climax. The time the viewer takes in front of a painting of parts, a composition, repeats both the drama and the slowness of the earlier relation between painting and painter, the strike of decision or a stutter of indecision. Composition has been from the outset of this essay an analogue for 'thought' as private and interior; here it is not a flattened and synchronic diagram, a philosophical model that mirrors us, but a narrative of subjectivity that we re-enact.

In contrast, the painting that is 'either all right or all wrong', to return to the description of Morris Louis' painting that Daniel Robbins offered some pages ago, cannot be corrected or adjusted. It is made and seen in 'one shot', a phrase that in the 1960s referred not only to the picture's formal unity and the viewer's experience of the painting, but also to how the material went down, the painter's quickness as well as the painting's and the viewer's. As Kenneth Noland recalled of his attraction to Helen Frankenthaler's method and his conversations with Louis about the possibilities of stain painting, 'Each thing you did was just done that one time, with no afterthoughts and it had to stand. We wanted to have that happen just out of the use of the materials'.<sup>75</sup> Soaked directly into the fresh, blank surface, continuing and absorbing it, the thin, transparent images could not be gone back into, balanced, or revised. They were made without the measured revisions of compositional painting, and in a sense they could not have carried them, at least not successfully. The line read as drawn, the feel of the wrist, Louis' pencil marks, put decisions and judgements where they do not belong. Where drawing belongs, it turns out, where it becomes once again crucial, is at the edge, the same place that Louis felt the threat of the arbitrary. Drawing appears there differently; it comes not before but after the painting, at the moment of seeing and as the figure of judgement. Writing in 1966 of what he learned from Jules Olitski's first sprayed paintings, Greenberg acknowledged once more the displacement of drawing as composition, and made clear its necessity. '[L]inear drawing is displaced completely from the *inside* of the picture to its *outside*, that is, to its inclosing shape, the shape of the stretched piece of canvas. Olitski's art begins to call attention at this point, as no other art before it has, to how very much this shape is a matter of linear drawing, and, as such, an integral determinant of the picture's effect rather than an imposed and external limit'.<sup>76</sup> Drawing here is composing, the matching of image to frame; the painting, the

pigmented surface comes as if readymade until it is cut out, made intentional, simultaneously framed and judged.

The cut of painting from the gallery wall as it stamps itself out as a shape, or, before that, the cutting of painting from a field of pigment sprayed, or rolled, or stained on the studio floor, mirrors a harsh and insistent division between making and seeing. That division is what Fried points to, and what he means by noncomposition, in a 1965 essay subtitled 'Some Notes on Not Composing'. His examples, Noland and Anthony Caro, are at once familiar and curious; they do not employ any of the strategies that have been with us since the beginning: chance, or the all-over grid, or the monochrome. Noland composes, one could say, in that he centres his circles or points his chevrons, but, Fried argues, his composition is so obvious and so repetitive that it is clear that 'the decisions that go into their making are not compositional decisions'.<sup>77</sup> Moreover, and more importantly to Fried, neither they nor Caro's sculptures are seen until they are completed. 'I don't compose', he quotes Caro. 'I put them up the way I want them and see them later'.<sup>78</sup> Noland's paintings and Caro's sculptures, Fried continues, 'were *not* made by a process of adjusting or modifying or adding or subtracting constituent elements in order to achieve, by gradual degrees whose progress can be gauged at any point, an ultimate effect'.<sup>79</sup> It is in this strong sense that they are not composed, but instead revealed, all at once, and then judged as whole, as given. The slowness of composition is a problem once again; the composed work is a temporal accretion of felt but unreconstructable decisions as well as a spatial one, as if the interior time of making, the artist's back and forth, was what was figured on its surface in the relationship of part to part. 'Seeing the work in compositional terms is connected with stepping back', with worrying from across the studio and outside the act and procedures of making over 'matters like balance, all-around appearance, etc. . . . *this* is what composing, seeing it in compositional terms, means. We distance it'. Here, the viewer too steps back, composes a work of art as a picture: 'our inclination to do this amounts in effect to a desire to escape the work, to break its grip on us'.<sup>80</sup>

Clearly, Fried wants this work to bring us close, or rather, he wants closeness to name both the intensity of his experience and the directness of the work. His desire to be in the work as its viewer (which will later be a motif in his art historical writing, particularly on Courbet) repeats the artist's desire to remain with it, to continue its making. His language might recall, or explain, Pollock's statement: 'When I am *in* my painting, I'm not aware of what I'm doing'.<sup>81</sup> What keeps Pollock inside the work, what keeps Noland there, is making as the carrying out of something; when he is making, he is not adjusting, or designing, or imagining the overall look. Moreover, as Fried notes, Pollock's horizontality—and Noland's, Louis', and Olitski's—makes seeing the painting as a picture, composing it as a picture, difficult. But horizontality and the procedures of dripping or staining, and indeed the numerous other processes of painting that characterise painting in the 1970s—the paintings with which I began—also establish an insistent and redoubled exteriority. The question of painting by 1970 was no longer what to paint; it had not been that since Harold Rosenberg's 'The American Action Painters', but his answer, 'just to paint', was not specific enough.<sup>82</sup> The question became how to paint: how to spread or disperse pigment or how to process the support to produce an 'image' that did not feel arranged, that was not composed, that seemed to come from the material substance of the pigment or of the support itself as it took form. Outside the painting in its making, as it makes itself, the artist stands outside the work a second time after it is finished

77 Michael Fried, 'Anthony Caro and Kenneth Noland: Some Notes on Not Composing', *Lugano Review*, vol 1, nos 3–4, 1965, p. 198.

