CONTEMPORARY MONOCHROMATIC PAINTING: OLIVIER MOSSET AND ANDERS KNUTSSON

A term paper for Art History 498 (Mr. Krens)

by

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Marcia Hafif, writing in Art in America, described contemporary monochromatic painting in New York as nearly contentless art. This painting does not depict images of the material world.

"It is non-pictorial and non-iconic; it exists on its own in the world and does not stand for or represent anything (other than, perhaps, 'Painting')."

Joe Marioni similarly stressed the material content of his painting. In a conversation with several monochromatic painters, he commented that his painting was unconcerned with the terms of art-history or art education. "My work is about the sensation of painting as an object."

The two artists discussed in this study, Olivier Mosset and Anders Knutsson, also prefer to characterize their painting as "aniconic." According to Knutsson, his paintings convey their meaning through the reality of their materials. "Instead of painting nudes, religious symbols or my mental health problems, these paintings are about the beauty of reality. The reality of paint, canvas, and stretcher." Mosset's art also avoids conventional content (if by content one means the conveyance of information or meaning). In fact, he regards the working title for the Williams College exhibition as misleading: "'Painting About Painting' has this illustration aspect....It's just painting."

These monochrome paintings exhibit a new approach to the traditional process of applying paint to a stretched canvas. According to Hafif, the most important decisions made by the artists regard the use of materials, of which there are several: "the ground and its support; the coloring material and the tools used to apply it; the artist's hand; and the circumstances under which the work is to be seen." Although this is "not necessarily a new focus," the process of creating a monochrome canvas centers on "seeing the material and its use more for itself than for what it can do."

All of the eight artists in our group stress the significance of the art-work as an object. To oversimplify, if artists since the Renaissance conceived of a painting as a window, these artists conceive of monochrome painting as a wall. "Where we used to read a surface, ignoring the material it was made of, we now look at that surface's very materiality. The work accepts the objectness of the painting." Monochrome painting, rather than serving as a ground for an image or figure, is "a figure on the ground of the world around it." The material itself constitutes a new content — a new kind of subject matter. 8

Monochrome painting, in Hafif's estimation, is open, receptive, non-specific, changing, and "empty." It fulfills, in effect (though not in intent) Malevich's assessment of abstract art: "The artist who wants to develop art beyond its painting possibilities is forced to theory and logic." The monochrome painters are chiefly concerned with painting possibilities, which they reduce to an emphasis on material and the experience of painting.

A common point between Mosset, Hafif and Knutsson is that the material itself introduces a kind of second "personality." There is a moment, Mosset wrote, when the internal logic of the painting

takes over and the artist loses control of "doing." The one thing he is certain about is that although he is a painter, "I do not only paint, it is not rally that I paint, but rather that the painting paints itself." Knutsson also describes a reduced sense of conscious control in the process of painting. Initial decisions are, of course, consciously made, but at some point "verbal transcription and intellectual wrestling [are] bypassed, and the decisions in the moment of painting seem to take on an involuntary character." 12 The work is not predetermined, Instead, these artists argue, the characteristics of the material direct the making of the art-work. Hafif offers perhaps the best description of this process: "The work is built from the inside out. In this way form results from necessities inherent in the bringing together of elements, and an opening is made in which unknown and unexpected images become active." 13

Content in these monochrome paintings is not so much absent as inherent in the amorphous individual "presence" of each art-work. Joe Marioni observed: "The whole object itself is the image and it is conveying its personality through the paint." After analyzing the complexity and variety of monochrome paintings, Hafif concluded that "the recent artists' goal has not been the depersonalization of the painting. ... One work can be very different from another -- both between artists and the work of one artist." For this reason, she wrote, monochrome paintings are best seen separately, away from the presence of other paintings.

Olivier Mosset

Mosset prefers not to talk about his paintings. He dislikes taped interviews. Even his conversation with Gregor Müller,
published in Flash Art magazine, focuses on the two artists' impressions of the New York art scene, rather than on a discussion
of their art. In the article, he remarks that the commercial art
galleries in New York tended "to dilute what there is that's subversive in an artistic position, in order to adapt it to the laws
of the market and consumerism. That is why people give -- or the
works give -- some rationale that is extraneous to the evidence of
the work."16 Definitions, he contends, compromise art. In a
short essay, Mosset describes imprecise labels as "a healthy sign,"
adding: "...we are well aware that all interesting ('revolutionary')
experiments in painting are precisely those which have been directed towards escaping from any precise definition."17

Mosset hesitates to ascribe symbolic meaning to his art.

