Abstract Connections

By

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Abstract

This thesis links disparate sources to build a new way of looking at abstract painting. It draws on anthropology, cognitive science, philosophy, and art history to open up a different discourse about abstraction. Alfred Gell's anthropological theory of art is used as a model for investigating the various social exchanges that take place in the entire spectrum of interactions that abstract painting involves. These social transactions include both traditional linguistic ones, as well as non-linguistic exchanges. Cognitive science is looked at to investigate the experience of sensation at a more granular level than that of language. Philosophy, particularly of Gilles Deleuze, is discussed in order to tie sensation with the opening of a fissure to connect to new ways of thinking and debating. Art History is investigated to situate my own practice with other painters, both historical and contemporary. This openness of sources in my writing is reflective of the openness of the types of resources that I use in my painting practice, where I mix ornamentation, topology, and gesture. In both the written thesis and my art practice the goal is to regard abstraction as a means to facilitate alternative knowledge production. In this sense, abstraction is investigated as a search for discursiveness through a material practice.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Sensation is that which is transmitted directly, and avoids the detour and boredom of conveying a story. (Paul Valéry)

Abstract painting is quietly undergoing a renaissance. Although installations and video are still *de rigueur* at large international art shows, such as Documenta, galleries across North America, Europe and emerging art centres in Shanghai, Mumbai and Eastern Europe are enthusiastically embracing painting. Abstract painter Tomma Abts won the prestigious Turner Prize in 2006 — the first painter since Chris Ofili in 1998. Artforum has in the last year had three abstract painters on its cover: Mary Heilman, Brice Marden and Amy Sillman. While Artforum may not be everyone's artistic barometer, this is something that has not happened in a very long time. The focus of the discourse around these painters, and their younger contemporaries, has refreshingly shifted away from previous generations' obsessions with purity, spontaneity, and private languages to one where the discussion is more about impurity and the mixing, rearranging, and the forming of new connections.

This forming of new connections and associations is the core of what I believe to be so exciting about abstract painting today. I view abstract[1] painting as a social process that involves the entire spectrum of experience with respect to the making, the viewing and the debating of abstract paintings. Abstract painting incorporates a network of social

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[1] The term "abstract" has been used to describe everything from geometric to conceptual painting and as a result it has become a catchall phrase that is perhaps meaningless. At the same time, the term has been remarkably resilient in its ability to absorb new approaches as well as retaining its old definitions. It is this inclusiveness of different, often contradictory, definitions that gives abstraction a fluidity that fits well with my view of painting as a departure point to various connections. Within its realm of definitions, I use the term "abstract" to refer primarily to non-objective geometric art.

interactions, and it is not just about an artist expressing something in isolation or a viewer responding to it in a private moment of inner contemplation. The experience includes what anthropologist Alfred Gell calls social exchanges between artist, art object, viewer, and the environment at large. Within this social network, I discuss how paintings themselves have a certain agency, making them active participants in this exchange. In anthropological terms, patterns in the type of abstract geometric paintings that I am mainly engaged with, can be said to become animated and have an agency or force of their own. They act to entrap and bind the viewer into a social transaction. Geometric patterns cause a direct exchange with sensation for the viewer, what philosopher Gilles Deleuze calls the extracting of presences beneath and beyond representation. This direct exchange with sensation can be a disorienting experience, but it is this experience that has the potential to create fissures in our normative ways of seeing. By making these presences visible, abstract painting can be seen as analogous to a threshold, opening up to new possibilities and connections through free association. In chapter 2, Carol Strohecker's research with children at a 'knot-lab' describes how their engagement with spatial structure and the interrelation of components leads to thinking in a critical fashion. The children's way of thinking critically about knot tying also opened the door to discussions about other issues in life. This spurring of a debate that was not available before, through an exchange involving sensation and a spatial investigation of topology, is what I mean by the forming of new connections and associations. In this way, abstraction for me is a search for discursiveness through a material practice, both inside and outside of language.

My own practice of abstract painting is grounded in this notion that the world of sensation can act as place where preconceived ways of thinking can be jettisoned, a place where sensation can invoke non-directed possibilities to form new associations. In my

painting, *Always/Already #1 (Fig. 1)*, the grid or tabular structure is evident as a geometric

form combined with gestural contents to give a paradoxical impression of order and chaos.

The disorienting effect of abstract geometric patterns is an attempt to produce an experience

that is close to what I believe is that of being lost, akin to that of being lost in the woods.

The disorientation of being lost, the living in the moment of sensation where predefined

beliefs seem to have no place, allows for new associations and interpretations to be formed.

There is no map available for guidance in this world, there are no codes, and the idea is to be

free to make them up.
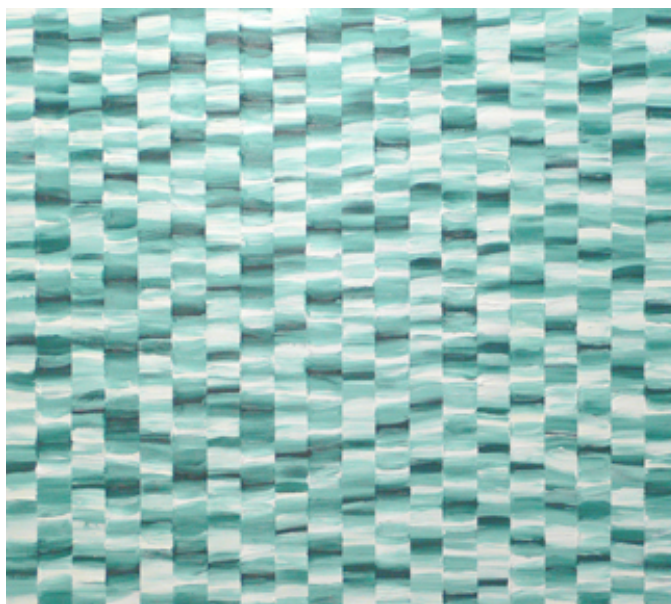
Figure 1. Vytas Narusevicius, Always/Already #1, 2007, oil on canvas, 35-1/2 x 40".

In my paintings I am drawing on a variety of different sources for the forms. I freely link

different styles, histories and techniques. Ornamentation is important, especially Islamic

tiling from the 15th century, and its four motions of reflection, translation, rotation, and glide

reflection. The forms are also inspired by the grids of Agnes Martin, diagrams of

informational databases, and a considerable amount of experimentation with geometric

compositions. Geometry plays a key role in my work since geometric patterns are ends in

themselves; they have no connotative meanings, and thus allow the engaged viewer to decide what to think.

While it could be said that the forms and techniques that I am using are from the history of painting, from the massive accumulation of visual clichés, and that they may obstruct any 'new' associations. I cannot ignore this history, but I am not privileging it in a hierarchical way. I remain as open to the many different sources and ideas in my paintings as I wish associations to be made from them. Even though existing forms from the history of painting are used to create the experience of sensation, it is not a contradiction to believe that they can initiate a new point of departure from the codes of dominant conventions. I see sensation acting as a way to defamiliarize the conventions and to acknowledge them as if one were seeing them for the first time.

The notion of being lost in the world of sensation is obviously a particularly important aspect of abstraction for me. It is in this realm of sensation that a puzzling connection is created between the viewer and the geometric patterns of the painting. One of my goals is to create a world of sensation with paint that is outside of language and semiotics, a world that acts in a similar manner to what Julia Kristeva calls an intrusion onto the symbolic order. My abstract paintings do not explain anything per se, but they suggest the potential for new possibilities whose outcome cannot be determined. Though the paintings contain this aspect of sensation that I would classify as sub-semiotic, I also view them as sites of social production and exchange that encompass not only the viewer, but also the artwork, the artist, the debates, and the environment at large.

The social exchange or transaction that takes place through the experience of abstract painting is comprised of a variety of connections. My own personal experience has been one where I have had rich, engaging, and reciprocal relationships with the viewing of paintings

that has lasted over the course of many years. They have connected me with a wide variety

of ideas, thinkers and writers, which have resulted in a better understanding of the world and

my place in it. Even when I am painting I speak to the voices of the painters who I admire

from Courbet to Ryman through the proxy of the canvas. Social interactions are embedded

at every step of the painting process, from the making of the work to displaying it, to

viewing it, and to debating it. The act of going to a gallery opening with friends and

colleagues entails active intersubjective exchanges that offer opportunities to rethink ideas

and strategies. None of these activities are in any way passive. The various social exchanges

surrounding painting can be considered as a type of relational aesthetics of the art object

itself, the same way as relational aesthetics considers interhuman exchange as an aesthetic

object in and of itself.[2] I think of the social exchanges surrounding painting as being a site of

production that creates a surplus value, to borrow a term from Marxist economic theory,

consisting of previous and new experiences that generate the associations and connections I

have been describing.