78. Fried, 'Notes on Not Composing', p. 204

79. Fried, 'Notes on Not Composing', p. 205.

80. Fried, 'Notes on Not Composing', pp 205–6

81. Jackson Pollock, 'Three Statements, 1944–1951', in Herschel B. Chupp (ed.), *Theories of Modern Art. A Source Book by Artists and Critics* (University of California Press Berkeley, 1968), p. 548.

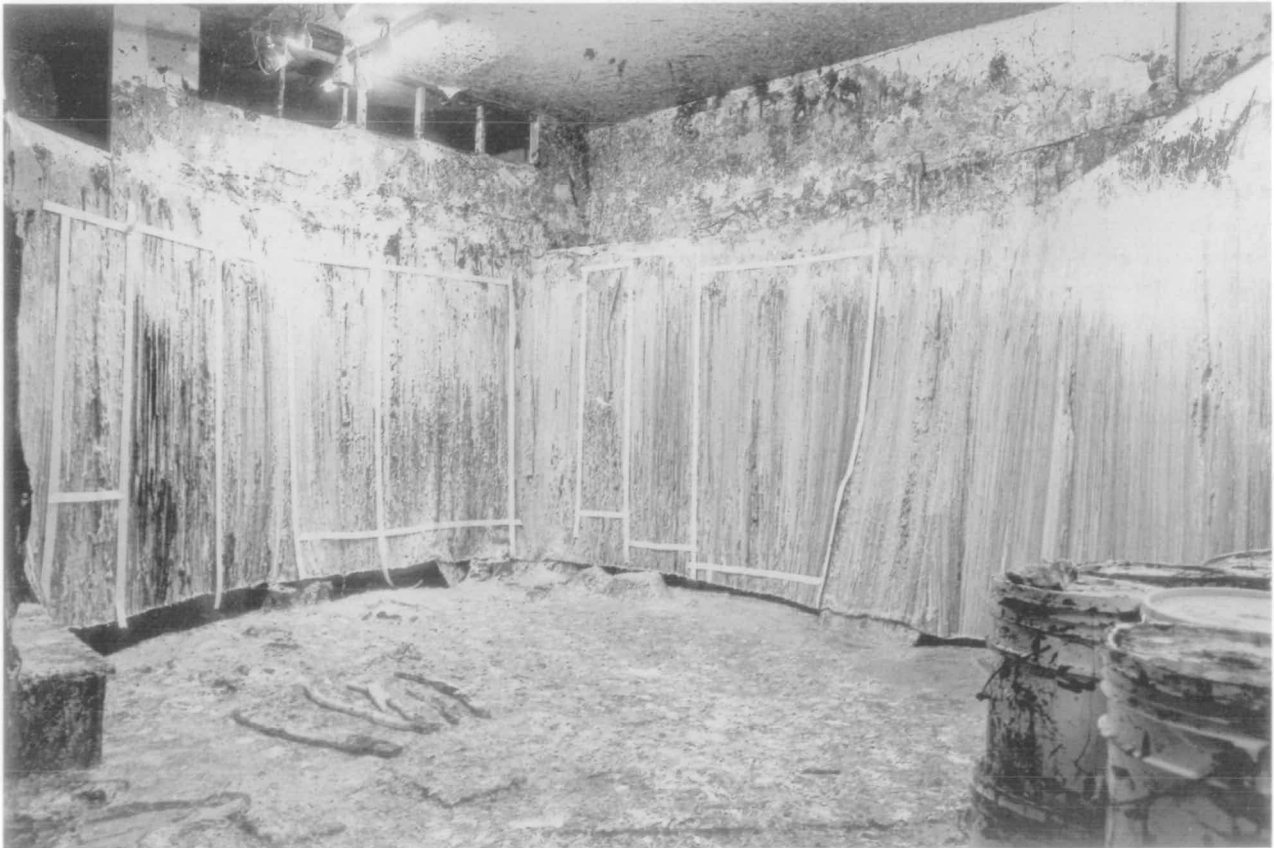
82. Harold Rosenberg, 'The American Action Painters' in *The Tradition of the New* (1960, reprint, University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1982), p 30



83. In Emile de Antonio and Mitch Tuchman, *Painters Painting* (Abbeville Press: New York, 1984), p. 149.

and as it is finally seen, as if it were new to him, as if it were a revelation. There, as Robbins said of Louis' work, it is either all right or all wrong.

With that claim, and with that final and immediate judgement, I need to draw a distinction, to separate things I have put together and, perhaps, to acknowledge something obvious. The painting Fried championed—or the argument he mounted for it—did not dispense with the artist's decision making, and certainly not with the artist's or the critic's judgement of quality. Rather, it intensified and coalesced decision and judgement in a single decision, and a single line; that is what Greenberg meant when he wrote that Olitski had displaced linear drawing to the enclosing edge. It is that judgement that is inscribed as Olitski's line or Poons', the linear drawing that encloses and proves the painting as formed, as, in the last instance, composed. Composed here means vouched for, decided, separated. Olitski's drawing on and as the edge, Poons' cut: these interventions are critically opposed to the surfaces they stop, to the flow and direction of Poons' pours, or the atmospheric openness of Olitski's spray (Fig. 3). As if paraphrasing Derrida before the fact, Olitski explained the opposition of drawing and painting, of drawing as the end and the absence of painting: 'this line is a line of demarcation; it separates itself from everything else. It's a drawing. It's a drawn line. It's an edge. Edge is synonymous with drawing'.<sup>83</sup> But much of the noncompositional painting that by the early 1970s can imagine parts of Poons and Olitski as a kind of postminimalism is not finally organised and composed by the cut, by the difference and the relationship between surface and edge.