As he says: "I'm just doing my job." He emphasizes the fact of canvas, paint and artist over a concern for content. This is not to say his art is meaningless, for Mosset nearly always tries to make a point. A painting is "right" when it functions as "a little cog in a little wheel in the general historical process." 19

Working in Paris in the late sixties, Mosset became involved with the BMPT group, which staged demonstrations which probably fit the artist's criteria for engaging the gears of the historical process. The BMPT group was formed at the beginning of 1967 by four artists: Buren, Mosset, Parmentier and Toroni. Within a year, however, the group disbanded for doctrinal reasons. While their paintings were not monochromatic, BMPT nonetheless presented art-works closely related in intent to the monochrome art-works Mosset now paints.

The BMPT paintings consisted of ready-made, vertical stripes applied to canvas (Buren), a small, black circle painted in the center of a canvas (Mosset), a series of dabs of blue paint arranged in a grid-like pattern (Parmentier), and four, parallel, horizontal stripes (Toroni). The work was widely discussed in Paris but generally regarded with ambivalence, One critic, Michel Claura, described the work almost as if they were monochromes: "The spectator sees a work in itself, nothing else, nothing more." Another critic dismissed BMPT as interesting but meaningless: "Their limitation lies in their desire for neutrality, for non-significance, abolishing interpretation or the illusion of order. Are we moving toward a society in which man will be in direct contact with the 'real'?" Lastly, Claura wrote that the canvases were "completely lacking in sensitivity" and complained that the artists were uninterested in transforming reality into illusion. 22

The inaugural exhibition of the group was presented at the Salon de la Jeune Peinture at the Paris Museum of Modern Art on January 3, 1967. Accompanying their work, a tape recording admonished the spectators: "The BMPT group advises you to become intelligent." The four artists affirmed their dismissal of meaning in art in a pamphlet they distributed:

Because to paint is to give aesthetic value to flowers, women and eroticism, the daily environment, art, dadaism, psychoanalysis and the war in Vietnam, we are not painters.23

That evening, the group withdrew their canvases, stating their opposition to the Paris <u>Salons</u> and the galleries "which abet public laziness (each gallery being a place of pilgrimage for a public intent on self-consolation)."²⁴

BMPT's second exhibition of June 2 of the same year took on the character of an anti-art performance. In the auditorium of the Musee des Arts Decoratifs (entrance 5 fr.) the four artists each displayed a single canvas, hung on a platform before 150 spectators.

"Nothing happened. The public waited a quarter of an hour, half an hour; still nothing happened. At a quarter past ten a leaflet was distributed." The leaflet described the measurements of the paintings (the same ones they exhibited in January, since they always painted the same composition). And, once again, a tape recorder gave a message: "Art is illusion, not the painting of Buren, Mosset, Parmentier, Toroni. ..." 26

Their third and last performance, given in October, 1967, amounted to a BMPT manifesto in action. The four paintings were again displayed, only this time the artists projected photographs onto them, and accompanied the exhibit with a recorded commentary.

Photograph

views of San Tropez

Commentary

Art is the illusion of being somewhere else. It is not a painting by Buren (spotlight projected onto his canvas), by Mosset (idem), by Parmentier (idem), by Toroni (idem). views of the Zoo

Little Red Riding Hood

Shots of a bullfight

Shots of Versailles fountains

Striptease

Flowers

No projection

Art is the illusion of freedom. It is not... /spotlight sequence is repeated/.

Art is the illusion of dreaming. It is not...
Letc.7.

Art is the illusion of sacredness. It is not... [etc.].

Art is the illusion of the marvelous. It is not...[etc.].

Art is the illusion of escape. It is not... [etc.].

Art is the illusion of nature. It is not... Letc. J.

Art is entertainment, art is false. Painting begins with Buren, Mosset, Parmentier, and Toroni.27

After a three-minute interval, the projection sequence and commentary began again and continued throughout the exhibition.

Mosset, in an interview, said that his BMPT art-works, like his monochromes, exhibited a "terrorist attitude." Actually, the BMPT performances have much in common with the anti-bourgeois Dada Soirees of the twenties. The latter, however, more closely resembled a theatrical review. Dada performances in Zurich and Paris consisted in part of the presentation of paintings, the reading of poetry and manifestos, and attempts to insult the audience. Co-

incidentally, as Mosset noted, the last BMPT spectacle was attended by Marcel Duchamp. Like the Dadaists, the four artists chose a theatre to present their art-works and used to occasion to challenge, shock and annoy the audience. Furthermore, the members of the BMPT negated the value of art by exhibiting their paintings as objects. In emphasizing the material reality and non-illusionistic character of their paintings, they approximated the anti-art intent of the ready-made.

