

ACTS OF INTERRUPTION: DÉRIVES AND DÉTOURNEMENTS IN PAINTING

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Daniel Buren, Photo-souvenir: "5 travaux dans Paris", work *in situ*, Paris, July, 1971. Detail.
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Following on from Yves Klein's 1958 empty gallery show "The Void," in January 1967 a group of painters – Daniel Buren (b. 1938), Oliver Mosset (b. 1944) Michel Parmentier (1938-2000) and Niele Toroni (b. 1937) (collectively known as the BMPT group) – collaborated in "Manifestation No. 1" – an exhibition which consisted of the absence of the artists' work. Intended as a statement of institutional critique – and of painting's role within this – the exhibition consisted of the making of work in the gallery space and the subsequent dismantling of this work on the opening night, with the gallery remaining empty for the duration of the show. This "action" can be understood in terms of the "zero degree" in painting – that is, painting which takes as its subject matter the so-called "death of painting." Each member of the group has also pursued other forms of "zero degree" painting. In Buren's case this extended to the taking of art out of the gallery and into the space of the city in acts of *dérive* and *détournement*. In his conceiving of the city as a place of action, Buren's practice is aligned with the artistic/political actions of the *Internationale Situationniste* (Situationist International or SI), a network of art activists operating in Europe during the 1950s and 1960s. This paper contextualises Buren's practice in relation to other instances of painting which demonstrates the ability to critically reflect on its own history and traditions. There will be a consideration of the relevance of this position as one from which to begin in the current teaching of painting. As such, addressing the concerns of conceptual artists of the 1960s is relevant, and further examples are drawn from contemporary painting practice. Hence a range of varying practices in painting are brought together and identified as participating in forms of "interruption" of painting.

Klein's "void" exhibition, along with the actions of BMPT, are occasions in a history of negative gestures in painting within the Western tradition. For example, from the period of early modernity Kazimir Malevich's (1878-1935) *Black Square* (1915) can be viewed as a zero gesture, reducing painting, as it did, to a simplified geometric form.

And in discussing the work of the Russian avant-garde artist Aleksander Rodchenko (1891-1956), Hal Foster et al. state: "Rodchenko said farewell to this art (painting) after having shown his famous monochrome triptych at the exhibition '5 x 5 = 25' in September 1921: 'I reduced painting to its logical conclusion and exhibited three canvases: red, blue and yellow' he later wrote. 'I affirmed: It's all over.'¹ Other artists through the period of modernity also made various "zero" gestures. Joan Miró (1893-1983) in 1931 stated that his aim was "to destroy everything that exists in painting."² Piet Mondrian (1872-1944) proposed the dissolution of all art forms, including painting, into art as environment,³ and painting lost favour with the Surrealists and Dadaists, whose environments and events – their "life as art" gestures – were precursors to Fluxus, Happenings and Performance Art of the 1960s. These represented a rejection – as did a number of the strategies of Conceptual Art⁴ emerging in the 1960s and 1970s – of painting – a field considered to have lost all relevance and all potential for criticality or self-reflexivity.⁵ Ann Rorimer said of the group of painters who emerged in the 1960s – and whose practices demonstrate a continuing engagement with the field of painting – that they "introduced new possibilities for painted content in the process of questioning accepted means and methods for its delivery."⁶ The practice of these painters can be understood not as an "end" to painting, but in terms of "painting about painting," and represents further instances of a self-critical approach to the histories, conventions and continued act of painting. In the 1960s Ad Reinhardt (1913-67) "reduced" painting to a black square. Nancy Spector suggests that "Reinhardt's writings on art read like a litany of negative aphorisms."⁷ Reinhardt, however, did not view these works as declaring any sort of "death of painting." Rather, he "was instead affirming painting's potential to transcend the contradictory rhetoric that surrounded it in contemporary criticism and the increasing commercial influences of the market."⁸ Along the same lines, the American artist Robert Ryman said in 1969: "there is never a question of what to paint, but only how to paint." Ryman's practice, based in an engagement with the materials of painting, has as its aim "the ideational capacity of painting to look at itself."⁹

We can therefore identify, by the 1960s, at least three positions for painting practice. Firstly there continued on practices which can be identified as neo-romantic, that is, those practices which in an unquestioning manner rework conventions of the past. Secondly, practices associated with a view that painting was an outmoded field no longer capable of renewal or critical potential, and which therefore should be abandoned. Thirdly, practices aligned with some of the examples I have presented here, ones which sought to find new means, materials and ideals for painting.

