ANDRÉ STITT

WHERE ERAS ELIDE

During the months of October and November 2015 James Cobb and I researched the work of Mark Rothko (1903 - 1970) and Donald Judd (1928 - 1994) at various locations in Texas. This became the basis for ten large-scale paintings that were eventually edited and installed as two large painting works at Flight Gallery. The final work explored the relationship of installed works of art to architectural environments using an acrylic paint layering technique that drew upon James’s experience of graphic design applications and my own experience working with the body through performance art, and the gesture in painting through the material properties of paint.

The collaboration involved an ongoing practical and theoretical discourse concerning audience/viewer assumptions and expectations of painting. This was considered from the perspective of shared histories, and artistic collaboration; and how painting in particular can be experienced as an expanded practice. As Ann Ring Peterson has said, ‘the expanded field of painting still has to overcome the rather fixed expectations of its audience.’ (Peterson, Ann Ring 2013)

The final body of work reconsiders contemporary painting as “essentially a broadcast medium” (Joselit, David 2012) and how painting is transformed from an object to a transmitter of information. Considered in this way, a painting “cannot be reified” because it isn't static but rather part of a “network”.

Therefore the net or rhizome of slippage between Donald Judd and Mark Rothko’s installations in Marfa and Houston respectively provoked altered states of consciousness and nodes of connection between minimalism and abstract expressionism that enabled several layers of historical transmission to be mediated through our painting activity.

THE ETERNAL NETWORK

The work at Flight gallery has its roots in a shared history going back to the early nineteen eighties. James and myself had initially connected through the international Mail Art network circa 1981 when James was living in Eugene, Oregon and I was living in my home town Belfast, Northern Ireland. Our meeting via this pre-internet artist network was as a result of a mutual correspondence with Dr. Al ‘Blaster’ Ackerman (1939 - 2013).4
Thereafter an analogue correspondence began between the three of us via the postal service whereby ideas, artworks and an oppositional artistic discourse took place throughout the ensuing years.

This resulted in several performance art tours by myself in Texas with James facilitating an appearance in 1986 at Blue Star Gallery in San Antonio where both he and ‘Blaster’ Ackerman where then residing. This in turn was reciprocated through several networking exhibitions and events that I organised in London throughout the 1980’s/90’s and a solo show I curated of James’s digital work at Trace gallery in Cardiff, Wales in 2003.

Our common back-story was partially plundered to reveal remnants from our engagement with the lost world of aggressive cultural workers and marginal networks. This parallel universe inhabited by ‘outsider’ practitioners compelled us to question the very nature of our perception and dependency on the consistency of a common contemporary visual world and how painting in particular might be experienced anew.

By subsuming our source material into a dominant western painting hegemony and reconfiguring it as installation or more correctly ‘environment’ we were inviting the viewer to experience the physical nature of the work and share in the illusive nature of much of recent abstraction. When considering contemporary painting Bois (Bois, Yves Alan 1990) might suggest this as being about painting as a space of transmission and how information moves within a painting.

Yet we can also hear the echoes of an analogue past in the notion of the gesture (still an integral feature of painting) as a performative intervention and what Harold Rosenberg called a “sensual, psychic, and intellectual effort to live actively in the present.” (Rosenberg, Harold 1952)

Herein lay the tension or elision for us: the virtual and the computer screen have altered our interfacing with the visual world. Yet, even if pervaded by a digital consciousness, the painted surface remains the locus for an ‘analogue’ gestural practice. (Florian, Federico 2015)

‘14 Secret Masters of The Universe’ owed much of its conceptual underpinning to the work and philosophy of Dr. Ackerman and the many years we spent in active mail art networking. Indeed the title of the exhibition at Flight gallery references the concept of what French mail artist Robert Filliou (1926-1987) termed the ‘eternal network’ and the idea that fourteen artists would be simultaneously corresponding via the worlds postal service at any given time. This pre-internet networking activity has its corollary in the work created at Flight.

The result is transference of the ubiquitous post-modernist ideas seen in the work produced during our mail art networking days. For example in my performance art from the 1980’s/90’s and our mutual engagement in collage, graphics and painting a method developed of “re-ordering existing visual codes to deconstruct familiar signs and symbols that shape social relations and identity.” (Owens, Craig 1980) This was different from modernism’s focus on form versus content. From a post-modern point of view this created a shift from the autonomous and self-referential, self-experiential
position to an integrated observation of culture as a vast collage of found material to be endlessly appropriated, deconstructed, reconstituted, regurgitated and repositioned.

As an expansion of our experience of post-modern practice we wanted to investigate abstraction in a painting/installation context in order to position it as the intermediate stage of transporting the image/object from one time or location to another as a form of ‘networkism’ or meta-narrative. A form of networking art-historical time, genres, and practical modes of operation (in our case through tensions between gestural and hard edge abstraction) that could mark the transfer of information rather than the production of new information itself that was for example the territory claimed by Abstract Expressionism.

The re-activating of certain art genres in the twenty-first century has more in line with contemporary ideas of ‘post-production’. This considers a form of art that responds to the proliferating chaos of global culture in an atemporal information age. “It is no longer a matter of elaborating a form on a basis of a raw material but working with objects that are already in circulation on the cultural market, which is to say, informed by other objects.” (Bourriaud, Nicolas 2002)

A process of producing work based on inventory, selection, and download. From this position the concept of ‘post-production’ extemporised via networkism in the paintings positioned at Flight gallery can then be viewed as an atemporal experience.