Until recently, Mosset used commercially available industrial paints, primarily oil-based enamel. He never mixed colors, but applied the paint straight out of the can. Previously, he briefly experimented with spray paints. But he found the results unsatisfactory, and shifted to brush-applied industrial paints. He also found these paints unsatisfactory, as they tended to crack and wrinkle after only a short period of time. He has now begun to use more expensive artists' paints, with which he hopes to make more durable art-works.

Mosset's paintings are varied in size. As he stated in conversation: "I have done some small paintings [24" x 24"]. but in fact I am more interested in large paintings."29 His largest, 10' x 20', nearly engulfs the viewer in its broad expanse of color. As a result of Mosset's habit of destroying old work, only a few of his 2' square paintings still exist. In any case, he attaches less importance to them: "If it's too small it's like an object."30

Mosset consistently re-iterates the importance of surface, rather than of an "objectness" that would suggest three-dimensional form. Although paint often splashes over the edge of his canvas

(departing from Hafif's suggestion that the paint stop at the edge), Mosset places no importance on this apparent sloppiness. The artist commented that if he did deliberately paint around the edges, he might as well work with shaped canvas and investigate the possibilities of the painting as a form in space. Instead, the surface has primacy in his art.

Recently, Mosset exhibited seven of his large rectangular paintings (110" x 55") at the Tony Shafrazi Gallery in New York.

These canvases are similar to the ones Mosset had at his studio when I was there. Each of his art-works is painted in a single color: blue, green, yellow, red, white, black, beige, and so on. The proportion of heighth and width is consistent with those of all his formats. The Shafrazi paintings are double squares, as are, of course, his large-scale 10 x 20 foot works. And, as I previously noted, his smallest canvases are square shaped, 2 feet on a side.

Brushed in a single coat, the paint-surface is flat, matte and thin. The texture of the canvas is visible through the surface, which is sometimes marked by irregularities such as brush strokes, hair from the brush, and bits of dust. Other paintings of his are more evenly finished, but he nonetheless prefers not to describe them as monochromatic, since every painting differs, if only slightly, and could never appear perfectly monochromatic because of variations in the light falling on the work.

Mosset resists the notion that art should be beautiful, illustrative or meaningful (qualities he dismissed as a BMPT artist). He is disarmingly straightforward in his approach to painting. He is not pre-occupied with aesthetic theories, although his emphasis is on

formal problems: "In painting, form is colour. So to raise a problem of form is simply to raise a problem of colour." 31 For each painting of different size and color, he paints differently, creating slight variations from painting to painting. The overall effect, however, is of a consistency in his approach and in the results. "For me," he commented, "it's just painting -- that's what I am trying to do, to paint, have some paintings that are just paintings." 32

Anders Knutsson

Knutsson and Mosset both take a somewhat business-like attitude toward their art-making. The latter artist commented: "I try to take this art business as work. Just working. As if you were any other place." Knutsson, when he lived in Cincinnati, actually acquired a business license which allowed him to buy supplies more cheaply. He also turned his store-front studie into a gallery. "You get this feeling that you are a businessman like the corner grocer or the shoemaker or whatever. And in a sense you are involved in producing something for sale -- from raw materials. Almost any manufacturer does the same thing... But the artist is completely unfamiliar with this idea." The arrangement was primarily a matter of convenience, however, rather than based on conviction, and Knutsson gave up his role as artist-businessman when he came to New York.

Though Knutsson devotes a considerable amount of attention to his material, he does not regard it as the most important aspect of his painting. In Knutsson's view, the material is a tool which permits the development of concepts from within the nature of painting itself:

"My interest and aim has been to explore the sensation and effect of physical color in the context of perception and as a materialization of feeling." The art-works do not, however, convey a particular reality or strict meaning. They carry their own reality within their materials: "I like for the observer to see [my paintings] as IT, as the painting, not as a picture of something else." 36

Knutsson paints with expensive materials: linen, wax and dry pigments. He says that he is not very interested in the minutia of the painting process. Nonetheless the artist has been manufacturing his own paints since 1970, when he learned about encaustics from an art-supplier's promotional literature. The paint he now uses consists of a dry pigment suspended in a wax and oil medium. He applies it with a palette knife, which suits the waxy consistency of the paint better than a brush (which he never uses).

