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THE LITERAL IN PAINTING

According to the French art historian Hubert Damisch, the late paintings by Paul Cézanne represent a “break” in the history of Western painting, a “break” that may be characterized as epistemological if one recalls that Damisch was working closely with Louis Althusser at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris at the time he made the claim.[[1]](#footnote-1) This break consisted in a shift from image to text, where the painterly text was defined as a material texture constructed from the relationships between touches of paint and the canvas. Thus, although the late paintings are often considered unfinished due to the areas of canvas that Cézanne left untouched, for Damisch these gaps represented the necessary counterpart to the painted touches, and together with the latter constituted the constructed nature of the painted surface. This material texture was seen in terms of its *literalness*, a condition analogous to that of written letters.

[In Cézanne’s paintings] the lateral relations between one dab and another, one tone and another, definitely win out over the vertical relation between figures and their referent, the only relation understood by any reading limited to the order of verbal denotation. It is laterality that in its turn establishes itself as the order of *literality*, in which even the “blanks” “assume an importance”… and in which the substratum of the painting becomes the equivalent of emptiness, the same void that constituted a substratum upon which, according to Epicurus, atoms clustered together in variable order and arrangement, “like letters which, although there are not many of them, nevertheless, when they are arranged in different ways produce innumerable words.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Literalness therefore pertains to letters, and the ground of their inscription—the empty page. Letters (and the gaps between them) are in themselves meaningless within the order of words and meanings but nevertheless produce the articulation of difference that forms the necessary prior basis for this order. In painting, literalness refers to paint and its relationship to its substratum—the canvas support—as together providing the material for a first articulation of difference that exists prior to the appearance of the pictorial image.

Perhaps another epistemological break in painting occurred with the advent of literalism in 1960s American art. For example, the series of stripe paintings produced by the American artist Frank Stella during the late 1950s and early 1960s can be seen in terms of a further development of the break instituted by Cézanne in their emphasis on the literal character of painting, but, and this is where the subsequent break would be located, taken to a point where literalness *per se*, a literalness of painting regardless of the image, came to seem possible. Stella’s second series of stripe paintings, in particular, which were executed in aluminium paint (the first used black enamel), were perhaps the first paintings that could be seen as objects, and so as refusing the possibility of pictorial illusion. The stepped patterning of stripes rhymed with the literal edge of the stretcher, which had small notches removed at various positions such as at two opposite corners, at the midpoints of edges, or at the centre. The shaped canvas produced reversals of cause and effect since it was not clear whether the stripe pattern caused the literal shape of the stretcher or was an effect of it.

The art critic Michael Fried’s criticism of the Minimal Art that developed in the wake of Stella’s stripe paintings, or “literalism”, was that it took the apparent possibility of a painting concerned with a literalness *per se* as real.

Because Frank Stella’s stripe paintings, especially those executed in metallic paint, represent the most unequivocal and conflictless acknowledgment of literal shape in the history of modernism, they have been crucial to the literalist view [...], both because they are seen as extreme instances of a putative development within modernist painting—*i.e.*, the increasingly explicit acknowledgment of literalness *per se*—and because they help to make that development visible, or anyway arguable, in the first place.[[3]](#footnote-3)

For Fried, however, the literal character of paint and the canvas support only provided the condition, seen from the side of painting, from which the latter sought to distinguish itself as pictorial image. Stella’s stripe paintings, and this accounts for their significance in the history of art, could thus be seen from two sides—as a literalist projection of literalness *per se* or as a modernist acknowledgment, from the side of painting, of *its* literalness.

In the early stripe paintings, Stella had left lines of raw canvas between the painted stripes (although these were subject to a certain amount of bleeding according to the kind of paint used). It is significant that Fried did not give the literalness of the canvas in Stella’s work the same attention as the literalness of the edge, perhaps because the function of the former was to produce the initial articulation of difference between paint and canvas support on which the subsequent pattern of stripes depended, and hence remained at the level of the letter rather than at the level of the pictorial meaning of the whole. Where Fried did consider the mode of existence of raw canvas, writing on Morris Louis’s series of ‘unfurled’ paintings from 1960-1, where the main part of the painting consisted in bare canvas lying between streams of colour at each side, it was brought into the realm of the pictorial. Fried compared the blankness of the canvas to that of an “enormous *page*”, a “void”, which the streams of colour “simultaneously destroy and make pictorially meaningful”.[[4]](#footnote-4) Although the metaphor of the page may be compared with Damisch’s characterization of Cézanne’s paintings in terms of the “laterality” of written letters, in Fried the literalness of the canvas surface is a nothingness that is obliterated from the side of painting, from the side of the pictorially meaningful.