**Fig. 3.** Larry Poons' studio, 831 Broadway, New York City, 1981. (Photograph © 1981–2002 William Soghor.)

Rather it continues across a surface that is accreted and extended by the process of making, rather than finished by drawing. These works have yet another kind of time in them, the time of flow or repetition, a materialised, indexical time. One might think this difference in terms offered by Deleuze and Guattari, as the difference between *coupures-prélèvements* and *coupures-détachements*, between those breaks that are continuous and partial, made up out of the flow itself, and those that cut out and organise discrete, heterogeneous objects.<sup>84</sup>

#### IV

I have used Morris Louis and his critics to plot a short American history of noncomposition; it turns out to have been a modernist history of a painting that is finally composed, if only in the last instance. I want to turn now to that painting practice that could think—that had to think—Louis together with Judd's 'specific objects', even with postminimalism, or with, at the very least, the Pollock that postminimalism imagined. Rather than use David Diaz or Helene Aylon, or any number of other American painters who seemed circa 1970 to be 'attempting to solve the problems of painting by producing something other than paintings',<sup>85</sup> let me offer the Hungarian-born French painter Simon Hantai (Fig. 4). He is interestingly situated at a number of crossroads: between surrealist automatism and the repetitions of production; between the school of Paris and the new American painting (it is always clear to his critics that he paints after Pollock, or after Matisse seen through Pollock); and between the generation of the 1950s—the *Jeune école de Paris*—and the most critical reactions to it at the end of the 1960s: Supports/Surfaces and BMPT (Buren, Mosset, Parmentier, Toroni).<sup>86</sup> Hantai's painting, particularly after 1960, has much in common with American painting after abstract expressionism; it shares particularly their noncompositional practices: an increasingly exaggerated scale, an all-over, continuously worked surface (and at times, after 1970, a continuous grid), and a way of painting that separates making and seeing. Like Pollock's horizontal canvas or Louis' staining—and much more radically—Hantai's folding does not allow him to see the painting whole. It is only available in fragments and glimpses; parts of it—the rough patterning that is finally produced and revealed by the fold—are unseeable as he is painting, and are seen afterwards because they are

84. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 1983), pp. 39–40.

85. Carter Ratcliff, New York Letter, *Art International*, vol. 14, no. 10, December 1970, p. 68.

86. I owe the phrase 'Jeune école de Paris' to Yve-Alain Bois and benefitted as well from his discussion of Hantai's importance to the younger French artists trying to work around it. See Bois, 'La Peinture après l'abstraction', *Artforum*, vol. 38, no. 4, December 1999, pp. 144–5.



Fig. 4. Simon Hantai, 'Blancs', installation at Galerie Jean Fournier, Paris, Summer 1973. (Photograph: Jacqueline Hyde.)

87. 'Hantai [procède] en aveugle, puisqu'à aucun stade il ne peut prendre la mesure de ce qu'il fait . . . il a éliminé, du fait du pliage, toute pensée des rapports. . . . Toute extériorité est abolie.' Dominique Fourcade, 'Un coup de pinceau c'est la pensée' in Pontus Hulton *et al*, *Hantai* (Centre national d'art et de culture Georges Pompidou, Musée national d'art moderne: Paris, 1976), unpaginated.

88. 'Le problème était: comment vaincre le privilège esthétique du talent, de l'art, etc.? . . . Le pliage était une manière de résoudre ce problème. Le pliage ne procédait de rien. Il fallait simplement se mettre dans l'état de ceux qui n'ont rien vu, se mettre dans la toile.' In Marcelin Pleynet, 'La levée de l'interprétation des signes ou Les manteaux de la Vierge' in Hulton *et al*, *Hantai*, unpaginated

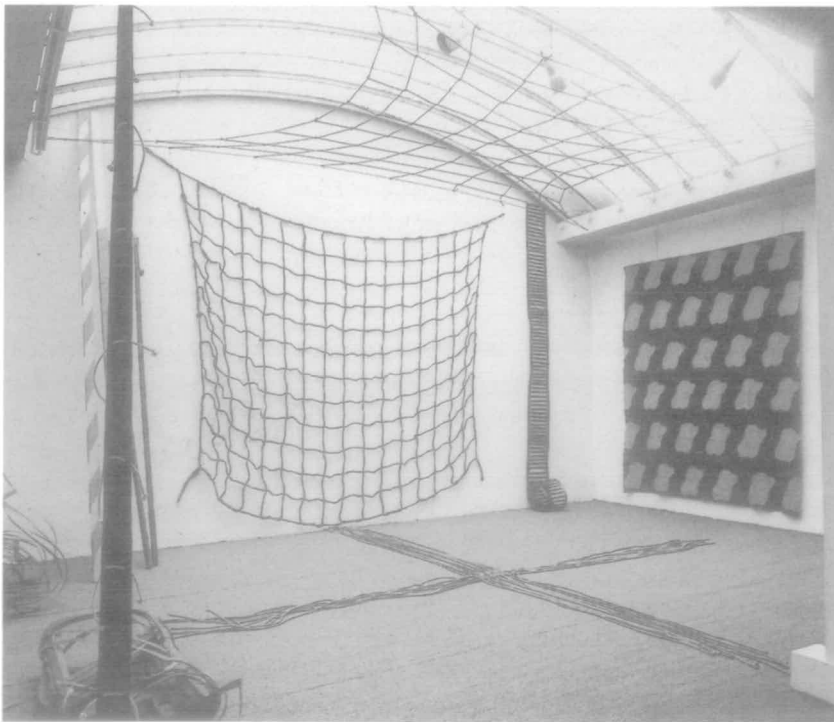
89. In Paul Rodgers, 'Towards a Theory/ Practice of Painting: Abstract Expressionism and the Surrealist Discourse', *Artforum*, vol. 18, no. 7, March 1980, p. 57.