Recent publications also indicate a renewed interest in the social interactions through

which art works, such as paintings, are both made and perceived. Gabriel Guercio has

written Art as Existence: The Artist's Monograph and its Project as a revived concern with

the artistic process, not as a notion of autonomous activity but as an idea that art and life are

irreducibly interconnected.[3] He views "art as a generative force of human activity" (Guercio

46). Joachim Pissarro's Cézanne/Pissarro, Johns/Rauschenberg: Comparative Studies on

Intersubjectivity in Modern Art looks at the importance of intersubjective dialogue between

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[2] Nicolas Bourriaud's Relational Aesthetics and Postproduction offer a detailed discussion of
relational aesthetics.

[3] Gabriele Guercio is an independent writer living in Milan. He has a doctorate in art history from
Yale University and has lectured at the Universities of Rome and Naples. He has been a Fellow at the
Center for Advanced Studies in the Visual Arts at the National Gallery and a recipient of a J. P. Getty
Postdoctoral Fellowship in the History of Art and the Humanities.

artists in their creative practices, particularly practices of painting.[4] Even art historian T. J. Clark, who has been somewhat unfairly associated with the tendency to reduce art to a set of political and historical functions and conditions, has recently written The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing as a compilation of notes from his 'dialogues' with two of Poussin's paintings during his six months of daily visits to the Getty Museum.[5] Clark's 'dialogues' were not just private inner ones, but ones that involved the entire environment of the gallery: the light, both natural and artificial and how it changed the painting every day, as well as the effect of other visitors and children talking and running in the gallery space.

My view that abstract painting is comprised of a network of social transactions is eloquently illuminated by Alfred Gell and his book Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory.[6] Gell ambitiously sets out to construct a theory of art based neither on aesthetics nor on visual communication. His anthropological approach is preoccupied with a practical mediatory role of art objects in the social process, rather than the alternative semiotic approach of reading objects as if they were texts. While Gell's theory has many problems associated with it, notably the circumnavigation of philosophical and logical debates. He insists that as an anthropologist his task is to describe, "forms of thought which are socially and cognitively practicable" (Gell 16). I find this approach particularly refreshing and I will use parts of Gell's theory as a way to introduce a discussion about a dialogue between art objects, viewers and artists.

Much of my practice as an artist revolves around the search for discursiveness through the materiality of paint, the exchange between the sensations in paint and the new

[4] Joachim Pissarro is curator in the Department of Painting and Sculpture at The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

[5] T.J. Clark is the author of many groundbreaking books on art history, which he also teaches at the University of California, Berkeley.

[6] Alfred Gell was a fellow of the British Academy and taught anthropology at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

possibilities and connections that the paint activates. What previously may have been considered philosophical, spiritual or religious, Gell effectively translates into one of social relations. This is important since a great deal of the discourse around abstract painting in the twentieth century has previously been in terms of philosophical essentializing, purity and/or the claptrap of spiritualism.[7] Looking at abstraction from the perspective of connectivity instead of purity creates an atmosphere of inclusion rather than exclusion of everything that is not pure.

One goal of this thesis is to situate my practice of abstract painting, more specifically a form of geometric abstraction, by looking at Gell's theory of art, which suggests that art objects are part of a relational social exchange. I am particularly interested in his notion of art objects having an agency of their own, which entails a reciprocal relationship between the art object and the viewer. In line with this discussion I will look at some recent writing in cognitive science with respect to our vision systems, which investigates our perception of sensation at a more granular level than that of language. I realize that anthropology and cognitive science are not part of the traditional art discourse, but this variety of sources is reflective of the intended openness of my work. I wish to bring these kinds of intriguing connections and associations into my writing in the same way as I link disparate elements such as ornamentation, topology and gesture in my artistic practice.

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[7] Wassily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian's writing is filled with essentiallizing and spiritual tones, while Clement Greenberg wrote of abstraction as a 'pure' form of art.

I

One way of thinking about the connectivity between an art object, such as an abstract painting, and either the artist or the viewer, is through Gell's anthropologic focus on social processes. Instead of focusing on aesthetic values, or the way that artworks embed cultural meanings, Gell is interested in the way artworks mediate social agency (7). He believes aesthetic judgments are only interior mental acts, whereas art objects are made and circulated in the external physical and social world. Thus the production and circulation of art is sustained by certain social processes that can be looked at as objective (3). By refusing to discuss art in terms of symbols and meanings, he places all the emphasis on "agency, intention, causation, result and transformation" (6). Art is seen as a system of action whose intention is to make changes in the world as opposed to encoding symbolic propositions about it.

Since anthropology is more concerned with the immediate context of social interactions and their personal dimensions, Gell looks at the local social context in which art is produced, as opposed to a function of the existence of specific art institutions. He explores a domain in which objects merge with people by virtue of the existence of social relationships between persons and things, and persons and persons via things (12). Through his own admission, Gell considers his anthropological theory of art as one that "considers art objects as persons," a theory recognizably indebted to the work of French sociologist and anthropologist Marcel Mauss (9). Mauss's exchange theory treated 'presentations' or 'gifts' as

extensions of persons, in the same way Gell sees art objects as persons. This approach is somewhat different from previous theories of object/subject relationships such as the aura of Walter Benjamin, the commodity fetish of Marx, or the sexual fetish of Freud and Lacan. It may not solve all the subject/object contradictions, but it casts them in a different light. Gell's theory of art views relationships in a 'biographical' context because anthropology tends to focus on the act in the context of the stage of life of an agent. Sociological relations, as in the Marxist kind, are considered 'supra-biographical,' an example of which would be the relations between classes. Psychological relations, such as Benjamin's aura or Freud's sexual fetishes, are often no more than momentary encounters, and are 'infra-biographical.'[8] Anthropological relationships, on the other hand, are real and biographically consequential ones that he claims articulate "the agent's biographical life project" (11). His investigation of the production and circulation of art objects tries to make sense of behaviour in the context of social relations and puts the spotlight on the visibly practical processes of social interaction.

Art for Gell is defined through the role that it plays in advancing social relationships constructed through agency. He defines agency as attributable to "persons, things, who/which are seen as initiating causal sequences … events caused by acts of mind or will

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[8] Gell can certainly be accused here of bracketing this theory around an anthropological methodology, and thus bypassing some very difficult questions in the sister realms of sociology and psychology. By restricting the range of other issues relating to the social role of art such as how societies are structured and their cultural beliefs, Gell's cannot truly be called an all encompassing theory of art. The minimized importance of cultural convention in the shaping of the reading of an artwork is very problematic, some even argue that an artwork's agency depends on it being "read correctly" (Layton 460). I think, however, that one of the reasons why I am attracted to Gell's theory is precisely the avoidance of the semantic approach. In the case of something like a representational painting I would be more moved to agree that a viewer's experience, mind-set, ideology, and culture are all important to construe the artist's agency 'correctly' because of the iconographic elements. In the situation of abstract painting, particularly the geometric abstract painting that I am interested in, the case is less clear. A square, a rectangle, a triangle, are what they are, analogous to a mathematical ontology, they appear to be devoid of cultural specificity. This lack of consistent associations in geometric abstraction leaves the viewer with a great deal of freedom to choose meanings. In this context I believe Gell's restricted range is less problematic for my area of interest.

or intention, rather than the mere concatenation of physical events" (Gell, 16). An agent is one who "causes events to happen in their vicinity" (16). Gell's agents initiate actions caused by themselves, by their intentions rather than by the physical material cause-and-effect laws of the universe. He recognizes that this position is philosophically debatable, but insists that his notion of agency is constructed from everyday practices and discursive forms, and is less concerned with "philosophically defensible notions of agency" (17). Since, in practice, people do attribute intentions and awareness to even mundane objects, such as cars, Gell believes that instances of agency occur whenever an event happens because of "an intention lodged in the person or thing which initiates the causal sequence" (17). Prior intention implies that the agent has a human-like mind; therefore, art objects cannot be agents in themselves, but act as extensions of their maker's or their user's agency. Thus, Gell writes, art objects are not self-sufficient agents, but secondary agents in conjunction with human associates (17). Although art objects are not themselves intentional beings they act as the mediums through which people manifest and realize their intentions. As a result, they are extensions of the persons whose agency they express, part of their 'distributed' personhood. Artworks mediate the way in which viewers make 'abductions' (inferences) about the intentions of those who produce them. Artworks, in essence, give viewers access to other minds[9] and therefore engage a social exchange (16). Gell's concern is not with the philosophical theory of human agency that presupposes autonomy and self-sufficiency, but instead he is interested in the secondary agency art objects acquire when they become "enmeshed in a texture of social relationships" (17).