In 1965 Buren decided that henceforth he would make only artwork that was comprised of two-toned stripes, 8.7 centimeters wide, for the rest of his career. For Buren this represented a form of institutional critique. This act of repeating the "same act" indefinitely could be viewed as addressing notions of "progress" in art and, in this case, painting in particular. Buren began placing his signature "stripes" throughout the streets of Paris in places normally reserved for advertising. Intended as a critique of, and intervention against, the rapidly increasing amount of advertising occurring throughout the city at the time, these were fugitive, transgressive and ephemeral actions. Simultaneously inverting an established role for painting as an object and also as subject (of analysis and/or experience), such actions turned the question back onto not just the physical location of painting, but also its conceptual position. The legacy of Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) – who viewed the readymade as a negation of painting – and in particular the placing of his readymade *Urinal* (1914) into an art gallery, is clearly evident. For, as Rosalind E. Krauss (b. 1941) suggests, something is "triggered by the object but is somehow not *about* the object."¹⁰ Duchamp's "turning back" – following Krauss' thinking – takes the form of a quandary, one which makes the experience of the artwork not one which is about the linear passage of time – that is, the time taken from seeing to understanding the work – but rather turns it into a question concerning the nature of art itself.

Charissa N Terranova suggests that BMPT's "empty gallery show" – and Buren's further actions – are "performance(s) of sorts" of painting and represent acts of "*détournement*." Buren's actions were inspired by the work and political action of his contemporaries, the activist group *Internationale Situationniste* (SI),¹¹ and it is possible to see the tactics of this group being played out in Buren's actions. Political and artistic agitators, Situationist International had their roots in early-twentieth-century European artistic and political avant-gardes. They promoted analysis of the contemporary world from the point of view of everyday life. Of primary interest to the SI was the construction of situations. Guy Debord (1931-94), a key figure in the group, developed the concept of psychogeography, a study

of – and simultaneous intervention into and against – the effects of the urban environment on the individual, both physically and psychologically.¹² Associated with this was Debord's concept of the *dérive*, which he describes as "one of the basic situationist practices ... a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances."¹³ In discussing the concept of *détournement* Debord says:

Any elements, no matter where they are taken from, can be used to make new combinations. The discoveries of modern poetry regarding the analogical structure of images demonstrate that when two objects are brought together, no matter how far apart their original contexts may be, a relationship is always formed. ... The mutual interference of two worlds of feeling, or the juxtaposition of two independent expressions, supersedes the original elements and produces a synthetic organization of greater efficacy. Anything can be used.¹⁴

Following on from Buren's acts of *détournement*, it is possible to identify in the practices of contemporary painters who continue to "make paintings" an understanding of and engagement with this critical legacy. In the 1970s German artist Gerhard Richter (b.1932) began a series of grey monochrome paintings. He commented about the work that it "makes no statement whatsoever ... so wretched a start could lead to nothing meaningful."¹⁵ Here, Richter evokes the failure of painterly abstraction that occurred in the late 1960s, as well as wider histories of the failure of painting itself. John Gaiger suggests that Richter has "made the problem of how to continue painting central to his work as an artist, producing a body of work that incorporates a critical and reflexive understanding of the history of painting alongside a close engagement with the forms and structures of the modern, mediated world."¹⁶

Such a position could be viewed as a disruption, or interruption, at the level of the meta-discourse of painting. Buren's evocation of the failure of painting took the form of a physical interruption in acts of *détournement*. Consideration is given in the remainder of this paper to artists whose practices demonstrate, like Richter, interruptions in painting whilst continuing to "make paintings." The practices of Luc Tuymans (b. 1958) and Wilhelm Sasnal (b. 1972) can be viewed as representative of painting as a type of *détournement*. Tuymans' art appears as an eliding of the modernist project of the "death of painting" and also the gestures of conceptual artists such as Buren. However, as Emma Dexter states, "his painting betrays an awareness of the discourse of the endgame of painting, which hovers over it like a malevolent angel."¹⁷ Both Tuymans and Sasnal employ strategies, transgressions if you like, against painting and its histories: "new combinations" (to quote Debord), heterogeneous approaches which effect a denial of painting through outcomes which read as anachronisms.

