



Planarity, Pictorial Space, and Abstraction

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This article looks at how abstraction has progressed in art history in relation to the image and the planar surface, and in relation to consciousness, concepts, and language. I begin with challenges to more traditional kinds of representation that were mounted by people such as Turner and Cézanne, and that were continued through Analytic Cubism to Mondrian and Malevich on to Abstract Expressionism and Color-Field Painting. This brief outline enables one to see how the dilution and disintegration of the realistic image end in the reality of the surface in pure visual abstraction. I also consider the route from papier collé and collage to Duchamp, and to different kinds of surface in different kinds of object, and how that route leads to Minimalism and linguistic Conceptual art, which itself represents, in at least one important sense, a return to the use of planarity in the background surface on which visible language is situated.

In the particular perspective on art history cited, it is seen how information in the form of an image comes off the surface, to go onto a common object, only to come back onto the surface as symbolic language by routes that are both artistic and philosophical. At this point I examine how the surface returns as a site for creative investigation and manipulation, and identify problems that arise with the use of written language on a two-dimensional surface. How the image functions in the course of this progression; how it relates to surface, language, and concepts; how realistic images and abstract forms stand in different relations to perception, thought, and time; how the notions of boundary or limit, and identity and difference, pertain to images, surfaces, and concepts;

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and how perception, thought, and action are presupposed by all of these things are matters that are introduced at points relevant to the issues to which they pertain. The relation of art to mind, choice, and understanding means that the ontology of art that I call *conceptual idealism* must be briefly considered in the context of the preceding matters. The article ends with the suggestion that consideration of the relation of surface, language, and ideas to one another, and to their comprehension, may be of interest to novel investigations of even more reductive kinds of abstraction than have hitherto appeared.

1 IMAGE, SURFACE, AND ABSTRACTION IN ART HISTORY

An artist of sufficient ability can use artistic media, such as oil, pastel, or watercolor, to create a picture of something that is realistic in the sense that it can be recognized as an image of something from the world beyond the surface on which the picture is seen, and by which both the construction of the picture and viewing knowledge are informed. Examples include *Still Life with Lemons, Oranges, and a Rose* (1633) by Francisco Zurbarán, *Hunters in the Snow* (1565) by Pieter Brueghel, and *Sir Thomas More* (1527) by Hans Holbein. The latter painting is a means of connecting us with the past in enabling us to see what the person that it pictures looked like. In that sense a realistic portrait is a window through which we can view elements of the past, and in that way documents an aspect of history that continues to inform the present. History can also appear in, or in relation to, a painting that is based on an actual event that an artist supplements or changes in ways that are creatively determined at the time at which the work is produced. One gathers that this is the case with a work such as *Niccolò Mauruzi da Tolentino at the Battle of San Romano* (c. 1438–1440) by Paolo Uccello. The figures and artifacts of battle seem likely to have been modified according to compositional interests, and one does not suppose that the field of battle beneath and behind the horses was pink, as it is in the painting. Greater liberties can be taken in the interest of a belief system, such as Christianity, in *The Annunciation* (1437–1446) by Fra Angelico, or in some other interest, such as using realistic space and suggestive images in the service of perceptual or cognitive bewilderment, as with *The Furniture of Time* (1939) by Yves Tanguy.

The sort of realism in two-dimensional art that is supposed to be like looking through a window, or holding a mirror up to nature, is challenged by images whose realism is shaped and contested according to the interests, knowledge, and constitution of the artist from whom they result. Here I am using the term *realism* in a loose sense that is not photographic, but one in which an image can be said to be realistic if it is recognizable as picturing or denoting a thing of a certain kind of thing, such as a tree, even if things of that kind do not look exactly like that in themselves. Although all figurative or illusionistic painting, including the most realistic painting, is abstract in lacking the third dimension, painting became more abstract as liberties were taken with images in the principal interest of allowing painting to conduct formal

investigations of its own intrinsic possibilities. The primary goal of such an investigation was, and is, to determine what visual art might achieve when freed from the obligation to picture nature or artifactual reality as they appear outside of art in daily living.