unpainted, because they were held in reserve. Dominique Fourcade stresses the difference between Hantai's work, or rather his practice, and that of the school of Paris' very late Cubism in terms quite close to Fried's description of Caro and Noland, who see their work only later. Hantai 'proceeds blindly, since at no stage can he take the measure of what he is doing: he is not painting a picture'. The artist's procedurally enforced blindness is a way to not step back, to not judge in parts; it means that refusal: 'through the act of folding, he has eliminated all thought of relationships'. And Fourcade, like Fried, conceives that rejection as a way to close the distance between artist and work: 'all exteriority is abolished'.<sup>87</sup> Echoing Pollock, Hantai speaks of being in the painting, but in a way that makes clear precisely his exteriority to both the process—the painting that makes itself—and a certain version of artistic subjectivity. 'The problem was how to overcome the aesthetic privilege of talent, art, etc. Folding was one way to solve the problem. The folding came from nothing. It was necessary simply to put oneself in the condition of those who have seen nothing. To put oneself in the canvas'.<sup>88</sup> When Hantai is in his painting, he is where the painting has not yet emerged; he will see it only later, along with those 'who have seen nothing'. At the same time, it is not quite he who is there: the process enforces an objectivity, a time and a labour that is not interior, but exterior, both on the canvas's surface—or of it—and outside the artist: 'When I fold I am *objective* and that allows me to lose myself'.<sup>89</sup> Like Pollock, when he is in his painting he is not aware of what he is about, but given the regularity and the technology of his practice, we cannot even pretend to see Hantai's automatism as a key to, or an image of, the artist, only to and of the process.

Up to this last point I have been able to read Hantai and his critics in language drawn from Greenberg and Fried, and in relation to American colour painting, perhaps too closely, for his differences are clear as well. Hantai's paintings are haunted by a literalness: by a before for which they are only an after and by an 'other' side, the side on which the pleats and pockets were tied. The canvas' back, one could say, is too close to the front, to the surface; it is felt materially in the image itself. (However 'stained' they may be, Louis' paintings, in contrast, never raise the question of a back side or another view.) Haunted by their other side and by a past that is all that the image—the face—records, Hantai's paintings cannot present themselves in one shot, all at once; they are not given in Fried's instant. At the same time, their time is not the interior, subjective time of compositional painting and the artist in his hesitation; it is the embodied and indexical time of making—of behaviour enacted and repeated, rather than meaning, deep and intended. The work as it appears is complete, but only in the quite literal sense that it has been completed, motivated by—one could say 'run' by—a process whose traces are retraceable on a surface that can be larger or smaller, but cannot be edged absolutely, only stopped. Continuing the surface means only repeating across still more of it a certain process, a regularised behaviour, tying, and painting, and untying. The edge that Louis agonised over, the line that composed Olitski's pictures in the last instance, and that found Poons'—the drawing that ends and finishes a painting, that makes it *a* painting, *this* painting—is missing. Or, one could say with Daniel Robbins, it is arbitrary: the ending of Hantai's painting is as much temporal as it is spatial, a running out, a leaving off.

Hantai's paintings are marked by seriality and, even more, by contiguity, by the regularised gesture of folding and tying, the continuous spread of a surface we are made to feel as cloth—as material—and by the closeness of front and back. The shifting group of artists who exhibited between 1970 and 1972

under the banner Supports/Surfaces continued Hantai's lessons; they systematised or, better, thematised them as a set of practices, as a way of naming the parts of painting (Fig. 5). André Valensi's floor-bound knotted cord intersection and Claude Viallat's wall-hung woven jute grids adopted—they magnified and exaggerated—the weave of painting's surface as a material image. Viallat's unstretched raw canvas banners claimed the spread of that surface, a spread marked over and over again by the regular repetition of a soft, lumpy parallelogram, an image that seems to float across the surface as a figure of the paintings' own hanging. In one way or another, most of the members of Supports/Surfaces pointed to—and processed—painting's surface as textile, emphasising its double-sidedness and its continuous length by folding, pleating, rolling, draping, staining, or burning. In 1967, Patrick Saytour had begun to burn regular patterns of holes into long sheets of commercially patterned oilcloth; among the works he included in the first Supports/Surfaces exhibition in Paris in 1970, at the Musée d'art moderne de la ville de Paris, ARC, were lengths of industrially dyed cloth—folded, starched, and unfolded—and suspended from the ceiling. Louis Cane's large unstretched canvases, first included in a 1971 exhibition at the City University of Paris, were painted on both sides, folded, tacked to the wall, cut, and unfolded so that they spread from the wall across the floor. Jean-Pierre Pincemin's *Carrés collés* were grid surfaces made of canvas squares dipped one after another into thinned paint and held together with glue. From the earliest exhibitions, Daniel Dezeuze's thin veneer *Echelles* took the wooden stretcher that Viallat and the others had discarded as their figure/surface, and gave it the continuity, the fold and spread of canvas cloth. For Dezeuze, and Viallat, and Pincemin, indeed for many younger French painters both within and just



**Fig. 5.** Daniel Dezeuze, Patrick Saytour, André Valensi, Claude Viallat, 'Accrochages des travaux d'été 70 et résumés photographiques', installation at Galerie Jean Fournier, April 1971. (Photograph: Jacqueline Hyde.)