**Permanent Present Tense**

In our lives James and I had moved from one networking time to another (mail art, and physical meeting to the internet and virtual proliferation) and did not see this as a linear activity but rather a form of atemporal lived experience in our art practice. Through this position we could then view painting as atemporal, and atemporality or timelessness in painting as an ahistorical open source redistribution engine, where contemporaneity as an indicator of new form is nowhere to be found, and all eras co-exist. Therefore our experience of certain forms of modernist art and architecture could be contextualised as part of an eternal networkism through painting/installation. On our information superhighway and eternal networked present all art historical experience then exists at once in a permanent present tense. (Hoptman, Laura 2015)

The experience of sitting in the Rothko Chapel with its charged zones and tectonic passages becomes an eternal present where movement is sublime and slow. Just as Marfa in west Texas may well be the art markets’ Jonestown of minimalism its epicentre is a monument of architectural paradox where the fixed installation of volume and space elide with our knowledge of Donald Judd’s life-time mashed up with an unidentified future transmitting a ‘fell to earth’ scenario via the mysterious light sources observed in Marfa’s western desert. So it is that our work urges an eternal network where atemporality in painting references and constantly rehearses a version of the future that never arrives.

Footnotes

1 The Rothko Chapel is a non-denominational chapel in Houston, Texas founded by John and Dominique de Menil. The interior serves as chapel and major work of modern art. On its walls are
fourteen large-scale paintings by Mark Rothko. The shape of the building is an octagon inscribed in a Greek cross, with the ‘modernist’ design influenced by the artist.

Mark Rothko (1903 - 1970) was an American painter of Russian Jewish descent. Although Rothko himself refused to adhere to any art movement, he is generally identified as an Abstract Expressionist. With Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, he is one of the most famous post WW2 artists.

Donald Judd (1928 – 1994) was an American artist associated with minimalism. In 1971 he rented a house in Marfa, Texas as an antidote to the hectic New York art world. From this humble house he would later buy numerous buildings and a 60,000 acre (243 km²) Ayala de Chinati Ranch (not open to the public), almost all carefully restored to his exacting standards. 40,000 acres surrounding the three ranch headquarters were sold under a conservation easement, but Judd Foundation still maintains the buildings and the land immediately surrounding them. In 1979, with help from the Dia Art Foundation, Judd purchased a 340 acre (1.4 km²) tract of desert land near Marfa, Texas which included the abandoned buildings of the former U.S. Army Fort D. A. Russell. The Chinati Foundation opened on the site in 1986 as a non-profit art foundation, dedicated to Judd and his contemporaries. The permanent collection consists of large-scale works by Judd, sculptor John Chamberlain, light-artist Dan Flavin and select others, including David Rabinowitch, Roni Horn, Ilya Kabakov, Richard Long, Carl Andre and Claes Oldenburg and Coosje Van Bruggen. Judd’s work in Marfa includes 15 outdoor works in concrete and 100 aluminum pieces housed in two painstakingly renovated artillery sheds.

Dr. ‘Blaster’ Al Ackerman (b. Corpus Christie, Texas 1939 d. Austin, Texas 2013), was the most commonly used name by American mail artist and writer born as William Hogg Greathouse. Ackerman had been active in various subcultures since the early 1970s. He is credited along with David Zack with the concept of Neoism, creating the performance art persona Monty Cantsin.

Installation art has two primary characteristics. The first is its consummate refusal of traditional paintings single point perspective, which, in turn, disallows the construction of the viewer as a unified subject. Furthermore, the multiple vantage points insisted upon by installation art are in keeping with contemporaneous theories of the centred subject. The second contention is that installation posits a model of spectatorship based on “experience,” in which the viewer is a participant rather than a “viewer” as such. (Bishop, Claire 2005) As a participant, the person is immersed in an experience that they must articulate and assemble for themselves, whereas the traditional viewer of perspectival painting, whose primary activities are looking and contemplation, inherits a world already assembled for them. In Minimalism (Judd, Andre, Flavin et al) the viewers attention is shifted away from the object onto the relationship between artwork and surrounding environment. The nature of minimalism was that of bodily measures rather than (as in installation art) an agent to activate the viewers participation. (This was initially experienced in the works of the American artist Allen Kaprow, who in 1958 was the first to employ the term ‘environment’ to describe roomsized works that experimented with the space into which viewers could walk.

Robert Filliou (1926-1987) was a French Fluxus artist who produced works as a filmmaker, action poet, sculptor and happenings. Filliou first proposed ‘Art’s Birthday’ in 1963. He suggested that 1,000,000 years ago there was no art. But on one day, 17th January ‘Art’ was born.

Networkism typifies a new concept of art […] A seeming consequence of the complex connectedness of modern life, ‘networkism’ is a revised idea of ‘meta-narrative’, or grand narrative, introduced by French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard in the 1970’s. The network is at the centre of this belief, embodying a transcendent and universal truth, an archetype that represents all circuits, all intelligence, all interdependence, all things economic, social, cultural or ecological, all communications, all systems. (Lima, Manual 2011)

Atemporality or timelessness is manifested in painting through the reanimating of historical styles or by recreating a contemporary version of them, sampling motifs from across a timeline of 20th-century art in a single painting or across an oeuvre, or by radically paring down an artistic language to its most basic archetypal form.

Bibliography