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[9] Not only access to the artist's mind, but also to the critic's, and to other writers whose ideas are contained in the work and whom the viewer might be motivated to read, as well as to other people the viewer discusses the work with.

Within this relational texture, art objects can become agents in a number of ways. A key concept is that the 'other' in social relationships does not have to be another human being. Gell gives many common empirical examples where people develop relations with 'things,' such as children with dolls or men with cars.[10] The argument is that dolls are only a few steps removed from idols, and then from idols to sculpture and other art works (18). The important point is that 'things' appear to act as agents in particular social situations. Furthermore, since human agency is exercised within the material world, and since 'things' make up the material world, 'things' are as essential to the exercise of agency as states of minds. Things with their "thing-ly causal properties are as essential to the exercise of agency as states of mind" (20). It is only because the material environment near the agent has a certain configuration, from which an intention can be abducted, that the presence of another agent can be recognized. Gell writes that agency is recognized only after the fact in the configuration of the causal environment, so it cannot be detected before someone acts as an agent or disturbs the causal milieu (20). Since agency is detected only by its effects in the causal milieu (rather than through unmediated intuition), Gell thus understands it as a factor of the physical environment as a whole, which encompasses people and things, instead of just the human psyche (20). While an art object is not self-sufficient like a human, it is a manifestation of agency, or a channel of agency, in a way that is powerful and a source of compelling experiences. The fact that Gell calls them secondary agents does not concede

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[10] Gell's argument here is somewhat similar to what Donald Winnicott, Christopher Bollas, and others in the British Psychoanalytic Theory School called a transitional or transformational object. Briefly, these theories state that our relationship with objects hinges on our relationship with our mother when we were infants. The ego experience of being transformed by our mother is then re-enacted with objects later in life. My problem with these psychoanalytical theories, other than the fact that they are just theories, is that they are in a sense structural. These early infant experiences fix the way we are to act for the rest of our lives and there is nothing that we can do about it. In my quest for an open methodology, I prefer to look for new possibilities instead of restricting them. This is why I prefer Gell's theory which brackets out psychoanalysis and concentrates on how things appear in actual experience rather than some debatable hidden cause.

that they are only agents in a manner of speaking. They are a potent source of experiences and thus have agency.

The idea of the spectator having agency, as opposed to being a passive recipient, is in many ways an obvious one that has already been written about extensively. Literary theory has explored this area through reception and reader response theories in which the reader's role is determined to be as vital as that of the author. Literature does not happen without the reader's continuous active participation. These spectator-as-agent theories are well documented.[11] Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of language comes closest to what I am interested in with his view that human consciousness is the subject's active semiotic discourse with others, and not an interior realm divorced from these relations. Consciousness, like language, is both inside and outside the subject simultaneously (Eagleton 102). This is very close to the idea of the artistic social exchange encompassing the artist, viewer, art object and environment as a whole. While, of course, I am interested in Bakhtin's type of dialogical and social exchange, literary theory is concerned primarily with evaluating how objects and humans confront each other and demand some sort of response, but within the realm of language. For the purposes of this thesis, I am specifically interested in the component of this exchange that is so fundamentally important to visual art, that of sensation. I believe that sensation can reside outside of language, in the space between the immediate and the mediated and prior to a cognitive response. Gell's theory relates well to this space as is discussed below in his description of the art object's internal sources of energy. It is this aspect of Gell's theory that differentiates him from other theorists.

The idea of agency internal to an artwork or 'index,' as Gell calls it, is also a familiar one. Gell himself calls attention to the fact that Rudolf Arnheim developed a visual theory based

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[11] Terry Eagleton's <u>Literary Theory: An Introduction</u>, 1983, is the classic text.

on Gestalt psychology[12] where parts of 'index' are shown to be pictoral forces affecting the appearance of balance and other dynamics (Gell, 43). Gell's description of abstract art and ornamentation describes how they exploit our perception of internal agency or the cause and effect within the 'index' (43). The interaction of forms and colours in an abstract painting seem to have "internal sources of energy" that are engaged in complex causal interactions (43). "Part-to-part" causal interactions are internal to the artwork and the basis of abstract and decorative art, according to Gell (76). The use of patterns in ornamentation, for instance, exploits important visual relationships produced by a variety of motif arrangements (repetition, symmetry, reflection, etc.). In this way, parts of indexes convey agency just as indexes as a whole do. Abstract surfaces often seem animated and the viewer can become lost in them. The constant sliding and shifting of the abstract patterns as they interact with each other produces agency in the physical body of the index itself "so that it becomes a living thing without recourse to the imitation of any living thing" (76).

Torben Giehler's paintings have this kind of animated agency. What is immediately evident in Giehler's *Stareadactyl [Blood Witch]* (*Fig. 2*) is how the painting initially overwhelms the eye. The abstract geometric maze of lines changes directions and bumps into three-dimensional objects that float in and out of each other. The vibrating grids of colour and lines create an active sense of connectivity within the painting. The painting in some ways appears to be a digital construction of different perspectives that morph into each other. There is a sense of depth but it is not a Cartesian perspective, the shapes resemble four-dimensional hypercubes of computer modeling. The viewer cannot help but engage with the painting, trying to make sense of the layers, following the geometric lines and trying

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[12] Gestaltists saw perceptions as the result of the interaction of perceiver and object, rather than as passive experiences. Life is a give and take between every organism and its environment, there is a constant natural dialogue between "man at home in his body, his community, his natural habitat" (Follin 79). In this aspect, Gell's theory is very Gestaltist.

Figure 2. Torben Giehler, Stareadactyl [Blood Witch], 2007, acrylic on canvas, 305 x 244 cm, Courtesy Torben Giehler.

to decipher what goes where. This painting is about spatiality, including relations of surrounding, proximity, separation, continuity, boundary and order. These complex geometric shapes involve combinations of forms in which the viewer attempts to sequence the productions steps, and thus their thinking about these complex geometric shapes becomes somewhat more broadly mathematical in a qualitative sense. This process of the viewer deciphering the painting's logic, and the painting responding with new problems at every glance, creates a pleasurable event where the viewer is 'trapped' by the painting's forces. This social exchange between the painting and the viewer becomes a thinking environment with its more mathematical impetus having the potential to initiate curiosity or knowledge of linking things. One can make one's own associations; it makes me think of

why painting can conjure up the essence of a digital world so much more effectively than the digital world itself can. It makes visible the presence of the complex inner workings behind or underneath things, like the code that we never see behind the slick web site.

Islamic ornamentation in the form of tiling patterns is also a wonderful example of artwork, which displays an inherent animation. Many scholars, like Markus Bruderlin, consider ornamentation as being a precursor to 20th century abstraction.[13] Reformers of decorative arts such as Ruskin, Owen Jones and Henry van de Velde looked to reinstate ornament as an abstract expressive force within an "all-encompassing aestheticism" (Bruderlin 20). Art historian Heinrich Lutzeler looked to Islam as his source, where he found ornament to be an expression of God's omnipotence.[14] Oleg Grabar[15] in his 1989 Mellon Lectures noted that in the ninth century and those immediately following, the Muslim world created forms that are not mimetic representations, yet contemporary scholars usually define them in mimetic terms (Grabar 20). The circle may well be granted a theoretical cosmic and metaphysical potential, but this does not mean that every circle represents the "universe or the totality of life" (129). Geometry acts as an intermediary for Muslims, the muqarnas of a Mamluk gate (*Fig. 3*) is the threshold between two worlds; geometry is a passage or a magnet to something else (151). Geometric designs are ends in themselves, which, endowed or not with identifiable connotative meanings, become their own objects of contemplation. Thinking of it as intermediary, Grabar sees geometry as leaving the viewer with a freedom of choice — it enables the viewer to look and to decide what to think (151).

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[13] Markus Bruderlin is chief curator of the Foundation Beyeler, Riehen/Basel.

[14] Heinrich Lutzeler was a philosopher, art historian, literary scholar, head of several institutions and dean of the University of Bonn until his death in 1988.