90. Yve-Alain Bois, 'Les Années Supports/Surfaces', *Artforum*, vol. 37, no. 4, December 1998, p. 119.

91. Alfred Pacquement, 'New Aspects of Painting in France' in *Unstretched Surfaces: Los Angeles-Paris* (Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art: Los Angeles, 1977), pp. 14–20. The exhibition included Bernadette Bour, Jerrold Burchman, Thierry Delaroyère, Daniel Dezeuze, Charles Christopher Hill, Christian Jaccard, Allan McCollum, Jean-Michel Meunice, Jean-Pierre Pincemin, Peter Plagens, Tom Wudl, and Richard Yokomi. And despite the contentions of its curators, there were any number of other names, equally unfamiliar, that could have been drawn from New York—Manny Farber, Mary Heilmann, Terrence La Noue, Alan Shields, Gary Stephan, Nina Yankowitz—or from the Washington colour school, Sam Gilliam. My review appeared in the *LAICA Journal*, no. 17, March–April 1978, pp. 25–7.

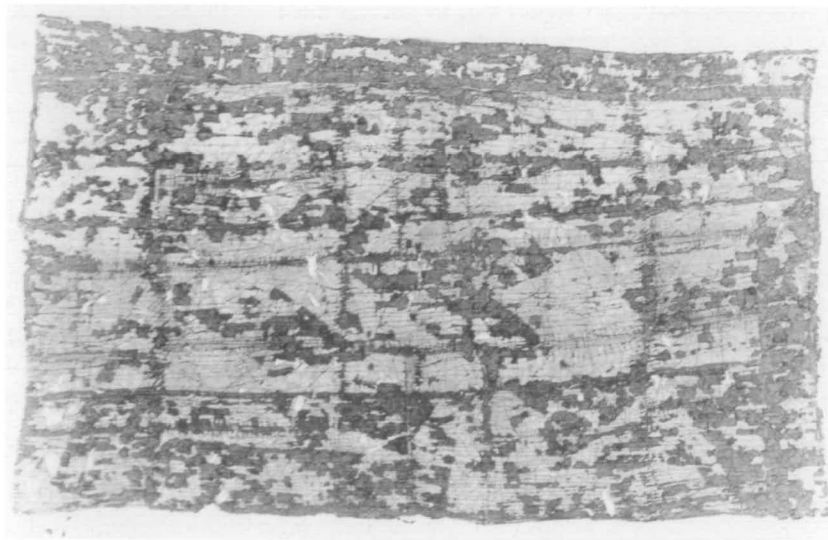
92. Peter Plagens, 'Abstract Painting in Los Angeles in the Seventies' in *Decade Los Angeles Painting In the Seventies* (Art Center College of Design: Pasadena, 1981), p. 20.

93. 'Une toile—pièce—seule n'est rien, c'est le processus—système—qui est important.' Claude Viallat, 'Fragments' in *Vingt-cinq ans d'art en France: 1960–1985*, ed. Robert Maillard (Jacques Legrand s.a.: Paris, 1986), p. 232.

outside Supports/Surfaces—François Rouen's tressages, for example, or Bernadette Bour or Jean-Michel Meurice—both image and literal surface are built by a repetitive materialising process that at once accretes and extends them. The relationship of part to part is material rather than pictorial and the overall field is determined and bounded only by leaving off. Completion is even more clearly the same as stopping making.

Soft, spreading, sagging objects offered as the record of a regularised gesture, the paintings of Supports/Surfaces look like 1970, or as Yve-Alain Bois has argued, like American postminimalism as it appeared in the pages of *Artforum* in the late 1960s—like Robert Morris, or Eva Hesse, or Richard Serra. In their 'embrace [of ] "post-Minimalism"' without having the slightest clue as to what minimalism was about, the Supports/Surfaces artists were led to strange stylistic amalgams that had little historical purchase.<sup>90</sup> They had missed the critique minimalism had mounted against modernist painting, and read the distancing repetition and nontraditional materials, the 'objecthood' that postminimalism inherited from minimal sculpture, as if those materials and procedures and the project of noncomposition were part of the project of painting—as if they could include Louis, Poons, and Olitski. However wrong or belated their reading was in relation to a history that has taken Fried's manichean opposition between art and objecthood as given and settled, and has mapped that opposition temporally as the end of painting or of modernism, their mistake—and the making of 'process painting'—was historically quite widespread. It appeared in studios across the states from New York to Los Angeles, marked and motivated, perhaps, by the same 'anxious provincialism' that, for Bois, characterised Supports/Surfaces. It is what my teachers made in art school in the mid 1970s, and was the subject of the first piece of criticism I published, in 1978, a review of an exhibition entitled 'Unstretched Surfaces', which threw together Pinceman and Dezeuze and other French 'new painters', as Alfred Pacquement called them, with recent art from Los Angeles, to suggest, naively and eccentrically—that is, provincially—a way of painting that continued outside New York and after 'Art and Objecthood'.<sup>91</sup> Pinceman's *Carrés collés* had their counterparts in Allan McCollum's grids of stained canvas squares held together with commercial caulking; Bernadette Bour's stitched layers of canvas and paper had theirs in Charles Christopher Hill's sewn and buried works, and probably in many other places (Fig. 6). Like Bour, Hill sewed layers of paper and cloth together with a commercial sewing machine—what drawing there was is the actual drawing together of layers and the trace of the machine—and then buried them. Unearthed, their revelation is as literal and as staged as Hantai's untying; they reappear as physical objects—unmade as if they were nature, or made elsewhere, long ago, as if artefacts.