Albert Oehlen (b. 1954) follows on from Tuymans in the manner that his work often has "the look of the amateur," deliberately employing an aesthetic of awkwardness.¹⁸ Patricia Ellis suggests that Oehlen "borrows from the tropes of traditional abstract painting"¹⁹ and also that he is "motivated by the notion of the failure of art, and of painting ... suggesting that in this his practice embodies a form of self-critique of painting, reinventing 'its life as a manic zombie state.'²⁰ Central to Oehlen's practice is his position against historical and established values and hierarchies in painting, and in this he shares with Buren a radical, political motivation and stance. His "interruptions" take the form of contradictions, "figuration ... against abstraction, form against anti-form."²¹

Raphael Rubinstein suggests that there is "a tendency in recent (and not so recent) painting ... [which] spurns high craft and finish in favour of a more makeshift, seemingly anti-market, esthetic."²² Jonathon Lasker's (b. 1948) manner, that of having the look of the "deliberately unvirtuosic"²³ and his suggestion that his work "has an idiosyncratic dialogue with the history of painting,"²⁴ is an example of such an approach. Here the notion of interruption can be understood as a "provisional" position. The bringing together of the field of painting, with all its attendant "problems" – its histories, established conventions (whether it be of the erudite, carefully planned and executed variety or that of the transgressive, anti-establishment positions of the modernist avant-garde), its tropes, its eliding of "strong" painting and the re-investing of this with a sense of imminent failure, a sense of not trying to do anything at all – is a *détournement* in Debord's sense in that there is "the emptying-out of the original meaning of a given form and the refilling of that form with a new meaning."²⁵ Rubinstein suggests of this approach that it is "casual, dashed-off, tentative, unfinished or self-cancelling,"²⁶ and that such a position could also be viewed as a turning away from the art market, as a form of institutional critique. Raoul De Keyser's (b. 1930) interruptions – to cite the French curator

Jean-Charles Vergne – take the form of “mistakes, accidents ... second tries and failures”¹²⁷ in a practice which appears to go against the art market’s “appetite for smart, stylish, well executed canvases.”¹²⁸ Michael Krebber’s (b. 1954) paintings, positioned in an ambiguous space between representation and non-representation, are made up of fragments of brushwork, and sometimes shapes on supports which are often made of “kitschy bed linens, or glued newspaper spread onto cursorily painted grounds.”¹²⁹ Rubenstein suggests that Krebber’s work is “ostensibly about painting, [but] uses none of its accepted components.”¹³⁰

The work of these artists represents “a conceptual approach to painting that questions the fundamental roots of the medium.”¹³¹ Such painting could be viewed as another moment in the discourse of the death of painting. But, as with other instances, it is “not about making last paintings, nor is it about the deconstruction of painting. ... It’s the finished product disguised as a preliminary stage.”¹³² It is “major painting masquerading as minor painting.”¹³³ In the concluding paragraph of his essay on provisional painting, Rubenstein suggests that many contemporary painters find themselves in a “minor” position. Here he cites Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, drawing a comparison between the position of many painters today and the position of Kafka they describe in their book *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature* (1986). Kafka found himself in a “minor” position, his cultural position as an outsider making it “impossible” to participate in the established and culturally dominant discourse. At the same time, it was impossible for Kafka to not write. Rubenstein suggests that “recent painters may have found themselves in similarly ‘minor’ situations; the provisionality of their work is an index of the impossibility of painting and the equally persistent impossibility of not painting.”¹³⁴

Alexandra Kennedy is a painter and lecturer in theory and history of art at the Dunedin School of Art at Otago Polytechnic, Dunedin, New Zealand. Her practice is located between painting and drawing, between object and process. Kennedy’s project is also located within a context which engages with the “zero gesture” in painting, addressing the critical relevancy of painting and its ability to reflect upon and engage with its own histories. Appearing as random marks and erasures on a field which forms part of a larger, potentially limitless field, her works are suggestive of digital junk, voids and empty spaces and can be “read” as being in the middle of something, as process, as becoming. Hence the work makes use of the notion of the “holes in space” created by electronic and digital technologies, reworking them as an “aesthetic of the void.” Her practice also encompasses writing on contemporary painting. Recent published articles and conference papers also focus on issues such as the “end of subject matter” and contemporary “zero gestures” in painting.