The literal in painting can be seen from two sides, from the side of the pictorial or from the side of the literal *per se*, each of which appears arbitrary and indifferent to the other. In Damisch’s 1972 book *A Theory of /Cloud/*, from which the remarks on Cézanne’s late paintings derive, painting is treated as a material process of production which incorporates these two sides as moments. The material condition of painting, however, emerges at the limits of a semiology, and is therefore defined negatively with respect to the pictorial sign. In particular, Damisch’s theory of painting utilizes a distinction between sign and figure derived from the work of the Danish linguist Louis Hjelmslev. A figure, in the Hjelmslevian sense, can be defined as that part of a sign which is not itself a sign but on which the latter necessarily depends for its working, an example of which would be a written letter that is a part of a word but which does not by itself convey any meaning. In the most general sense, the “material texture”, or “signifying materiality”, of painting was produced at the level of the figure, of the literal.[[5]](#footnote-5) The materiality concerned was thus not that of a completely formless exteriority, but was rather, as Damisch put it, that of the condition of “”matter” aspiring to “form””,[[6]](#footnote-6) the condition of the material or literal elements out of which differences were articulated to produce the signifying order of pictorial space as such. This distinction between a materiality as formless exteriority and a materiality oriented to form is also one that can be found in Hjelmslev’s linguistic theory. At the most material level of painting, the formless materiality of canvas and paint as mere stuff is turned into a materiality consisting of relationships between touches of paint and canvas support, in the condition of “”matter” aspiring to “form””, which constitute the figures, the literal elements, from which the pictorial sign, or image, was produced.

(In the context of the present exhibition, the extension of various attributes of painting into ‘real’ space can be seen as dependent on the level of the literal, rather than that of the pictorial image. Because the literal is not defined by the image, it is in principle not confined to the conventional limits that produce the separateness of the pictorial image from the world.)

Although one can speak of the literalness *per se* or the materiality of the canvas support, this condition can only ever be seen in relative terms. Thus, from a materialist, or historical materialist, perspective, the canvas support, although functioning within painting as its material basis, and in itself indifferent to the realm of depicted form, has nevertheless itself a form, defined by the production of canvas in general as a conventional support for painting (a relatively recent convention), and of the more or less industrial production of the material itself. As Damisch warns, “The substratum, the “canvas” as revealed by Cézanne and set up as a signifier, is by no means a *given fact*… The canvas is the product of a history…”.[[7]](#footnote-7) As material, canvas, as well as the wood for the stretcher, the paint, and so on, is already formed, is already matter worked on. It is in the nature of such raw materials that they will be subject to further work, and given new forms as part of a temporal process. In painting, one could say that its capacity to produce new forms depends as much on its raw material as on the imagined realm of form as such, and in a contemporary context, one would have to add that this raw material also consists of the space around the painting. Without the temporal dimension of the process, the relationship between the literal materiality *per se* of the materials on one side and form on the other would lapse into mere indifference, as Marx pointed out in a passage concerned with the temporality of production in general in the *Grundrisse*.[[8]](#footnote-8) The literal in painting, because it can be seen from the two sides of the literal *per se* and the pictorial, from a literalist and a modernist point of view, is therefore also the stratum at which painting can be seen as a material practice, in its own specificity and as one material practice amongst others.

1. Hubert Damisch, *A Theory of /Cloud/: Towards a History of Painting*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002; originally published in French in 1972), pp. 226-7. For discussion of Damisch’s intellectual formation, see Hubert Damisch, ‘Hubert Damisch and Stephen Bann: A Conversation’, *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 28, no. 2 (2005), pp. 155-181. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Damisch, *A Theory of /Cloud/*, p. 229. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Michael Fried, ‘Shape as Form: Frank Stella’s Irregular Polygons’, in Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 88. (First published in 1966.) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Michael Fried, ‘Morris Louis’, in Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, p. 119. (First published in 1971; italics in the original.] [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Damisch, *A Theory of /Cloud/*, pp. 13, 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Damisch, *A Theory of /Cloud/*, p. 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Damisch, *A Theory of /Cloud/*, p. 230. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), pp. 360-1. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)