None of the Los Angeles artists I have conjured up are artists whose historical purchase is clear, but they have learned the same lessons, or seen the same images of Serra and Hesse or Sonnier and Le Va as the artists of Supports/Surfaces, and understood them to be about painting, to have ramifications for its practice. Still, the American painters and the artists associated with Supports/Surfaces belong to different histories or, rather, to different discursive constructs of a similar history, one that might be written in the difference between a Los Angeles' painter's reported remark—'I think I've found a new way to make some paintings'<sup>92</sup>—and Viallat's insistence that 'A single canvas—piece—is nothing, it's the process—system—that is important'.<sup>93</sup> Supports/Surfaces' proceduralised gestures and its thematisation of painting's material practices were understood as strategies for making



**Fig. 6.** Charles Christopher Hill, 'St. Elmo's', 1977, photo backdrop paper, muslin, and stitching, 169 × 292 cm. Courtesy the artist. (Photograph: Cirrus Gallery, Los Angeles.)

painting 'work' (that is, labour and, indeed, praxis), rather than a work, as well as ways to make it—against the traditional practice of painting—physically uncollectable and psychologically unavailable: ways, as Saytour wrote in 1970, to 'make a painting that is irrecoverable on the level of intention and unusable in its form'.<sup>94</sup> Viallat's 'the process—system' does the work of noncomposition; it spreads the painting across its surfaces as sheer continuity and drives out a certain version of the 'subject' of painting: the mirrored interiority of artist and painting that composition hollows out. It makes the work as an object, a fact, or makes it feel like one: 'For the work to be real, it must be the product of a coherent system and not the result of a simple choice, be it preferential, referential, or arbitrary'.<sup>95</sup>

If *Supports/Surfaces* missed the lessons of minimal art and its critique of modernist painting, perhaps it was because what they knew of it came in no small part from 'The Art of the Real', which refused to see the difference between art and objecthood. Shown in Paris in the Winter of 1968, its reception in the French press was quite harsh; most of the critics took Goossen's nationalist bait and the other side in his division between European composition and the American real. Among those who did not was the *Nouvel Observateur's* critic Christiane duParc, who suggested instead a European prehistory and priority for the American noncompositional practices, one Goossen left out: 'Stella or a Noland . . . have preoccupations very similar to Soto in 1951, or Morellet in 1952 and of the Research Group in 1960. . . . All this is, one might say, the secret history of modern painting. It is just beginning to be understood and Mr. Goossen does not help us to understand it by forgetting the part Europe has played in it'.<sup>96</sup> DuParc seems to have approached 'The Art of the Real' as though it were an exhibition of painting, or of work that descended, and took its lessons from, painting; in 'Painting and Reality', an essay that would be particularly influential for the artists of *Supports/Surfaces*, the poet and critic Marcelin Pleyne, took it the same way. Published in *Art International* early in 1969, Pleyne's long, two-part essay ignores the exhibition's sculpture, and mentions Judd and Morris only in passing. He credits their writings for Goossen's 'completely naïve' idea of

94. 'Faire une peinture irrécupérable, au niveau des intentions et inutilisable par sa forme.' Cited in Marie-Hélène Dampérat, *Supports/Surfaces* (Saint-Étienne: Publications de l'Université de Saint-Étienne, 2000), p. 31.

95. 'Pour que ce travail soit réel, il doit être produit par un système cohérent et ne pas résulter d'un simple choix préférentiel ou référentiel ou arbitraire.' In Dampérat, *Supports/Surfaces*, p. 39.

96. In James Meyer, *Minimalism: Art and Polemic in the Sixties* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 2001), p. 258. I am indebted to Meyer's book for its account of 'The Art of the Real' and its critical reception in Paris.

97. 'La spécificité différentielle de l'histoire de la peinture'. Marcelin Pleynet, 'Peinture et "Réalité"', part 2, *Art International*, vol. 13, no. 2, February 1969, p. 61. On the relation between Pleynet's review and Supports/Surfaces, see Stephen Bann, 'From Kineticism to Didacticism in Contemporary French Art', *Studio International*, vol. 185, no. 953, March 1973, pp. 105–9.

98. 'Finalment et logiquement réduction, de ce qui tente de fonder la profondeur problématique d'un objet de connaissance, à la surface idéologique de ce qui va se donner (et se vendre) comme objet réel'. Pleynet, 'Peinture et "Réalité"', part 2, p. 63

99. 'La monnaie d'échange technologique du spéculaire'. Pleynet, 'Peinture et "Réalité"', part 1, *Art International*, vol. 13, no. 1, January 1979, p. 26.

100. 'Comme "objet de connaissance", la peinture, c'est bien évident, ne propose rien qu'elle ne se prépare à reprendre, à effacer, elle ne propose plus des tableaux ou des sculptures, mais une type d'activité qui ne saurait jamais se reconnaître que dans sa démarche productive, dialectique'. Pleynet, 'Peinture et "Réalité"', part 1, p. 26.

101. In 'Extracts from *Peinture: Cahiers théoriques*' selected and translated by Jonathan Benthall, *Studio International*, vol. 185, no. 953, March 1973, p. 111. 'From the introductory editorial in the first number, June 1971, signed by the editorial committee', Vincent Bioules, Louis Cane, Marc Devade, and Daniel Dezeuze.

102. Marc Devade and Louis Cane, 'The Avant Garde Today', *Studio International*, vol. 186, no. 959, October 1973, p. 146.