better understading of how the paint ingredients respond in different situations. "You just have more strings on your guitars. You can control aspects of the paint in a much deeper way than /with paint/ in cans and jars." 37 Over time, the artist has been able to improve the quality of his paints (obviously, paint bought in a tube cannot be made any better than it already is). He has recently begun to experiment with flourescent admixtures. Several of his large paintings (roughly 6' x 8') finished in the last six months actually glow in the dark. Knutsson's experiments with his material have afforded him a remarkable versatility. "I have found that a paint can be unique, personal and individual, in a way I never could find in a commercial oil and acrylic paint." 38

Unlike Marcia Hafif, who usually begins and completes a painting in a single day, Knutsson works on a painting for a prolonged period of time -- often many months. After starting a work, he may become blocked by a formal problem, or feel that the work is not progressing properly. He then stores away the painting. Sometime later, he retrieves the canvas and works on it until he feels the painting is finished, or he may put it away again for re-working. "Sometimes paintings are ornery. They don't want to come out. Really it's me, but. ..."

When I asked him how he knew when a painting was finished, he answered simply: "It's intuitive, you feel it."

Knutsson began painting monochrome canvases in 1971 (previously he painted portraits and experimented with cubist and social realist styles). These works of the early seventies were not purely monochromatic; the artist painted different colors side-by-side or on top of one another, and created patterns with his knife-marks.

His most recent art-works are painted with a highly-saturated, single color built up in layers of tonalities. His canvases are, for instance, red, yellow, orange, green, maroon -- but never white or black. Because of the care with which the material is manipulated and the nature of encaustic, the paintings change in appearance with subtle changes of light. Each of the paintings have unique qualities.

Knutsson, in fact, regards each work as an individual (he dislikes the idea of creating art-works in a series).

Knutsson's glow-in-the-dark paintings are probably the most bizarre experiment by any of the eight artists in the group. To be fair, Knutsson harbors doubts about this innovation. The flourescent admixture retains only a weak light for a short period of time, pre-

senting display problems. I had to close my eyes for several minutes as he charged the paintings. He then turned off the lights, and I opened my eyes, which had become accustomed to the darkness. The paintings had lost most of their color saturation, and seemed to hover in space. In any case, these glowing rectangles are indistinguishable from Knutsson's other monochrome works under bright light.

On the most direct level, Knutsson conceives of his artworks as matter of fact objects. "Rather than a description of an external world or a window to an imagined or perceived reality, they are painted objects that exist in this world." Knutsson differentiates himself from past artists who painted abstract works in order to visualize concepts unrelated to painting -- such as Mondrian with geometry and Pollack with psychoanalysis. For Knutsson, "the struggle with figure, composition, rendering illusion and the great subjects of the last 500 years of Western painting is over. It ended with the 60's."

The viewer, Knutsson argues, is free to interpret the paintings as he sees fit. In looking at the monochromes, the spectator cannot help but associate the color he sees with his understanding of past paintings, symbolic meaning, or "magical and mysterious powers." In this sense, the viewer's conscious and subconscious reaction to the artwork constitute its content.⁴³

The meaning of Knuttson's art is nonetheless intuitive and not definable.

The ultimate reality can never be adequately described by words [i.e. symbols], because it lies beyond the realms of the intellect from which our words and concepts are derived. I see my own art as a form of meditation. 44

This meditative aspect is reflected in Knutson's technique: his process of painting is gradual and slowly realized. His painting is less concerned with the expression of ideas than with providing "a way of self-realization through the development of the intuitive mode of consciousness. When the rational mind is silenced, the intuitive mode produces an extraordinary awareness. ... "45

Knutsson's Weltanschauung is holistic. He observes that

Quantum and Relative theory have forced modern man to adopt a subtle,
organic view of the universe. "As the physicist penetrated into matter, nature did not show him isolated 'basic building-blocks,' but
rather complicated webs of relations between the parts and the whole."

Above all, writes the artist, he hopes to convey through his painting,
"the experience of oneness with the surrounding environment."

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Knutsson feels it is "both valid and often necessary to deal with concepts, symbols, abstracts, etc., as long as we don't confuse them for reality." Monochrome, "all-over" painting is a means to attain an understanding of the symbolic importance of the art.

It is...one of the main aims of Eastern mysticism to keep us on our toes about the limitations and the relativity of conceptual knowledge. It is thru direct experience of reality that we can trancend [sic] intellectual thinking, and eventually also sensory perception. My point is that painting can be an aid (but by no means the only one) to both the painter and the viewer on this journey.⁴⁸

For those who have attained a high spiritual level, painting would probably be unnecessary. Knutsson, writing in a short essay, cited an anecdote to illustrate his point: "The Zen Buddhist says that you need the finger to point at the moon, but that we should not trouble ourselves with the finger once the moon is recognized."49

Knutsson's approach to his work is a blend of the intellectual and the intuitive. On the one hand, he strives to create beautiful paintings which function as objects for meditation. Knutsson also sees his art as broadly based -- carrying with it philosophical, cultural, and spiritual implications. In an essay entitled "On the Interpretation of the Myth of Dinae and the Shower of Gold," the artist tries "to clarify to the world" the potential for content in his monochrome work.