Organic abstraction. Where one begins in the history of art to locate the genesis of the kinds of abstract art found in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is somewhat arbitrary. However, it is impossible to overlook the contribution to one kind of abstraction of the late works of J. M. W. Turner. Whether or not such works as *Landscape with River and Distant Mountains* (c. 1845) (Fig. 1), *Sun Setting over a Lake* (c. 1840–1845), or *Sunset from the Top of the Rigi* (c. 1844) are finished, they are extraordinary, and artists have seen and been influenced by them. And such completed works as *Rain, Steam, and Speed* (1844) by Turner advance abstraction in being characterized by a loosening of the image, a softening of the edges of substantial objects, and such a blending of positive and negative space that the hard edges of precise pictures of things are lost in relation to their ground. This art can be understood to foreshadow the diffuse Color-Field painting of Mark Rothko and Helen Frankenthaler.

Late paintings by Claude Monet at Giverny, such as *The Path with Rose Trellises, Giverny* (c. 1922) that themselves border on pure abstraction, anticipate the sort of nature-based abstraction of Abstract Expressionism of which Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Joan Mitchell, and Pat Steir are, in their different ways, representative. Although such works as de Kooning's *Excavation*



Fig. 1 J. M. W. Turner, *Landscape with River and Distant Mountains*, ca. 1840–1845, oil on canvas, 92 × 122 cm; Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool (in public domain)

(1950) may contain broad flat areas of an unchanging or slightly varying color, they tend to be more linear, like the Monet cited, and their line is organic, not geometric. The line of development stemming from Turner contains images or areas of paint that are more diffuse and inexact, and that reflect such parts of nature as clouds, fog, dust, mists, and the softening light of overcast skies or twilight. The nature-indebted abstraction to advance from Monet calls to mind such things as sticks, the thin clawing limbs of leafless trees, stems of plants, grasses, and the more exact edges of things that are better articulated in standard light. Different aspects of the two kinds of natural influence may mix, combine, or interact, and perhaps the flatter more painterly aspects of largely or loosely linear works are the created counterparts of such things as fields, mud, swamps, moss, rivers, and lava flows. For instance, although the Monet cited presages linear abstraction, he also did works—such as *The House from the Garden* (c. 1992)—that incorporate areas that might be thought to be painterly responses to the kind of natural phenomena just listed. In any case, Turner and Monet are just two artists that were influential to an abstraction that, as organic, suggests a connection with nature, even as it ends in work that means to be self-sufficient in the sense that its nature and value are determined in relation to its abstract composition and created visual properties, and not in relation to an exterior reality lying beyond the surface of the work by which it may nevertheless have been informed.

Geometric abstraction. Such late works as *Mont Sainte-Victoire Seen from Les Lauves* (1902–1904) by Cézanne—of which there are many versions—are characterized by the careful dissection of objects that, in being less isolated than integrated with their ambient space, form a kind of fusion of figure and ground that consists of what is determined by their interactive relationships (Fig. 2). This interaction often seems to be both settled and dynamic, and in featuring harder-edge lines that echo boundary lines of a rectangle, initiates an abstraction that is less organic than geometric. Although such painting can be based on nature, as in the work cited, it can be understood to use nature to get beyond nature. This leads to the Analytic Cubism of Braque and Picasso, then to the geometric abstraction of Mondrian and Malevich, and subsequently to the hard-edged Color-Field painting of Barnett Newman.

The monochrome and Greenbergian Modernism. One can imagine a nebulous form by Turner becoming so dispersed throughout an area as to mark it as an undifferentiated expanse, and a monochromatic space with a rectangular border situated in a larger area can be imagined to expand to fill that area with nothing more than its single color. In either case the work as a visible object now coincides with the bounded surface of the work. And whatever the genealogy, the work is now characterized by nothing foreign, and just consists of its particular assertive being. Here the recognizable image is replaced by something that simply declares its perceptible physicality as the item of focus. Lest a single monochrome be thought to end painting, or a number of monochromes to vitiate creativity, flatness can be delimited in any number of ways, with or without diverse colors, lines, and shapes, including in ways investigated by such



Fig. 2 Paul Cézanne, *Mont Sainte-Victoire Seen from Les Lauves*, 1902–1904, oil on canvas, 60 × 72 cm; Kunstmuseum, Basel (in public domain)

artists as Cy Twombly (Fig. 3), Agnes Martin, Ad Reinhardt, and Robert Ryman. The latter two are particularly relevant to working within restrictive limits, as Reinhardt did by focusing on creating minimal differences between different squares of the nine black squares that composed a larger square, and as Ryman did by exploring the use of different kinds and shades of white paint in relation to different kinds of surface of different sizes. Looking for interesting ways to delimit flatness was said to be the program of Modernist painting, as it was the job of work of that sort to explore the essence of painting (cf. Greenberg 1960, 85–93; 1962, 121–133). This is only one kind of abstract art though, and there is an additional route to abstraction that must be recognized.