[15] Oleg Grabar, Professor Emeritus at the Institute for Advanced Study in the School of Historical Studies in Princeton N.J. He has had a far-reaching and profound influence on the study of Islamic art and architecture.

Figure 3. Mashhad al-Husayn, portal with muqarnas, from Google Images.

Many scholars have drawn attention to this autonomous signification of ornamentation. For instance, Jorg Traeger investigated the 19th century Romantic painter Phillip Otto Runge (who reintroduced ornament into fine art) and his attempts to match artistic means to visual content.[16] Traeger's study recounts how Runge's intensive consideration of his own artistic activity made the act of creating an image the actual subject of the work (Bruderlin 22). When ornamental forms describe an object, it can be said that the object is representing itself in ornament. As a function inherited from ornament, this kind of critical self-reflection was crucial to 20th century abstraction and was used to justify an art as being wholly autonomous (22). The making of marks on a flat surface and the abandonment of all representation was Abstract Expressionism's self-reflexive transformation of painting to the event of 'just painting.'

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[16] Jörg Traeger teaches art history at Universität Regensburg.

Ornamental patterns can be very complex and ambiguous, and often it is difficult to grasp their geometrical basis only through visual inspection. According to Gell, we mentally resign ourselves to not quite understanding these complexities and, as a result, a relationship is generated over time between persons and things, because what is presented to the mind is "cognitively speaking, always unfinished business" (Gell, 80). This is the essence of exchange as a binding social force for Gell. If the exchange relation is to last, then it should not result in "perfect reciprocation, but always in some renewed, residual, imbalance" (80). Gell makes an analogy of anyone who owns an intricate oriental carpet, claiming that they never entirely come to grips with its pattern, even after many years of ownership. Thus ornamental patterns have the quality of slowing perception down so that the object is never fully possessed, but always in the process of becoming, or an "unfinished transaction" (80).

In most non-modernist civilizations ornamental patterns are valued for a specific role in the mediation of social life. For Gell this is the creation of an attachment between persons and things. These complex relationships give the abstract or ornamental work a certain type of agency. This is the reciprocal of the agency of the recipient in attempting to perceive the ornamental pattern, the pattern's agency is then subjectively experienced as a passion or a "pleasurable frustration" (83). Gell gives many examples of non-modernist civilizations that use apotropaic patterns as protective devices or obstacles for demons. The patterns not only attract the demons, just as they attract people to things, but then act as demon-traps or "demonic fly-paper" in which the demons become stuck and are consequently rendered harmless (84).

In this way, abstraction can be considered as a separate domain of causality unto itself where parts of it causally interact with other parts. But Gell qualifies this by saying that abstract patterns show cause and effect relations between motifs rather than agent to patient

(target of the action initiated by the agent) relations between motifs. The motifs are not sentient in themselves. The motifs only have a secondary agency; they manifest the effect of agency without possessing it intrinsically (Gell, 44). In other words they only interact causally with each other, not intentionally. Gell, however, argues that we do see intentional activity in this case, it is only that the intentional activity is displaced onto the "imaginary creator of the pattern, rather than onto the physical constituents of the pattern" (44). These complex causal relations speak to the complex intentional agency not in the artwork itself, but "off-stage" in the mind of the artist. The parts of the index exert causal influence over each other and make the agency of the index as a whole apparent, and it is through the disposition of the parts of the index that the "artist's agency is primarily made apparent" (76). Gell thus connects the viewer, art object and artist in a complex interrelationship.

The notion of captivation further elaborates the displacement of intentional activity onto the image. For Gell, an artwork's power partly rests on the fact that its origination is somehow inexplicable, seen by many as a magical or supernatural occurrence. He explains that most adults (in the West) have at some point in time attempted to make art in their lives. Thus part of the reception of an artwork occurs under the assumption that the recipient could approach the task of making technically that same work of art themselves (69). Gell relates a story of his looking at a Vermeer painting, where he could, up to a point, identify with Vermeer's artistic procedure. But once the "point of incommensurability" was reached, Gell could no longer identify Vermeer's agency with his own and he was left suspended between two worlds. It became a kind of logical bind where Gell had to accept Vermeer's painting as part of his world but at the same time knowing that it defeated explanation (69). Captivation occurs through a "spectacle of unimaginable virtuosity" when a spectator is trapped within the artwork since the artwork embodies an agency which is

essentially indecipherable (71). A blockage in cognition occurs when the spectator cannot follow the complexity of the artistic decision-making process. I would add here that there is also another form of viewer entrapment that can come from conceptual virtuosity. In the case of an artwork that is technically simple, captivation may still occur in the form of an inexplicable origination, since as a viewer of the work, I do not know the mental process by which the artist is able to create such an engaging but simple work. Here I am thinking about some of Blinky Palermo's stripe wall paintings. Palermo redefined painting from its rectangular planar surface to become a three dimensional experience to be stepped into (even with the paint remaining flat on the wall). Many of his wall paintings were just stripes of colour in the middle of the walls of a room, or a mere band of colour following the meeting of the wall and the ceiling like a crown molding, but they managed to completely change a room from being a "room" into being an experience of a painting. Technically they were not very difficult to make, but conceptually they are fascinating. In this way, captivation is brought on not only through technical virtuosity, but also through conceptual virtuosity.

Art objects have an agency of their own not only in the social exchange between viewer and art object, but also between artist and art object. Gell writes of the process of origination of the art object through the bodily activities of an artist. Painting and drawing are artistic skills that are known as 'ballistic' activities. They are muscular performances that Gell describes as taking place at a rate such that the "cognitive processing of the outcome of the action" only takes place after the action is complete, not while it is in process (45). The process is one that takes on a trial and error sequence of events. While it is feasible that some artists are able to muscularly create a mark that is exactly how they envision it in their minds, a great deal of us are not so fortunate (or unfortunate). It is not uncommon that the final product is often different from what was initially visualized. The artist is an agent at one

moment creating an artwork and a patient the next while looking in amazement at what

he/she has made. From an anthropological perspective, Gell considers artworks as agents in

this self-generational process that is similar to how they operate as agents for viewers of art

objects (46).

II

Celtic knotwork patterns such as those found in *Fig. 4* can be looked at as examples of self-generated artworks. Knotworks have this peculiarity of being demon-traps like the animated patterns discussed earlier, while from a 'generate and test perspective' they have the dimension of typically only being able to be produced by trial and error. Knot patterns have been a source of fascination in many non-Western cultures such as in the malanggan carving of New Ireland (Küchler, 67). They have also been used in Western art, especially in sculpture works by Constantin Brancusi, Brent Collins, and more recently, Andy Goldsworthy.

Figure 4. Celtic knotwork. From Grammar of Ornament by Owen Jones.

Knot-theory has become an important part of the mathematical branch of topology, where it models the behavior of systems that have a capacity for self-organization, "for generativity and autonomy of systems … whose behavior cannot be explained by simple and identifiable laws" (59). In biology and genetics, topology is known as 'nonlinearity' and has been developing as computing power has allowed for the modeling capability of cellular systems which do not conform to any set of laws and are perpetually self-organizing. N-dimensional modeling and the creating of viral life forms has been made possible by what is known as 'manifolds' in the computing world. It is the identification of the "generative element" that is inherent to a structure and becomes increasing spontaneous and self-governing as it transforms (62). This technology is what allows for the creation of computer-generated viral forms used in computer animation imagery (62).

The knot epitomizes what has been called "knowledge technology," something that is responsible for externalizing non-spatial, logical problems in a very distinct spatial manner (71). This kind of associative or inferential thought provoked by the knot may condition spatial cognition because of the "textured and deformative properties of the knot" (71). Susanne Küchler,[17] the author of "Why Knot? A Theory of Art and Mathematics," believes that the knot has intrinsic spatial and transformative properties that exist in a self-evident and non-ego-centred manner (71). She claims that the spatial problem of the knot is not something that can be conceived experientially at all, other than by simply doing and looking. The knot is not the result of the projection of pre-existing ideas from cultural-social experience. Acting like a mathematical formula, the knot synthetically brings together experiences from other domains and is an artifact that is capable of creating something new

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[17] Dr. Susanne Küchler is a Material Culture Masters Tutor in the Department of Anthropology, University College London.

(68). Küchler refers to the knot as something that is the knowledge of linking things,

material and the mental, that normally exist apart.

Figure 5. Bernard Frize, Un, 2005, acrylic and resin on canvas, 130 x 130 centimeters, Courtesy Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin.