'l'art comme réel', and argues that to end up there—with real objects, one would want to say, with 'literal' ones—they have misread the project of modernist painting from Cézanne forward as a series of styles and avant-gardist reductions. Pleynet might sound in my synopsis not unlike Greenberg or Fried, but he argues against objecthood not for the essence or autonomy of painting, but, in terms borrowed from Althusser, for the 'differential specificity of the history of painting'.<sup>97</sup> Cézanne's epistemological rupture inverted the terms of traditional painting, foregrounding its pictorial systems and cracking its perspectival and naturalist codes; the practice of painting he made possible produced an object, Pleynet explains again with Althusser's *Lire le Capital*, but it was not the object of the empiricist 'real', which would only be an ideological counterpart of the represented world of the traditional tableau (and would only continue its world modelling and its divisions of external appearance and internal essence), but the *objet de connaissance* produced by the practice of theory. If one takes the history of painting since Cézanne as a history of 'modernist reductions', then the last 'reduction, finally and logically, is from [a practice] that attempts to establish the problematic depth of an object of knowledge, to the ideological surface of one that will pass itself off (and sell itself) as real object'.<sup>98</sup> 'L'art comme réel' can only deliver itself up as a commodity, as a 'technological token of exchange for the spéculaire', a term Pleynet uses to bind together contemporary painting's optical—and ideological—surface, Hegel's speculative philosophy, and the market.<sup>99</sup> Against painting as an object, he concludes, 'it is obvious that as an "object of knowledge", painting proposes nothing that it is not prepared to revise or efface; it no longer proposes pictures [tableaux] or sculptures, but instead a type of activity that only recognizes itself in its productive, dialectical process'.<sup>100</sup> Offering painting as both a critical and theoretical practice, Pleynet suggested both its continuing possibility, even necessity, and its impossibility.

Much of what has been written about Supports/Surfaces has been about its failure, its inability to produce the impossible practice Pleynet laid out or to fulfil the hyperbole of its own statements: its broad appeals to semiotics, psychoanalysis, and Marxist-Leninist and Maoist thought (as well as to Chinese thought and writing in general, as the 'outside' of Western painting), and its promise of a 'science of painting, a new practice of painting . . . weapons for the struggle against idealism and its corollaries, State monopoly capitalism and imperialism'.<sup>101</sup> By the middle of 1971 Supports/Surfaces had begun to fall apart over a number of knotted questions of the relation of politics to practice: the place of Maoism and the role of the journal *Tel Quel*, over whether the group should exhibit in the large state-sponsored exhibitions of new French art, and whose names should be included under its banner. In the aftermath, a year and a half later, Marc Devade and Louis Cane, the artists closest to Paris, Pleynet, and the editorial board of *Tel Quel*, recorded the divisions and departures of the group, the resignations of Viallat, Valensi, Saytour, and others, whose practice they dismissed for its naturalism and experimentalism: against a true dialectical materialism grounded in the theoretical practice of the journal *Peintures, Cahiers théoriques*, theirs was a 'materialism of materials', a 'mechanistic materialism' that took 'the material means of painting, canvas, stretcher, wood, cord, etc. . . . as the complex substance of painting: plan, colour, form, depth'.<sup>102</sup> Perhaps Supports/Surfaces' painting practice could only in the end reaffirm the name of the artist and the institutional autonomy of painting, but in and around the town of Coaraze in 1969 and across the beach and through Montpellier in the Summer of 1970, their interventions

seem, at least from here, to have figured a radical possibility for painting. Temporarily, and maybe only ever in photographs of the streets and the rocky coast, they were not so much Althusser's 'objects of knowledge' as echoes of another version of May 1968: anti-hierarchical, anti-bureaucratic, decentering, but also, in interesting ways, naturalising and infantile and 'irresponsible', kin to 'Frontières = Repression' or, given the setting, 'Sous les pavés, la plage'. They forecast Deleuze and Guattari's axes of 'escape' and 'lines of flight': Viallat's banners, Dezeuze's *Échelles*, André Valensi's suspended cardboard shapes seem to 'find [their] own places, territories, deterritorializations'. They have neither inside nor out—or rather nothing is felt to be left outside of them, organising and embodying them, no cut or *parergon*. They promise to spread, to continue to grid, and clothe, and line the landscape (Figs. 7 and 8).

I would like to end by returning to Daniel Buren's 'It Rains, It Snows, It Paints' to look again, briefly, at its appeals both to the anonymity of the grammatical *impersonnel* and the meteorological event, and to add to it its next sentence: 'When it snows we are in the presence of a natural phenomenon, so when "it paints" we are in the presence of an historical fact'.<sup>103</sup> Buren's insistence on the work's facticity, an objecthood predicated on his refusal of interiority and authorship and on its critical historicity, its situatedness in the practice of painting taken as a field, might by now no longer resemble the 'natural event' of David Diaó's painting, or of much 'process' painting, but clearly it rings within the discourse of painting in France as a praxis, as a strong and insistent rereading of the project of modernist painting. The juxtaposition of Buren's texts and Diaó's and their shared language can at least serve as a reminder that Buren's now long familiar practice was once seen in relation to painting circa 1970, and that it grew out of the same moment that produced Viallat and Dezeuze, and even Deleuze and Guattari. Rolled across floors and along walls, hung in banners across West Broadway or on posterboards around Paris, Buren's work might even seem to promise the same spread, the same continuity as that of Groupe Supports/Surfaces in Montpellier. It, too, may once have suggested escape and lines of flight, but he has always measured them closely: Buren's repetition is of a different order than Viallat's sheer continuations, his spreading endlessness. Since at least the early 1970s, Buren has worked to work 'without an escape route'; he has refused its imagination.

103. Buren, 'It Rains, It Snows, It Paints', p. 43.



**Fig. 7.** Claude Viallat, untitled from 'les travaux de l'été', 1970, Montpellier, France. (Photograph: André Valensi. Art © 2002 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.)



104. Daniel Buren, 'Notes on Work and Installation, 1967–75', *Studio International*, vol. 190, no. 977, September–October 1975, p. 125.

105. Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, 1986), p. 193.