From collage to Duchamp and the readymades. In *papier collé* and collage, Braque and Picasso introduced elements of common reality, such as bits of newspaper, onto the surface of the artwork. In his readymades, Duchamp removed the surface of the painting and just exhibited the quotidian object itself as the work of art. One way to think of Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) is to see it as the two-dimensional surface of a white painting that has come off the wall to enclose the object that it perceptually envelops to coincide perfectly with the shape of that object. As a result, what the object is is immediately seen, as what is seen registers in the mind as a token of a type of common object. And



Fig. 3 Cy Twombly, *Untitled, from Hommage a Picasso (Bastian 41)*, 1973, granolithograph and collotype in colors, on woven paper, 76.2 × 55.9 cm. Photo by Wikimedia Commons (fair use)

this means that the image of something as representing the concept of that thing is replaced with the thing itself that an image could be used to represent. An effect of the standard planar area coming off the wall to collapse onto the surface of a chosen object is that the mind reads the object as *being* an object of that type, as much as the mind could have read a pictured image of the object as *signaling* or symbolizing an object of that type. Both painted image and selected artifact then represent a means of getting to a thought of an object, or to the concept representing that kind of object, by taking different artistic routes.

Artworks and literal objects. In a typical Minimal artwork, the planar surface is no longer a site of symbolization but is a visual expanse that engages thought

and perception as a literal area or object. In Joseph Kosuth's *Any Five-Foot Sheet of Glass to Lean Against Any Wall*, Alberti's window has been replaced by the kind of glass that a window normally contains. But one is not meant to see something through Kosuth's glass. Rather, seeing the glass itself and understanding it in relation to the following points are what matter. First, it shows that there is a physical place to go beyond the monochromatic painting, namely transparency. Second, its physical relation to the wall as a means of partial support can be seen to comment on the relation of the work to the sort of institution in which it is typically expected to be exhibited. Third, because a transparent object's material is not internally differentiated, any perceived difference in areas of its surface is determined extrinsically in relation to its larger environment. This emphasizes the relation of the work both to the observer and the environment since nothing perceived in the material/surface of the object is intrinsic to the object. And nothing would be perceived, as sense data or reflected images, apart from the presence of the observer doing the perceiving. Fourth, the work of art is not a particular but a type that can have any number of instances, as can be understood from its title. Given this and the preceding point, the relation of this work to both body and mind is emphasized. Fifth, what this kind of work shares with others in the history preceding it is an (abstract) identity, and a difference from what it is not, that is shown visually in a clear linear boundary that separates it perceptually and conceptually from everything that it is not. This is important to the recognition that the more abstract artworks possible will concentrate on the notions of identity and difference, as philosophically basic notions that are also fundamental to art.

From the visible surface of art to the page as semantic surface. Conceptual art is said to be an art of ideas, and ideas as imperceptible might be thought to mark the limit of abstraction in art, and so to end the potential of abstract art to go further, or in a different direction (on conceptual art in general see Lippard 1997; on conceptual art, philosophy and "the idea idea" see Goldie and Schellekens 2009). However, abstract art has more than one end or direction, more than one limit, and more than one way of arriving at those limits. Works of linguistic conceptual art that feature words on a page, or other flat surface, such as Victor Burgin's *All Criteria* (1969) represent, in at least one important sense, a return to the use of planarity in the background surface on which language is situated (Schlatter 1990, 185). One can recognize in such works a progression from the flat surface of Minimalism and Greenbergian Modernism to the surface of the page, or to the surrounding space of language as the negative ground of the text as figure. Consideration of the use of language in relation to space means that the different perceptual and conceptual relations of both space and language to meaning, thought, and time will have to be examined. The figure-ground relation, to be considered further below, results in four problems, and their solution, as linked to perception, thought, and language, in turn results in a number of philosophical and aesthetic possibilities for abstract art.