- 1 Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin HD Buchloh, *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Anti Modernism, Post Modernism* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2004), 178.
- 2 Raphael Rubenstein, “Provisional Painting,” *Art in America*, May 2009, 127. Here Rubenstein quotes Anne Umland, *Joan Miró: Painting and Anti-Painting 1927-1937* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2008), 2.
- 3 Piet Mondrian, “Neo-Plasticism: The General Principle of Plastic Equivalence” (1920), quoted in *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, eds Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Malden and Oxford: Blackwell, 1992/2004), 291. Mondrian states: “The New Plastic ... creates the unity of all the arts” (author’s emphasis).
- 4 With Conceptual Art a range of practices emerged. These included instruction, performance and documentation, process art, art and language, appropriation and intervention, and engagement with politics, ideology and institutional critique.
- 5 Thus, the sentiment of wanting to break with the past in a political and social sense extended to the rejection of the forms of art which were perceived to be representative of – and as playing a part in maintaining – an old order.
- 6 Anne Rorimer, “Painting at Issue after 1965,” in her *New Art in the ‘60s and ‘70s: Redefining Reality* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2001), 37.
- 7 Nancy Spector, http://painting.about.com/gi/dynamic/offsite.htm?zi=1/Xj&sdn=painting&cdn=hobbies&tm=21&f=00&tt=33&bt=0&bts=0&zu=http%3A/www.guggenheimcollection.org/site/artist_work_md_133A_1.html, accessed 23 August 2009.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Rorimer, “Painting at Issue after 1965,” 42.
- 10 Rosalind E Krauss, “Forms of Readymade: Duchamp and Brancusi,” in her *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge, Mass. & London: MIT Press, 1977/1981), 78.

- 11 Shortlived, the group formed in 1957 and disbanded in 1972. Active in Europe through the 1960s, they aspired to major social and political transformations and promoted the principle that there was no separation between aesthetics and politics. Guy Debord (1931-94), a key figure in the group, published *The Society of the Spectacle* in 1967 and established Situationism as a Marxist critical theory.
- 12 Psychogeography was defined by Debord as the study of the effects of the environment on the behaviour and emotions of individuals. He also described it as a strategy for intervening in the structures of the city, something designed to take city dwellers out of their usual awareness, or lack of awareness of the environment they live in, with the purpose of creating a new awareness of the urban landscape. There are links in his thinking to groups which promoted a revolutionary attitude to architecture.
- 13 Guy Debord, "Theory of the Dérive" (1958), quoted in his *Bureau of Public Secrets*, <http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/2.derive.htm>, accessed 16 August 2009. First published as "Théorie de la dérive" in *Internationale Situationniste* #2 (Paris, December 1958). Here Debord describes *dérive* as "awareness of psychogeographical effects, and ... thus quite different from the classic notions of journey or stroll. In a *dérive* one or more persons during a certain period drop their relations, their work and leisure activities, and all their other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there."
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Gerhard Richter, "From a Letter to Edy de Wilde, 23 February 1975," in his *The Daily Practice of Painting: Writings 1962-1993*, ed. D Britt, trans. HU Obrist (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1995), 82.
- 16 John Gaiger, "Post Conceptual Painting: Gerhard Richter's Extended Leave Taking," in *Themes in Contemporary Art*, eds Gill Perry and Paul Wood (New Haven: Yale University Press and the Open University, 2004), 99.
- 17 Emma Dexter, "The Interconnectedness of All Things: Between History, Still Life and the Uncanny" in *Luc Tuymans*, eds Emma Dexter and Julian Heynen (London: Tate Publishing, 2004), 16.
- 18 Patricia Ellis suggests that Oehlen's work is "rife with 'mistakes' and 'second tries.'" Patricia Ellis, *About Albert Oehlen and his Art*, http://www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/artists/albert_oehlen_about.html, accessed 4 February 2009.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Rubinstein, "Provisional Painting," 123.
- 23 Jonathan Lasker, quoted in Raphael Rubinstein, "Counter-Resolution," *Art in America*, April 1995, 85.
- 24 Jonathan Lasker, interviewed by Francesco Bonami in *Flash Art*, 176 (May/June 1994); quoted in *Contemporary Visual Arts*, 28 (2000), 26.
- 25 Charissa N Terranova, "Performing the Frame: Daniel Buren, Degree Zero Painting and a Politics of Beauty," <http://www.stretcher.org/reviews/images/2002/symposia/performingtheframe.html>, accessed 24 August 2009.
- 26 Rubinstein, "Provisional Painting," 123.
- 27 Ibid. Here Rubinstein quotes Jean-Charles Vergne's view that De Keyser's work "constantly asserts the impossibility of painting free of touch ups, mistakes, accidents, set on laying bare the seams, the second tries and the failures." See Jean-Charles Vergne, "Small things aspirate the world and they become the world" in his *Raoul de Keyser* (Clermont-Ferrand: FRAC Auvergne, 2008), 15.
- 28 Rubinstein, "Provisional Painting," 124.
- 29 Ibid, 126-7.
- 30 Ibid, 126.
- 31 Liverpool Tate, *Rhinegold: Art from Cologne, Michael Krebber*, 12 June–22 August 2004, <http://www.tate.org.uk/liverpool/exhibitions/rhinegold/krebber.htm>, accessed 23 August 2009.
- 32 Rubinstein, "Provisional Painting," 134.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 Ibid, 135.