Abstract

How to Look: Ad Reinhardt's Black Paintings

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This article is a development from a presentation given at the ‘Painting in the Age of Digital Reproduction’ symposium at Art Sonje Centre, Seoul in May 2023. The paper takes Ad Reinhardt's 'black paintings' as the centre of its discussion to explore what it means to see paintings in reproduction. Today paintings are ubiquitously encountered though light emanating handheld devices or personal computers, in contrast to the light reflecting and light absorbing surfaces of paintings encountered in real life. This paper examines some of the implications and problematics in painting's material facture when experienced in different modes.

Key words: Ad Reinhardt, Abstract Painting, Materiality, Digital Reproduction, Photography

A simple confusion occurs when we see an image of a painting; we believe we are seeing the painting and not documentation of its image. In an increasingly dematerialised experience of painting through digital reproductions, today paintings are ubiquitously encountered though light emanating handheld devices or personal computers, in contrast to the light reflecting and light absorbing surfaces of paintings when encountered in real life. Although printed forms of digital reproduction have existed since the 90s, digital images have become synonymous with images experienced online and through computerised experience rather than physical forms. In this paper I will examine painting's material facture and experiential qualities encountered in different modes, focusing on Ad Reinhardt's late 'black paintings' to discuss these ideas.

In 1839 some of the first subjects to be photographed by Louis Daguerre were fossils. Geologists had discovered that our planet was millions of years old and not thousands as once thought, referring to the new time revealed in the earth's strata, as 'deep time'; a concept first developed by Scottish geologist James Hutton in *Theory of the Earth*.[1] More recently 'deep time' entered our vocabulary when the writer John McPhee coined the term in his 1981 book *Basin and Range*. McPhee proclaims, "Numbers do not seem to work well with regard to deep time. Any number above a couple of thousand years—fifty thousand, fifty million—will with nearly equal effect awe the imagination to the point of paralysis."[2]

Continued discoveries and technological innovations produced in the 19th century a 'frenzy of the visible'[3], through the introduction of photography and film. A usefulness for these new technologies such as X-ray was clear, but film and photography applications were at first less apparent and questions were raised as to whether a photograph was document or art.[4] Uncertainties and questions notwithstanding, a consensus grew that photography could enable a faithful reproduction of *object d'art* – and photographic reproductions of paintings proliferated from the 1850s onwards.

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[1] James Hutton, *Theory of the Earth*; vol III. Edited by Sir Archibald Geikie. Geological Society, Burlington House, London,1899.
[2] John McPhee, *Basin and range*. Publisher New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1981, p.29
[3] Jean-Louis Comolli, "Machines of the Visible." *Electronic Culture: Technology and Visual Representation*, ed. Timothy Druckrey. Aperture Press, 1996 [1971]

Photography remained a specialism until Eastman Kodak's 'Brownie' popularised this medium in 1900. In the 20th and 21st centuries, we see a convergence in advances in digital filming and photography, which in combination with personal computers and hand-held devices completely revolutionise the documentation of artworks, social relationships and behaviours.

Until this digitality, photography resulted from a direct interaction between light and the physical world by way of contact with particles bound in plates, film-negatives and photographic-papers. The nature of digital photography brings a new ontology in its relationship to subject-materiality, because of the way digital filming and photography transform light into 'information'. Unlike analogue photography, digital images are not result from chemical reactions, but produced through computerisation, where light is captured by sensors and transformed into 'code' – producing images by organising this code in contrasting colours and tones, which are then translated on our screens as an image.

Our screens in turn consist of smooth glass surfaces, illuminated from within by light emitting diodes known as LEDs, producing high resolution imaging which in combination with image editing software, enable an unprecedented level of photographic reproductions on a mass scale. In addition to editing software, ready-to-use filters embedded on social media platforms can enhance image quality and – in some cases – lend nostalgic qualities such as Sepia tones which paradoxically originated from analogue photography. In combination with the intimacy of handheld devices and the speed at which images are viewed, this sheer volume of quasi-professional photographic documentation has led us to sometimes forget that we are not witnessing the *thing-in-itself* (first introduced by Immanuel Kant)[5], but rather, dematerialised artworks as information reconstructed as a code on our screens.