Bernard Frize's paintings have a quality analogous to knotwork patterns. In Frize's

paintings there is an overwhelming urge for the viewer to trace the production of his braided

lines of colour. Perhaps this is because initially there is an impression of simplicity before the

realization sets in as to how complicated the paintings are. The first time I saw one of Frize's

paintings and became aware of their complexity I could not help but to immediately start

mentally reconstructing the painting process. I followed the different colour braids and

interlacing grids to try to figure out the order of the layers and even how the colour braids

were made. I was thoroughly entrapped by them and had reached my "point of

incommensurability" in not being able to quite understand the process. It was only later

when I read about his work that I came to understand that the colour braids, as in *Fig. 5,* are

the result of dragging three or four separate brushes, which were strapped together and loaded with different colours. The complex lattice-knot patterns, with their over and under layers of braids, are also the result of a highly choreographed effort of at least four hands working simultaneously together. This collective activity of Frize and his assistants involves a coordinated multi-layered social exchange in the creation of a painting. The viewer's act of tracing the production in Frize's work becomes a departure point for connecting to other ideas about the social forces that go into his paintings, such as what it means for the production to be so simple and yet the result so sophisticated in its simplicity. For example, writers Kate Siegel and Paul Mattick[18] equate Frize's relatively simple form of production with a Marxist utopian future of being free from labour and having the "right to be lazy" (Siegel and Mattick 72).

The knowledge of linking things, for Küchler, also extends into what she claims mathematics has long recognized about the knot — that it both embodies mathematical principles and can simultaneously evoke affect. The knot is a type of object that touches people in a personal way that forms a springboard for associations that are both abstract and concrete. Küchler likens this aspect of the knot to Proust's famous madeleines, having the ability to remember by chance something "previously experienced and connect it into strings of associations without which the thought itself would not be possible" (63). To test this notion, while working at MIT, Carol Strohecker[19] created something called the 'Knot Lab' in an inner city elementary school where children were encouraged to have dialogues about

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[18] Kate Siegel is Associate Professor of Art History at Hunter College and Paul Mattick is Professor of Philosophy at Adelphi University.

[19] Carol Strohecker directs the Everyday Learning group at Media Lab Europe. She is concerned with how people think and learn, and how their constructive interactions with objects, artifacts and technologies can facilitate these processes. She earned the PhD of Media Arts and Sciences from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1991 and the Master of Science in Visual Studies from MIT in 1986.

ways to think about knots. Just as in Küchler's claim that the problem of knots is often solved by seeing and doing, and with Gell's description of the muscular performance of artistic skills, many of the children used their bodies in expressing their conceptions of knots and knot-tying, often relying on their arms or legs to represent ends of string moving into the form of a knot. The tactile and pliable qualities of the string contributed to the "body syntonicity" that helped many children develop understandings of the configurations (Strohecker 64). Discussing the structure of the knot, how it is made, and how its components interrelate encouraged a self-critical discourse on the production of knots and a way to explain these considerations to someone else. Her research showed how the children engaged in dialogues between themselves as they developed their critical thinking about interpreting knots, and how it eventually led to discussions of other issues in life (67). These discussions dealt explicitly with the "topological relationships of neighborhood, continuity, and boundaries" (66). According to Strohecker, the environment of producing, communicating, and self-reflecting, stimulated conversations that promoted an awareness of one's own processes of thinking and doing. This, fundamentally, is a practical example of what I refer to as discursiveness through a material practice.

Another way to further investigate the experience of making or doing, is to look at the difference between what we see in our minds and what we see by making things or diagrammatically illustrating problems. This is something Canadian Zenon Pylyshyn, the Board of Governors Professor of Cognitive Science and the founding Director of the Center for Cognitive Science at Rutgers University, has done extensive research in. He writes that there is a great deal of evidence that the imagined pictures in our minds are very different from the visual perceptions of physical drawings (Pylyshyn 459). Pylyshyn claims that when we imagine carrying out certain operations on mental images (such as drawing a line on

them), what we 'see' happening is just what we believe would happen if we were looking at a scene and carrying out that operation (459). Consequently, we cannot rely on discovering something new by observing what actually happens in our mental image as we might in an actual drawing. He sites experiments where subjects memorize simple maps, and although the subjects are able to identify the features of the map from memory, they inevitably fail to encode the indefinite number of relationships between those features. For instance, the subjects are not able to notice which features are on the same latitude, or that three of the features form a triangle. Yet when the subjects are asked to draw the memorized maps, the missing relationships become self-evident (458). The advantage of physically drawing a diagram from what you know enables one to see the relationships that were entailed by what was recalled, even though the noticed or encoded relationships are sparse. Pylyshyn argues that because mental images do not have the benefit of being a rigid surface, as with drawing on a piece of paper, they do not automatically retain an enduring shape. Thus there is no credible evidence for visually noticing new patterns or relationships in mental images.

The difference between mental images and physical images brings to the forefront the difference between seeing and visualizing.[20] Pylyshyn and others (Fodor 2001) claim that what they call the "language of thought," is not merely linguistic or imagistic, but a complex of compositional components. There is a great deal going on behind the scenes. Some thoughts can contain unconceptualized contents, which means there is finer grain of thought than that of one's potential linguistic vocabulary (Pylyshyn, 432). Pylyshyn writes of the inherent difference in grain between thoughts and experiences, and essentially claims we can have visual experiences at a finer grain than the grain of our thoughts (432). The argument is that there are many more concepts than there are words, and that language only

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[20] Visualizing here meaning mental imagery.

approximates the compositionality and systematicity of thought (432). This highlights the difference between thinking about or visualizing a painting and then physically and experientially making a painting.

Pylyshyn's work on vision has led him to conclude that there is such a thing as a visual system, apart from the entire system of reasoning and cognizing in humans. What he calls early vision is a module encapsulated from the rest of cognition, operating with a set of autonomous principles. In other words, there is a distinction between seeing and cognition (47). Pylyshyn points to a great deal of evidence where the early vision system is cognitively impenetrable. One of the simplest examples is illustrated in *Fig 6*. We all know that the two lines are equal, but despite this knowledge one line still appears longer than the other. Thus proving that cognition does not override what we see in this case. Otherwise the two lines would 'look' equal.

Figure 6. Equal lines.

Early vision is also more than just a module that sends raw visual qualia to other parts of the brain for interpretation. Because early vision is encapsulated, it works according to different principles from those of rational reasoning (414). It provides interpretations of visual patterns according to rules, where for instance certain line drawings are automatically interpreted as three-dimensional objects, certain patterns are ambiguous and result in involuntary reversals or changes in perspective, and certain images lead to the perception of motion (414). Another important property of early vision is that it appears to keep track of

where information is located in the 'world' through a mechanism Pylyshyn calls visual

indexes (445). Early vision typically goes beyond the information provided by a perception

by generalizing the individual properties of the perception.

What Pylyshyn identifies is that there is a considerable amount of visual processing that

takes place separate from cognition. This is different from seeing, which occurs in the stage

of visual perception that is shared with cognition. Seeing also encompasses reasoning,

recalling and recognizing (468). This is the part of the visual process where our belief-

systems kick in, and it is unlike early vision where three-dimensional surfaces are computed.

So why am I emphasizing this separation? It suggests that perhaps there is a momentary

possibility that what we 'see' is actually what we 'see,' before our cultural veil or what Jacques

Lacan calls the 'stain' clouds our vision. Artists such as Bridget Riley can be regarded as

having used this aspect of playing with our capacity of early-vision to recognize patterns and

at some level process them before cognition takes over. As part of the Op Art movement,

Riley's work from the mid-1960s magnifies that importance of the body, of both the artist

and the spectator as corporeal entities rather than just perceiving intellects. Riley's paintings

from this period offer various dizzying patterns, such as in *Suspension* (*Fig. 7*) from the

MoMA exhibition "The Responsive Eye" in 1965 that established Riley's reputation. Her

black and white hard edge paintings from 1961 – 1965 are of particular interest to me since

they rarely allow the eye to settle. The images always appear to be sliding between points of

focus creating a highly animated surface. Many commentators agreed that looking at her

paintings gave rise, almost involuntarily, to physical sensations in the body other than purely

visual ones (Follin 66). The work suggests elements of proprioception being invoked, the

disorienting and dizzying sensations destabilizes the viewers' muscular balance as they

gradually become aware of their bodies in the viewing process. Vision activates corporeal

movement in the body. It emphasizes a direct, physical experiencing of the world as opposed to portraying a window to the world. Riley, in a sense, lends her body to the painting in its creation and the gallery goers lend their bodies to the painting in order to participate in it.