2 IMAGE, SURFACE, MIND, AND MEANING

Images and ideas. The word *image* comes from the Latin *imitari* to imitate. An image is the imitation or reproduction of the form or means of recognizing or identifying something else. An image can be understood to be a kind of idea that involves the notions of imitation, duplication, and representation in that an image *re*-presents, or presents again, in a different space, in an imitative medium, that of which it is the mental or understood duplication. Albrecht Dürer's *Self-Portrait* (1500) is an example.

That which is represented, or presented again, is presented to mind, so that a relation is established between image and object. In recognizing what the image represents, a cognitive relation is created between image and object so that an image has a conceptual dimension, and so is a form of information. Images in art may consist, at the elementary level, of visual sense data, but their functioning as representative material takes them beyond that foundation to the meaningful level of thought and understanding. As an image as information is directed toward a perceiving and comprehending subject, the subject-object relation cannot be ignored in talking about images in art, and in fact the relation is tripartite in being image-subject-object. The subject is the means of connecting image and object in the sense that no image can represent an object without the perception and understanding of a conscious subject. The subject is then a necessary condition of an image standing for an object.

Surface as site. The planar surface has been the main site of artistic investigations for most of art history. The reason would seem to be facts about reality, including practical matters, that underwrite and sustain at least certain kinds of creative investigation. The history of art includes ample illustration of how techniques of assembling lines, shapes, and colors on flat surfaces can be used to construct planar images that register phenomenally with viewers as being depicted slices of actual or possible reality. Thus, suitably manufactured visible data with the right internal relations can be connected through consciousness to a separate real or imagined world. And connecting conceptually disparate phenomenal entities—pictures and the things that they picture—seems best suited to a surface that, as flat and smooth, is most receptive to the techniques used to link images to their external counterparts so that the concept that applies to the depicted object registers in thought as a result of seeing the depicting image. It is difficult to paint something with the visual crispness, clarity, and existential accuracy of Jacques-Louis David's *The Death of Marat* (1793) (Fig. 4) on the rough and undulating walls of a cave, or on something with the surface of a globe or a saddle, and of course these and other non-flat surfaces would result in a different aesthetic. Use of the representational methods of realistic art on planar surfaces is fitted to the notion of seeing art as if looking through a window, and of course most windows are flat and rectangular, as are most artworks in history. (Windows are also transparent, and so share that feature with the space through which we see, and with the acts of seeing and thinking on which art and culture depend, as indicated below.) Flatness is



Fig. 4 Jacques-Louis David, *The Death of Marat*, 1793, oil on canvas, 165 × 128 cm; Royal Museums of Fine Arts, Brussels (in public domain)

also implicit in the notion of realistic art holding up a mirror to nature, since mirrors that are accurate in their reflections are flat, not curved. Ways of communicating information or conveying knowledge most often make use of rectangular planar surfaces. Think of blackboards or whiteboards, projection screens, tablets, smart phones, computer and television screens, and pages of books. Art as a means of conveying information and ideas is not limited to using images. What is remarkable is the amount of varied and important work produced by artists on planar surfaces in the history of art, and how that work engages and expands the notions of image, information, and idea as it leads to novel art forms, such as Installation, Earth, and Performance art, that are linked to earlier forms and extensions of planar art.

On the relation of data, information, and subjects in abstract art. All apprehensible data is informative at the conceptual and cultural level at which art exists and functions as art. Given the lack of images in more abstract or

non-objective works of art, and the absence in such visually restrictive works as monochromatic paintings of such means of conveying ideas as language, the question naturally arises if certain abstract works have moved beyond the association of art with information in the form of images to an art of pure data—the data of seeing. While that may be thought to be an appropriate insight into the nature of such works, the deeper thing to realize is that, at the level of intellectual and cultural maturity at which art operates, no datum can be apprehended that does not fall under a certain concept or set of concepts. A large number of concepts applies to an all-white painting, including those of thing, painting, white, opaque, art, and being an object of attention. In that sense its surface is as much a semantic one, albeit one of a different kind and complexity, as one that is marked by images or populated by words.