The painting Dinae is rendered in an overall orange hue over a red underpainting. It depicts no overt imagery or figures: the connection with the myth is one of emotion. Knutsson intended to convey, in part, the erotic and mysterious feelings he imagines displace experienced as she was seduced by Zeus. The content of the painting is, in other words, explicit. I knutsson's concern for content, then, is nearly antithetical to Hafif's theoretical position on the "emptiness" of monochrome art. Knutsson would not agree with Hafif, who wrote: "I look at the paint for the paint. I care what physical colors I use. I don't think of the paint as going beyond itself to become a beautiful painting." 52

Zen, Monochrome Painting, and Conclusions

When I asked Marcia Hafif whether her practice of Zen Buddhism influenced her art, she said no. On further examination, however, similarities between Zen practice and monochrome painting became apparent. Actually, Hafif, in her recent article in Art in

America, cited the text Zen and the Art of Archery by Eugen Herrigel.

This came as little surprise. It would have been more remarkable if

Zen did not influence her art, since it provides such an important focus
for her life.

Like Knutson, Hafif considers Monochrome painting to be a "meditative" art and an "essentially personal" experience. 53 As I discussed at the beginning of this paper, several of the artists talks of losing their sense of self in the process of creating a painting. Zen practice achieves similar results. The master Dogen-zenji said: "to study Buddism is to study ourselves. To study ourselves is to forget ourselves." 54

Shunryu Suzuki wrote the best contemporary book on Zen meditation and practice, in which he described the basic tenets of the religion. The Buddist, rather than concern himself with broad ideas or achievements, focuses on a single activity. The correct way to practice is "to be concentrated on what you are doing in this movement....You should limit your activity. When your mind is wandering about elsewhere you have no chance to express yourself." Or, phrased differently: when you read, you read. Hafif wrote:

As a society we use our minds in McLuhan's 'mosaic' manner; we deal with several subjects at once, trying to read the news while having full-page clothing ads compete for our attention...Life / sic_7 demands pull us from one subject to another. If meditation helps some re-experience a focus, certain work carried out by artists performs a similar function. Both in life and art these artists attempt to give attention to one thing at a time and to avoid interruption.

Joe Marioni articulated a view of painting that corresponds with Hafif's and Mosset's: that aniconic painting just is, and is not chiefly concerned with conveying an historical scene, myth, or a way of perceiving the world. Marioni commented that painting "was always about a way of being, but culture and art applied to painting all their various cargo and it became about ways of seeing." 57

Similarly, Suzuki commented that Buddism was more than intellectual understanding. "True understanding is actual practice itself." See practice attempts to make the individual aware of himself--of reality or "being," if you will. "It is almost impossible to talk about Buddism. So not to say anything, just to practice it, is the best way. Showing one finger or drawing a round circle may be the way..."

Perhaps in Zen, then, lies the solution to the ambivalent stance of the artists between "empty" monochrome paintings and those with content. The content exists; the artists just do not talk about it very much. "We are used to talking in terms of materials and formal elements," Hafif wrote, "but not of subjective content. Perhaps we feel that too much discussion dissipates the fact of it." Hafif's statement that associations outside of the painted-object are "almost non-existent" appear true only if we focus on her over-riding interest in the material and the process. Olivier Mosset came closest to summing up the character of monochromatic painting: "I think our kind of work is just a more radical kind of abstraction."

FOOTNOTES

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- 4. Interview with Olivier Mosset, 7 March 1981.
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- 21. Otto Hahn, "All or Nothing; The Paris Season and the Venice Biennale," Arts Magazine, Summer 1968, v. 42, 40.
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- 35. Chester Kannowski, "Anders Knutsson; Holistic Painting," (xerox without source, 1980), n.p.
- 36. Interview with Anders Knutsson, 6 March 1981.
- 37. Ibid.
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- 39. Ibid.
- 40. Interview with Anders Knutsson, 20 February 1981.
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- 48. Anders Knutsson to Eric Weiding, 12 March 1981.
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- 54. Shunryu Suzuki, Zen Mind, Beginners Mind (New York, 1979), 79.
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