Figure 7. Bridget Riley, Suspension, 1965, emulsion on wood, 45-3/4 x 45-7/8 x 2-1/4, Courtesy Walker Art Center Collection, Minneapolis, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Julius E. Davis, 1981.

Writers such as Frances Follin often discuss Riley's work in the context of phenomenology.[21] French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty's notion of the body as being the centre of the most profound experiences and where consciousness is not separated from

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[21] Frances Follin is the author of <u>Embodied Visions: Bridget Riley, Op Art and the Sixties</u>, 2004, and chair of the independent Scholars' Group of the Association of Art Historians. She holds BSc, BA and PhD degrees from the University of London.

the body, but part of it (80). Another earlier phenomenologist, Edmond Husserl attempted to introduce a stage of consciousness that preceded the intentional (Iampolski 306). Husserl believed that there was a possibility that there is a stage, which he called 'primary content,' at which consciousness is not yet directed at an object. These primary sensations were called *hyle* (matter) and they are what Husserl believed were the material from which consciousness was formed (306). Merleau-Ponty used *hyle* as the basis for his later work where he describes the immediate as a special topological space in the realm of the "immediate of wild perception," or perception prior to the encounter with culture (307). Merleau-Ponty describes this space as being only a two-dimensional world of colour and tactile sensation, oddly no depth or three-dimensional space. This form of directly experiencing the world, in a physical way, was explored by Merleau-Ponty's work on art as a bodily experience. Merleau-Ponty relates this topology to abstract painting in his essay <u>Eye and Mind</u> where he claims that the spectator viewing an abstract painting can no longer escape into it from where he/she stands (as with a representational painting). The abstract painting returns him/her to a space "in all its brute literalness" of the same spatial order as our bodies (307). These notions formed a great deal of the discourse around both Op Art and Minimalism, the importance of the body and the perception of art as essentially a bodily phenomenon.

The problem with phenomenology, as French philosopher Gilles Deleuze points out, is that it merely invokes the body through description, it still wants conditions of judgment. In <u>The Phenomenology of Perception</u>, Merleau-Ponty defines phenomenology as "a study of the appearance of being to consciousness" (Merleau-Ponty 61). Though he appeals to the senses and the direct experiencing of the world, he does so only to ground knowledge since he believes that he can never overcome his own subjectivity. This is unlike Deleuze's notion of the 'logic of sensation,' a logic that is neither cerebral nor rational. Affects and percepts

are the two basic forms of the Deleuzian notion of sensation. Deleuzian scholar John

Rajchman best describes affects as being similar to what Freud called "unconscious

emotions," akin to feelings of guilt, which are affects that go beyond their subjects and pass

right through them (Rajchman, <u>Connections</u> 134). Rosalind Krauss, in her description of

Marcel Duchamp's *Etant donnés*, relates that Sartre believed that the shame of being caught at

the keyhole puts one in the position of a self that exists on the level of all other objects of

the world, one that has become opaque to its own consciousness (Duve, <u>Unfinished</u> 435).

As an example of affect, shame creates a self that is nothing but a pure reference to the

other. Percepts, on the other hand, are not ways in which nature is presented to the eye, but

they are "like landscapes, urban as well as natural, in which one must lose oneself so as to

see with new eyes" (Rajchman, <u>Connections</u> 135).

Deleuze, in his book <u>Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation</u>, claims that sensation "is in

the body" but it is exceeded and traversed by a "power" that surpasses the lived body that

"is deeper and almost unlivable" (37). It might appear that Deleuze is differentiating between

internal sensations and external forces, but he states, "it is the same body that, being both

subject and object, gives and receives the sensation" (31). The distinction is not about

external forces and internal sensations, but about the body of sensation rendering visible the

invisible forces that play through bodies. Deleuze writes of Cézanne being able to render

"visible the folding force of the mountains, the germinative force of a seed, the thermic

force of a landscape" (49). The thermic force of the landscape is experienced as physical

intensity. This force is not a psychological projection, just as the landscape is not an

extension of the human body; there is no differentiation between subject and object, human

and nonhuman. It is true for Deleuze, as opposed to being a projection, that the thermic

force of the landscape is the landscape's force, not the viewing subject's. In a sense, the

landscape's force is analogous to Gell's conception of the art object or landscape as having an agency of its own. The relationship between these forces and sensation is what Deleuze describes to be like a "world that seizes me by closing in around me, the self that opens to the world and opens the world itself" (37). In other words, one has to lose oneself to the world of sensation and forces in order for the world to open up to new possibilities.

The notion of being lost is something writer Ronald Bogue claims that Deleuze appears to have adopted from his reading of Henri Maldiney and psychologist Erwin Strauss.[22] The space of sensation for Straus was perspectival, a "surrounding environment delineated by a shifting horizon" (Bogue 117). We do not move in space as much as space moves with us, thus sensation is neither within nor without (117). Straus contrasts the space of geography with the space of landscape to elaborate on the distinction between perception and sensation. Geographical space is perceptual, because it is the space of the map, with all its objective coordinates (117). The landscape, on the other hand, is a sensory and "perspectival world enclosed by a horizon that constantly moves with us as we move" (117). In such a landscape, Straus claims, we gain access to an unfolding self-world that knows no difference between subject and object, thus "the more we absorb it, the more we lose ourselves in it" (118). When we have the rare experience of encountering the world of sensation, without the objective perceptual coordinates, we are lost. Being lost in the landscape, one can still move, but one no longer knows where one is, or where one's "position in the panoramic whole is" (119).

An example of the difference between sense experience and perception, or between the immediate and the mediated is illustrated in the following excerpt:

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[22] Although I have run into references of Henri Maldiney and Erwin Straus on numerous occasions, they are not translated and I am relying on Ronald Bogue's overview.

> The author of the book *Hiker's Guide to the Desolation Wilderness*
> stands in the wilderness beside Gilmore Lake, looking at the Mt.
> Tallac trail as it leaves the lake and climbs the mountain. He
> desires to leave the wilderness. He believes that the best way out
> from Gilmour lake is to follow the Mt. Tallac trail up the
> mountain … But he doesn't move. He is lost. He is not sure
> whether he is standing beside Gilmore Lake, looking at Mt.
> Tallac, or beside Clyde Lake, looking at Maggie Peaks. Then he
> begins to move along the Mt. Tallac trail. If asked, he would
> have to explain the crucial change in his beliefs this way: "I came
> to believe that *this* is the Mt. Tallic trail and *that* is Gilmore Lake"
> (Pylyshyn 254).

This notion of looking at a landscape and coming to the realization that you are lost is a familiar one to me. My mother-in-law's cottage in Alberta has a small boreal forest near by. Since the forest is a bird sanctuary with certain restrictions, and because it is near a lake where Albertans prefer to spend most of their time wakeboarding behind carbon spewing powerboats, the forest is rarely visited and thus in a very dense natural state. Whenever I enter it, it is inevitable that I get lost. The experience of being lost for me is one where the trees, meadows, and bushes in the landscape become only recognizable as colours and shapes. They become unfamiliar because I cannot place them or myself in any rational whole of the map. I lose the feeling that I am in anyway in control; I am just a thing, like the things around me. In this way I am on equal footing with the environment, no longer the centre of the universe, but a thing-in-the-world like all the other things-in-the-world. This notion of being lost, is the germinative aesthetic moment, in Maldiney's opinion. It has its origin in a moment of dislocation, "an unexpected experience of vertigo as the world of commonsense temporal and spatial markers ceases to cohere" (Bogue 119). It is only after I snap out of this world of sensation, when my belief systems kick in, I remember that I can look up at the sky to navigate via the sun to find my way out of the forest. At that moment I am able to find the objective coordinates of the map of my world and my place in it, but the experience is always one that invokes a fissure in the normative ways of seeing.

At this point I think that it would be useful to step back and clarify my usage of the term sensation, as it has been used historically in many different ways. Hopefully through my discussions of Deleuze's 'logic of sensation' and Pylyshyn's 'early-vision' system, it is evident that I am referring to something that is outside the cerebral or rational. This is a view that is contrary to the influential theory that the perception of sensation is infected through the perceiver's view of the world, or in other words, we perceive in conceptual categories and all perceptual experience is the end product of a categorization process (Pylyshyn 52). Pylyshyn effectively counters this theory by showing clinical evidence for the existence of an early-vision system that is cognitively impenetrable. Encouraging the possibility, at least initially, that we see what we see. This is important to me, not because of the wish to gain some kind of access to a Lacanian Real or the unrepresentable, but that perhaps we have a greater capacity to 'understand' other physically material objects (and forces), such as paintings, in a more direct and less mediated way than previously thought. And it is this more direct engagement that I am suggesting has the possibility to lead to different forms of knowledge production and connections.