In response to this dematerialisation, new theories on materiality are being considered today which build on existing arguments surrounding concepts of the *thing-in-itself,* such as the French anthropologist Bruno Latour's 'Actor-Network-Theory'

[5] Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*. Translated by James W. Ellington. 2nd ed. Cambridge, MA: Hackett Publishing. 2001.

(ANT).[6] This theory was developed by Latour, Michel Callon, Madeleine Akrich, and John Law, at the *Centre de Sociologie de l'Innovation* (CSI) in Paris in the early 1980s, as a set of tools and methods used to describe the relationships between actors, whether human or animal, or objects and signs, that generate networks of relationships. Supporters of ANT prefer the term 'actants', as actors implies human actors, this is echoed by Latour where he states that "actant-rhyzome ontology" would be a more appropriate term.[7] This theory is not without its critics as it widely used in different contexts and its speculative nature borders on the metaphysical. In this paper however it is employed not as a didactic or prescriptive methodological device, but as a prompt to reframe the otherwise perceived passive nature of painting, such as Ad Reinhardt's black paintings, which at first encounter offer in the viewer the response that, there is nothing there – or nothing to see.

Latour's ANT proposes an equality of participation in any given network between humans and non-human objects. Although ANT is more closely associated with science and technology, rather than the visual arts, in this paper it is employed in relation to Reinhardt's black paintings. The experience of viewing Reinhardt's black paintings embody entangled relations that are simultaneously material (between things) and semiotic (between concepts), posing that this experiencing of viewing results from material–semiotic networks which come together in unison through the 'actants' involved.

In 1960 the American artist Ad Reinhardt embarked upon on series of paintings known as his 'black paintings'; a seminal series of black monochromes now synonymous with his work, which Reinhardt continued until his death in 1967. The gestation of these paintings begins in 1956, and the schema for reductive compositions earlier still, with his 'red monochromes' of 1952. Reinhardt's practice emerges from a polysemic position of 1930s left-wing debates, alongside ideas found in early 20th century modernist thought. Prior to developing his black paintings, between 1946 and 1961, Reinhardt produced a series of satirical, quasi-pedagogical cartoons, informed by the art-history studies first began with Meyer Schapiro at Columbia University. Published as 'How to Look', they

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[6] Latour, Bruno, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford New York: Oxford University Press, 2005

[7] Ibid.

explored notions of art's place in society, most famously in a 1947 ink drawing where a figure representing 'the public' points at a painting and exclaims, "HA HA WHAT DOES THIS REPRESENT?" – only to be challenged in return as the painting replies – "WHAT DO YOU REPRESENT?".[8]

Reinhardt also travelled extensively, building a collection of over 12,000 photographic slides documenting amongst other things the symmetry of architecture in Europe, Asia and the Middle East, India, Japan, Iran, Iraq, Egypt, Turkey, Syria, Jordan, and the Yucatan in South America. Towards the end of his life, he was considering film, and in addition was heavily influenced by Eastern mysticism and Buddhist's philosophy. For an artist once described as "Mr. Pure",[9], he was everything but. His belief that that a work should be conceived in its entirety beforehand, rather than discovered through the act of 'action painting', places him as a proto-conceptual artist, but nothing could be further from the truth, especially when considering the materiality of his late black paintings which posit an indispensable relationship to material discipline.

Briony Fer when discussing the work of Ad Reinhardt referred to the medium of Reinhardt's paintings as "time",[10] where the paint is merely the vehicle for a temporal thickness, and palpable experience of the thickness of time, gradually revealed in the cruciform composition of Reinhardt's black paintings the longer we engage with this work. However, this palpable thickness is not just celestial. At a more fundamental level, its materiality is also terrestrial, and the image's revelation is inextricable intertwined with a painterly materiality developed by Reinhardt – where light absorbing paint surfaces in his works eliminate light-reflectiveness – through a near-absolute matt surface. By avoiding reflections, they enable the uninterrupted gaze into the painting's strata in a way recalling the 'deep time' identified by the Geologists of the 18th century, discussed at the start of this paper, who first observed strata in rock sediment and layers. Today painting conservators can view the sedimentary layers that form a painting with the aid of microscopes. Through a specific connection to materiality, Reinhardt allows us to

[8] Ad Reinhardt, "How to Look: A Sixth and a Summation of a Series on Modern Art." *Arts and Architecture*, January 1947, pp. 20-27

[9] Art critic Grace Glueck, referring to Reinhardt as 'Mr. Pure 'in, New York Times, 13 November 1966, p.18D.