106. Fried, 'Shape as Form: On Frank Stella's Irregular Polygons', in *Art and Objecthood*, p. 88. One could argue that Fried's discussion in 'Shape as Form' refers not only to the individual painting but to the disciplinary situation of painting; that the individual painting is in some sense a figure for painting as a whole. Fried himself makes such an argument in his brief reprise of 'Shape as Form' in 'Art and Objecthood'; indeed the later essay seems an allegorical expansion of the earlier one. When he writes there that the work's 'ability to hold or stamp itself out' as shape is 'what decides [its] identity as *painting*', that identity, it is clear, is both individual and categorical—or it is neither (p. 151). The shape of the individual painting, as it spreads across and is acknowledged by the painting's surface, as it makes that surface seem full and necessary, constitutes and figures another shape, the edges and boundaries of the discipline 'painting'—the very boundaries that in 'Art and Objecthood' must be protected from theatre.

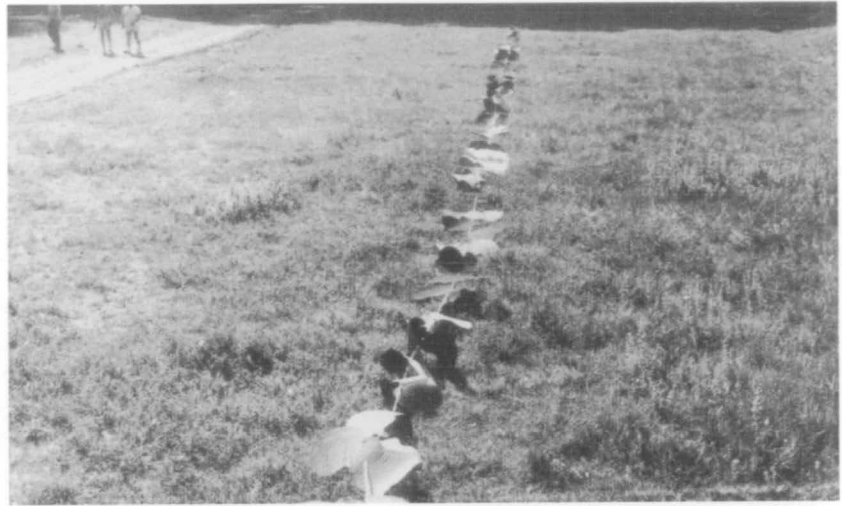


Fig 8. André Valensi, untitled from 'les travaux de l'été', 1970, Montpellier, France. (Photograph: André Valensi.)

Like Deleuze and Guattari's French novelists, Buren has been concerned to plot points:  $45^\circ$  out,  $90^\circ$  in,  $45^\circ$  missing (1986). His striped banners have always been careful to mark the entrances and exits—*Les Portes* (1975)—and to measure the distances *Within and Beyond the Frame* (1973). Over and over again he has marked the edge between the art world and its outside, between the institutional supports of painting practice, and the world of objects that painting may be just like—and, of course, that it must be held apart from. The limits are critical, and reciprocal: 'to reveal this limit (this role), the object presented and its place of display must dialectically imply one another. . . . To imply in the work the place where it is situated (whether internal or external) is to give limits materially and visually'.<sup>104</sup> One could gloss Buren's commentary and his critical project by linking it to a number of other familiar texts, to the critique announced by Craig Owens' essay 'From Work to Frame' or by Rosalind Krauss' concept of the 'Institution of the Frame', that 'act of excision that simultaneously establishes and reaffirms given conceptual unities—the unity of formal coherence, the unity of the enframed simple, the unity of the artist's personal style, his oeuvre, his intentions—and these turn out to be the very unities on which the institutions of art (and its history) presently depends'.<sup>105</sup> Here, for its unfamiliarity, and to stay within a certain category, I would propose instead the terms of Michael Fried's 'Shape as Form': if Buren's work is in relation to its limits, it is also about the implication of those limits in the work, a limit that is not merely or literally 'had' like an object, but is spread across and understood by the work. That relationship that has become, for him, the 'medium within which choices . . . are made', in and around the 'continuing problem of *how* to acknowledge the literal character of the support—of *what counts* as that acknowledgement'.<sup>106</sup> Composition comes for Buren, and for most work now, as it does for Poons or Olitski, in the last instance, but the force that composes, that impinges an outside on an inside, is institutional, historical, and disciplinary, rather than aesthetic. Perhaps that work on the limit, in the 'institution of the frame', is what is meant by the name painting now, what constitutes its determination and its critical possibility. Against that end, Viallat's paintings, spread out on the floor or across the sand, draped, or crumpled, or folded, or stacked, one

atop another, suggest a rather different possibility, or, depending on how one thinks of these things, a different impossibility. To borrow a phrase from Cornelius Castoriadis, another, perhaps less familiar theorist of May 1968, and of the possibility of refiguring the social and its institutions, Viallat's practice, as it continues, offers painting's 'radical imaginary'.<sup>107</sup>

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107. 'History is impossible and inconceivable outside of the *productive or creative imagination*, outside of what we have called the *radical imaginary* as this is manifested indissolubly in both historical *doing* and in the constitution, before any explicit rationality, of a universe of *significations*.' Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, 1987), p. 146. Castoriadis makes it clear that his imaginary is not Lacan's: 'it has nothing to do with that which is presented as "imaginary" by certain currents in psychoanalysis: namely the "specular" . . . The imaginary of which I am speaking is not an image of. It is the unceasing and essentially *undetermined* (social-historical and psychical) creation of figures/forms/images' (p. 3). To which I would add it is also not Viallat's imaginary, or that of any individual artist, but of the medium itself.