Another clarification that is in order is whether the idea of disorienting a viewer to push their thinking outside the normative is somehow similar to the notion of the sublime? In Yale English professor Thomas Weiskel's book, <u>The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence</u>, he writes that the "essential claim of the sublime is that man can, in feeling and in speech, transcend the human" (3). The awe of the sublime transports the infinite and the unknowable. This limitless abyss or void challenges the imagination of a viewer and offers an occasion for self-recognition. My intention, on the other hand, is not to inspire awe or transcendence, but to offer a more modest visual experience that encourages a direct engagement that highlights our human physicality and its

capacities rather than attempting to transcend them. The end goal of challenging the

imagination of the viewer may be the same, but the means and processes are quite different.

III

The feeling of being lost puts viewers momentarily on equal footing in the exchange with the source of the disorientation — the art object or painting in my case. The social relationship I attempt to create for the viewer with my paintings begins with a moment of disorientation, the same as the feeling of being lost. The painting seems to have a life of its own by presenting the viewer with a reciprocal exchange in the form of visibly different appearances at every glance. The viewer sees the animation that takes place between the different parts of the patterns. Then when the viewer's belief systems kick in, he/she can freely associate with the painting to spur other possibilities and connections. Likewise, when I am in the process of making the paintings, since there is a gestural procedure involved, I am never quite sure what the result will be. The hand moves but it is not entirely guided by rational linguistic-centered thought. This process is a constant form of experimentation that has a self-generative aspect where again the painting appears to have its own agency. I engage in a dialogue with it in the form of a trial and error process that involves both rational linguistic aspects and the more muscular or "ballistic" forms of non-linguistic communication. In every step of this process there is a form of discursiveness that occurs — between artist, material, painting, viewer and environment, that always in one way or another includes either linguistic or non-linguistic elements. Discussion with others is always present, whether that other is the painting, a real person, or a proxy of a person through some idea that is generated in the process.

Figure 8. Vytas Narusevicius, Always/Already #3, 2007, oil on canvas, 40 x 35.5".

From a formal perspective, what is immediately noticeable about my paintings is their grid or tabular like structure, as in *Always/Already #3 (Fig. 8)*. While being somewhat geometric, the lines are not perfect and the 'cells' in the grid or table are all gestural. A combination of rationality in the form of a grid and the involuntary nature of gesture, gives the simultaneous impression of order and chaos. It is as if a city information table is mixed with a land or seascape.

The overall effect of the paintings that I hope to achieve is a disorienting optical effect similar to what one experiences while looking at one of Bridget Riley's paintings, but in a subtler way since the gestural aspects are not as jarring as her hard edge lines. There are several intentional links to our vision systems that I would like to relate here. One possible explanation for the disorienting effects of patterns is a process that Pylyshyn calls the 'individuation' of visual objects is a 'primitive operation' in our early-vision system distinct from discrimination and recognition (Pylyshyn, 173). In *Always/Already #3 (Fig. 8)* there are

numerous vertical strips, twenty to be exact. The fact that there are so many of them results in the eye being unable to visually resolve them in an individual manner. Instead the viewer sees the entire painting as one object instead of twenty separate objects. The eye has a great deal of difficulty in focusing attention on an object within a group when it is composed of many objects. The magic number seems to be four. More than that number of objects and our vision wants to treat them as a single group instead of individuating them (174). Thus the inability to individuate the strips in the painting results in a disorienting feeling when trying to read them all at once. *Always/Already #3* (*Fig. 8*) also has a rectangular inlay of the same pattern but is slightly offset from the rest of the grid; most people have to look at it twice before noticing it.

Derek Hodgson has written about understanding abstract art from the point of view of neuroscience.[23] Hodgson poses a theory that the visual systems of animals, both predator and prey, have been shaped by the ability to rapidly identify potential animals in "ambiguous situations by separating figure from ground by searching for tell-tale signs of an animal's true contour" (Hodgson, 56). Likewise the human brain has been 'designed' by evolution to have this early warning system ability to discern forms in confusing and complex textural arrangements. Pylyshyn similarly discusses the ability of early-vision to detect objects based on certain rules (Pylyshyn 107). The emotional aspect of this ability comes into play as a form of anxiety and excitement when one is unable to identify indeterminate figures that could potentially constitute a danger. Hodgson writes of monkeys that initially respond fearfully to the sight of a camouflaged snake, but once they have spotted the danger and can view it from a safe distance, it becomes an ongoing fascination for them (Hodgson, 57). In a similar vein, argues Hodgson, when gallery goers are confronted with abstract patterns, they

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[23] Derek Hodgson is an independent scholar.

'naturally' look for a "threatening form [which] may have lurked as an embedded figure" (57). But gallery goers know that there is no actual threat from the painting. There exists only an excitement mixed with what Hodgson calls a "sense of consternation mixed with pleasure in the knowledge of being one step removed" (57). This description is remarkably close to Gell's argument that viewers of ornamental 'demon-traps' feel a pleasurable frustration.

The actual forms of the patterns in the *Always/Already* series take on a grid or tabular-like appearance. The forms, and the colours, have evolved over the past year from my various experimentations with geometric figures, and in this last iteration they were inspired by a combination of Islamic blue and white tiling from the 15th century, and by the grids of Agnes Martin. Grids give a sense of mapping, but they do not map anything real like a city. The grid only maps the material surface of the canvas itself. Rosalind Krauss points out that abstract painters such as Mondrian and Malevich did not discuss grids as a form of matter but of the mind or spirit and as a "staircase to the universal" (Krauss, Grids 2). Mondrian drew on the grid's principles of order to assign it a symbolic significance as a means of giving visible form to the cosmos, infinity and universal relations. (Bruderlin 19). Similarly in Islam, ornamental geometry was an expression of God's omnipotence. The banning of images was not what some critics termed a so-called primitive attitude that prevented the Muslim artist from representing objects as the were; instead it showed only the most extreme fidelity and responsibility towards their craft, together with their sense of impotence towards the "Almighty Creator whose works it would be childish frivolity and presumption to attempt to imitate" (32). It was liberation from the ephemerality of earthly bonds. From this perspective, ornament has a long history of being given philosophical significance as a means of providing visible form to the cosmos and infinity. This conviction of geometry as having

a theological perspective dates back at least to Platonic philosophy's belief that the world

was created on geometric lines in accordance with numerical logic (Bruderlin 57). The means

of achieving this purity was through geometric order and access to an essential universal

truth where, by definition, impurity would be mapped out. My problem with these notions

of geometry as metaphorically representing purity, spirituality and the divine (besides the

essentializing quest for the Platonic ideal) is oddly enough, the overall affect of order. Order

can be seen to be about organizing and compelling behavior and in some ways even

reinforcing political power. My interest in abstraction, on the other hand, is not about a

union with some absolute, but with a dialogue through ideas and a kind of enlightenment

that comes with an unending cycle of artistic experimentation. Using Gell's language,

abstraction is a way to have an ongoing social exchange with materials, ideas and other

people through constant experimentation.

To reconcile the fact that geometry is very good at inventing a type of image that is

mental because it has immateriality as its telos, with the fact that I am interested more in

disorientation than in order, I have used what can be called slippage in the *Always/Already*

series. By combining geometric grid-like forms with gesture, the paintings have a sense of

pattern, but because of their gestural nature they do not conform to the geometry in a

precise mathematical manner. The patterns have an optical effect but the gesture produces

more subtle variations. The paint leaks between the lines and yet the patterns are still

distinguishable. This combines the rationality of geometry with an imprecise gesture to

produce a 'logic of sensation.'