[10] Briony Fer, "The Oldness of Abstraction (or Can Abstract Art Be New?)." Brooklyn Museum, June 1, 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zTltlP6y0l8 (accessed January 11, 2023)

experience not a series of sedimentary layers, but experience itself, released from the pitch blackness of these works, almost like a photographic image being revealed in the alchemical reaction of light-exposed-paper meeting chemicals. Reinhardt's black paintings render time with a thickness otherwise imperceptible.

To achieve this thickness in temporality, which Briony Fer's refers to in Reinhardt's work, Mars Black oil paint was mixed with small amounts of blue or green or red paint to arrive at chromatic blacks diluted with generous amounts of turpentine and left to rest in jars for weeks. This process allowed the pigment to sink and separate to create a reduced-binder concentration of oil paint as the solvent evaporated, leaving Reinhardt with an exceptionally matt chromatic black.

In Ad Reinhardt's *Twelve Rules for a New Academy*, "No Texture", and "No Brushwork or Calligraphy" feature as its first and second rules.[11] It would be logical to assume that these black monochromes negate the materiality of brushwork. However, as colour, his brushwork exists in an inconspicuous way. This is evident in the documentation of work in progress in Reinhardt's New York studio, where jagged brush marks are seen when wet, only to become invisible when dry. With colour it is the opposite, as chromatic variations in the black paintings reveal areas of black-blue, black-green or black-red, as cones in our eyes gradually adjust. If we follow Latour's 'Actor Network Theory' here there is a reciprocity taking place between painting and viewer, adjusting to see the layers of 'deep time' which echo an uncanny similarity with that other maxim expressed in Reinhardt's 1947 cartoon:

> "An abstract painting will react to you if you react to it. You get from it what you bring to it. It will meet you halfway but no further. It is alive if you are. It represents something and so do you. YOU, SIR, ARE A SPACE, TOO".[12]

The End of Painting, 2010 is a project by artist Duncan Wooldridge, presenting twelve web-resolution images from major museums of an Ad Reinhardt black painting. According to Wooldridge, "Reinhardt knew and celebrated the resistance of his work to being photographed; these works present the attempts of museum collections to make

[11] Ad Reinhardt, "Twelve Rules for a New Academy." *ArtNews*. May 1957. Pp. 37-38
[12] From Reinhardt's "How to Look" in *Arts & Architecture*, January 1947.

public these works online in the early stages of widespread digitization".[13] Although not a primary intention, we might propose that Reinhardt's black paintings were made to make their documentation difficult, if not impossible, to purposely coerce the viewing experience in person. Attempts by museum collections for an online experience only affirm Latour's Theory of Actants, where to experience these works, painting and viewer need to be participants within a network, broken only once a participant leaves or interrupts the network. Here, the social dimensions of Reinhardt's black paintings extend beyond themselves, pointing to human condition networks and our connection to painting in its widest sphere.

Reinhardt's paintings are sometimes encountered with scepticism. They force a slowing-down that is counter-intuitive to an increasingly accelerated society. However, as Nicolas Mirzoeff reminds us in 'How to See the World' ". . . the brain is not a camera. It's a sketch pad".[14] Through this slowing-down, in-person experience, Reinhardt's black paintings are an invitation to penetrate painting's 'deep time' – not through the flattened experience of reproductions digital or otherwise – but through the nuances of colour revealed at the edges of perception.