The initial paintings of the *Always/Already* series were made on 35.5 x 40 inch canvases

as an experiment to assess the forms and colours. I next produced larger paintings (80 x 72

inches and 66 x 60 inches) in order to provide a greater potential to promote a direct

physical experience. From a distance, the large painting's geometric patterns are meant to attract the viewer and draw them in closer to unravel the animation of the patterns. Once closer to the painting, the viewer's field of vision is filled to create the sense of being temporarily lost. Since the *Always/Already* series are conventional paintings on canvas,

Figure 9. Always/Already #1, Detail.

as opposed to some kind of environmental experience, viewers are well aware that the initial disorientation or lost feeling is not from any potential threat from the paintings. A conventional painting is not an exact recreation of an environment, but a material object just as humans are material objects. The viewer and the painting facing each other establishes an intersubjective experience between their bodies, as opposed to a wall painting or some kind of environmental installation that may be more effective at creating a disorienting experience, but where the viewer is inside the environment instead of in a face to face dialogue with it. The fact that my paintings are on a wall, separated by white wall space, establishes them as individual objects. The size of the paintings and the materiality of the

paint create a human-like body-to-body experience. As the viewer approaches the paintings

it also becomes apparent that the paint is applied in a very thick manner. The thick paint

enhances the perception of materiality and helps declare the painting as a physical object, as

opposed to an illusion or window. The paint takes on a topographic appearance as evident in

Fig. 9, especially when seen from an oblique angle, giving viewers a new experience when

looking at the painting from a distance, close-up, from an angle, or when moving past it.

The marks making up the columns in the *Always/Already* series are gestural and are not

significant or signifying. They are asignifying marks. The marks can be looked at as technical,

irrelevant and meaningless in themselves. As 'sub-semiotic' marks they gain independence

from what we know, and in so doing create a new visual world. Their irrelevance helps free

the painting from any dominant codes of meaning. But it is not about passively absorbing

visual information without critical judgment or distance. I like to think that in this non-

illustrative and non-narrative world our rigid social selves can be shed, and we can begin

anew in an unexpected way. As Deleuze said, "The Abstract does not explain, but must itself

be explained" (Rajchman, 1998, 63).

The potential to activate connections, regardless for how many, is what is so compelling

about abstract painting. Clearly there are common characteristics to all painting that can

cause connections such as the physical stillness of the encounter that acts like a sensory

anchor for thinking and a prolonged period of exploration. This experience automatically

runs counter the hasty, narrow and fuzzy forms of everyday thought. But as Strohecker's

work illustrates, geometric abstraction has the ability to activate a thinking environment with

a more mathematical impetus that has the potential to initiate curiosity and the knowledge of

linking things.

My abstract painting practice has taken numerous turns, fits and starts over the last several years in what seems to have been an unending process of experimentation. It has been this process of experimentation that has resulted in my better understanding of not only abstraction and its materials but of my entire practice. The experimentation has not been one of about being isolated in the studio, but one where there has been a constant social exchange in the various iterative cycles. A progressive dialogue between myself, other artists, viewers, the world at large and the paintings themselves, has occurred over and over again. As with Proust's madeleines, the connections were made in a non-linear and complicated way. Abstract paintings are engaged in a dialogue with us, while it may be in their peculiar dissociated language, they do succeed in speaking with us.
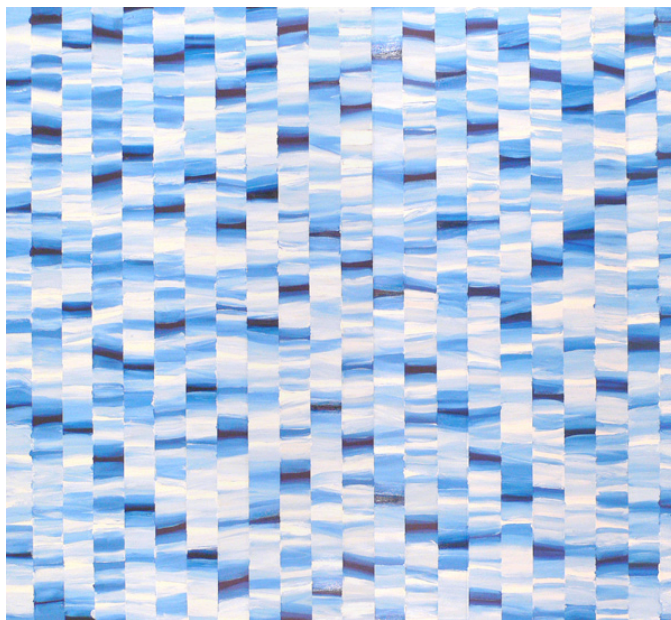
Figure 10. Vytas Narusevicius, Always/Already #7, 2007, oil on canvas, 60 x 66".
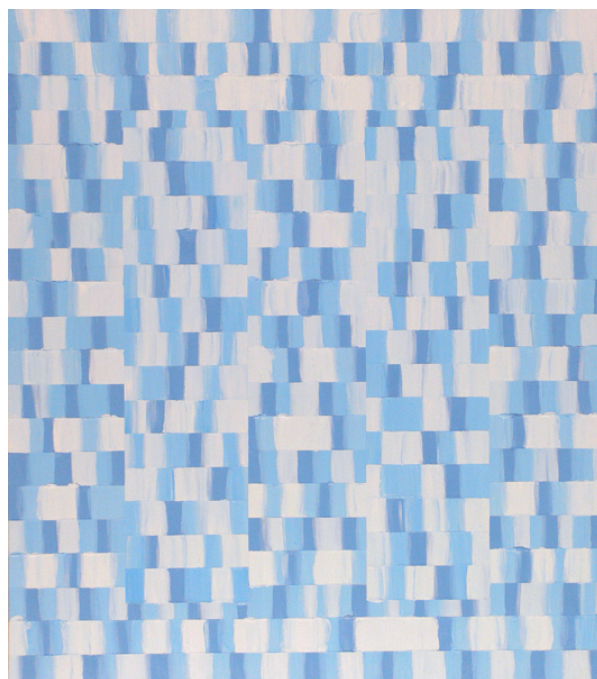

Figure 11. Vytas Narusevicius, Always/Already #4, 2008, oil on canvas, 40 x 35-1/2".
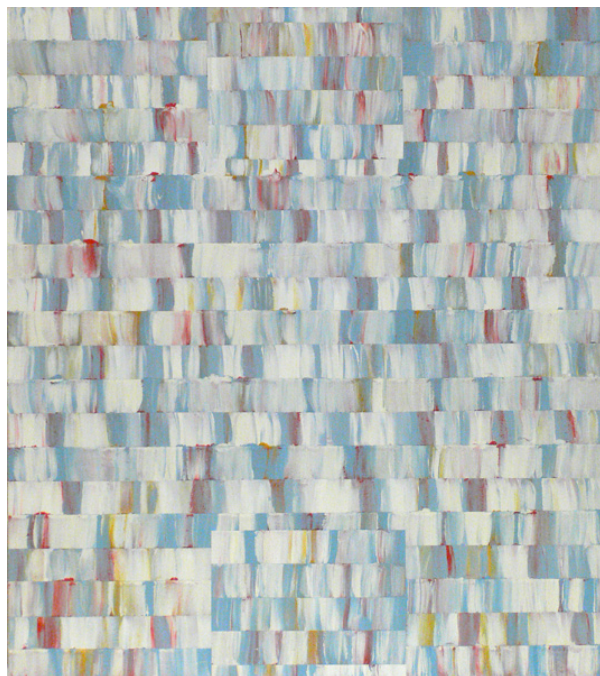
Figure 12. Vytas Narusevicius, Always/Already #5, 2008, oil on canvas, 40 x 35-1/2".
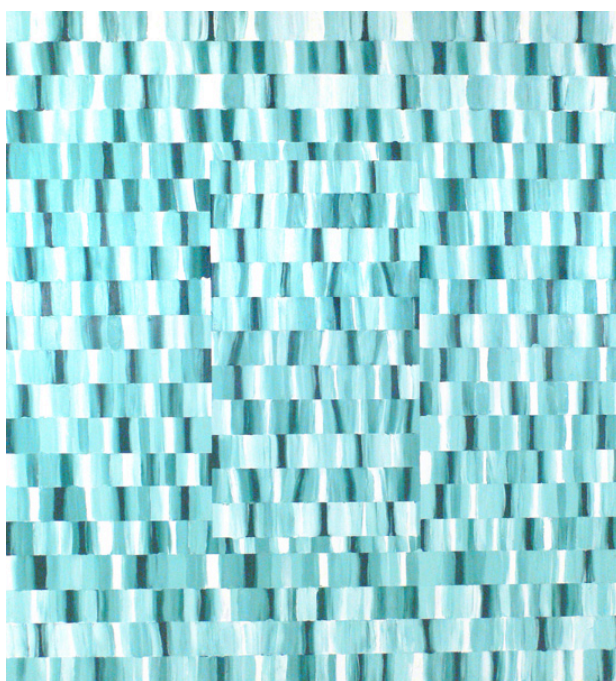

Figure 13. Vytas Narusevicius, Always/Already #6, 2008, oil on canvas, 80 x 72".

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