It's worth noting however that today many artists celebrate the merits of digital documentation. In a recent interview, the Neo-Geo American artist Peter Halley, comments how in his opinion his paintings look better on an iPhone, offering a more authentic colour reproduction of his work than in printed form, explaining how Day-Glo paint "produced a kind of technologically-generated light, almost like an LED screen".[15] According to Halley, the iPhone has changed people's expectations of glowing color, going on to explain how his paintings look a lot better on a phone than in print. Colours employed by Halley since the early 80s do benefit from digital reproduction, especially when perceived through light emanating devices, accentuating in this way the use of Day-Glow colour described by Halley in his 1982 'Notes on The Paintings', as a form of "low budget mysticism".[16]

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[13] Duncan Wooldridge, *The End of Painting, 2010*.
https://www.duncanwooldridge.com/reproducibilities/theendofpainting (accessed February 25, 2023)
[14] Nicholas Mirzoeff, *How to See the World: An Introduction to Images from Selfies to Self-Portraits, Maps to Movies and More*. New York: Basic Books, 2016
[15] Max Lakin, "Peter Halley's Day-Glo '80s Show." *New York Times*, New York Times, April 16, 2023
[16] *Peter Halley: Collected Essays 1981–87*, Zurich: Bruno Bischofberger Gallery, 1988.

From a personal perspective my practice relies on the printed image, working from books and postcards of modernist paintings for re-enactment. Carefully paint matching colours found in books, an aspect of this activity lies in allowing the variations and fluctuations in tones found in different publications.

In ontological terms however digital photography and documentation occupy a new position, narrowing the gap between the painting and its reproduction. Once upon a time our relationship to the world through light, emanating from the Sun, had a synchronic relationship with the world through a corresponding relationship between light, objects and durational exposure. The first camera obscura photograph by Joseph Nicéphore Niépce in 1826, was a light-impression captured, projected onto a light-hardening bitumen-coated plate. This was invariably difficult to see as it was so dark and an enhanced version is often presented in place of this image. Prior to the digital age, photographic objects such as this plate, grounded our connection to reproductions. Analogue documentation and reproduction of paintings existed in the tacit knowledge of this contractual equivalence. Reproductions often offered images of lower resolution with many painting monographs and theoretical texts publishing black and white images, and in some cases as separate papers physically adhered to book pages, where these 'photographic objects' reminded us that these images were *aide-mémoires* and not the *thing-in-itself*.

Digital reproductions bring a new ontological dimension to painting's materiality, now reproduced through code and if required through artificial intelligence without subjects. Conversely to the photographic-object experience of analogue documentation, a critique of the digital lies not in its quality or fluctuations seen in early stages of digitisation, but in the way in which this new artificial intelligence creates extremely convincing dematerialised hyperreal images. In 2023 Boris Eldagsen a winner in the Sony World Photography with his photograph *The Electrician* declined the award after admitting these portraits had no subjects and were a synthetic image generated using the AI neural network DALL-E 2. Portraits without subjects thus begs the question; are we to expect documentation of paintings without the painted object next?

Towards the end of his career, Elvis Presley commented at a press conference that "the image is one thing and the human being is another…".[17] It's a statement that seems too obvious to be in any way profound and verges on the absurd, but in a similar way photographic documentation of a painting is not a painting. A painting is not its image. Reproduction images in essence are what Philip Guston refers to in Michael Blackwood's film documentary of the artist's life as "wax museum"[18] - but in a digital age these have acquired a new status. When The Mona Lisa was stolen in 1911, visitors flocked to the Louvre to see the empty space where the painting once resided. As if an aura of the work remained, they purchased *souvenir* post cards as *aide-mémoires* of this metaphysical encounter. Today a new aura exists around the waxworks of the digital world. Its merits are evident. In the U.S., more photographs are produced every two minutes, than in the 19th century, and in 2014 the global photographic archive increased by 25% when one trillion photographs were taken this year alone, and with digital NFTs all conjuring a new frenzy of the visible (reminiscent of Jean-Louis Comolli's words mentioned at the beginning of this paper).

Amidst this frenzy, it is important to remember that painting is *dialogic*. Ad Reinhardt's black paintings are an invitation as actants within a network to engage in a dialogic experience, not just with these late paintings, but a discourse of painting beyond these iconic works. Painting will react to us if we react to it. We will get from it what we bring to it. It will meet us halfway but no further. It is alive if we are, and in this way perhaps reveals not only paintings', but our own, deep time.

[17] Elvis Presley, Press conference, Madison Square Garden, New York City, 1972.
[18] *Philip Guston, A Life Lived*. New York, NY: Blackwood Productions, 1981.

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