All of the data of even the most reductive art is information in being classifiable data. However, the information of an abstract painting is not limited to the sort of basic concepts listed above, but includes information that connects it to relevant histories and criteria of evaluation. Relevant histories are all of those that are germane to the production, understanding, and evaluation of a work. They include, but are not necessarily limited to, art, critical, intellectual, cultural, and technological history. Relevant relations among such histories are also significant.

Thus, instead of an image pointing beyond itself to something in the external world—as in traditional illusionistic art—the informative data of abstract painting points beyond itself to a historical tradition of which it is a modern development. And that information, with the information provided by its formal visual elements, is pertinent to, and may challenge, ways in which the work might be critically and aesthetically assessed. Because of the relation of abstract art to history and evaluation, and so to its engagement of the conceptual mind to which it is directed, any planar space of any kind of art, including perceptually reductive art, is semantic. Seeing is then a necessary but not a sufficient condition of appreciating and understanding a work. It must be supplemented with an active mind working with a vocabulary of appropriate ideas.

Images and concepts. Because of the intellectual relation of images to thoughts and concepts, images can be understood to be the artistic precursors of concepts in Conceptual art, concepts that will typically be imageless in the sense that understanding or using them need not rely on something pictorial or otherwise related to sensation. Notice that the use of concepts, as communicated through words, in art does not have the same relation to artist and audience as that of images. Although a word may be used artistically because of its polysemantic character, or its capacity for ambiguity, it is chosen for this reason by the artist using it. And this choice makes sense only in relation to a set of public understandings that allow for ambiguity or multiple meanings. A word then, in having a public meaning(s), is not shaped individually in the way that an artistic image is in being a partial product of the native and developed constitution of the depicting artist.

Consciousness, art, and conceptual idealism. All art depends on consciousness to be made, to be interpreted and understood, and to be evaluated. Visual

artworks and their surfaces and features, including images, are normally thought to be physical objects. This is incorrect for two basic reasons. The first is what physics tells us about matter. The second is that all art is intentionally directed toward mind that is meant to understand and respond to it as art. The planar artistic surface, qua planar and artistic, is dependent on mind in that, as physics assures us, it is only seen as planar, and is not planar in fact as a physical collection of moving atoms in mostly empty space. It also depends on mind since perceptions and understandings are mental, and art presupposes perception and understanding to be art. Without the participation of the mind to which it is directed there is no artistic surface, either as seen or understood. The same remarks apply to a work's images, and to any other apprehensible entity that forms part of the work, or on which it depends to be art. As seeing and understanding are mental, they are philosophically ideal in the sense of depending on mind. While it is not necessary for an artwork itself to be perceptible, it must be possible to understand what any artwork, however conceptual, abstract, radical, or anomalous, is meant to be. This understanding depends on the perception of at least one perceptual object that the work itself is to be understood to be, or it depends on an apprehensible object containing information directed to the kind(s) of mental event(s)—such as reading and comprehending language—relevant to the understanding of intended artistic identity. In such a case, the perceptual object will contain comprehensible information that directs consciousness beyond sensation to something else that all or part of the work is to be understood to be. An example can be seen in the language by Robert Barry as illustrated below. In any case, any understanding of the identity of any artwork of any kind of art, including any that is purely visual, works with the concepts of art and artwork. For that reason, and because the perceptual objects and *minds* on which art depends can each be metaphysically material, I call the ontology of art and abstraction “*conceptual idealism*”. The concepts relevant to producing and apprehending works of art apply regardless, and so artworks are conceptually ideal in depending on what we think of as mind even if they are not metaphysically ideal in not being immaterial. Conceptual idealism is consistent then with pure physicality and the universal absence of immateriality.

The discontinuous nature of art. Because consciousness is discontinuous, and any artwork of any kind of art depends on consciousness, an artwork is a discontinuous entity that only has its particular identity, as art, when standing in the right relation to consciousness, given the nature of what it is that the work is meant to be.

3 IMAGE, SURFACE, THOUGHT, AND PERCEPTION

Surface, time, and information. An unchanging planar surface is *in* time but is not *of* time in the sense that it does not use actual change or motion in the determination of artistic identity. Rather, time is arrested in the persistent image, or in any data of determined visual content and established relationships

thought to lack variation, as set in an ostensibly permanent space that defeats the time of quotidian reality. The time of the stable visual artwork is confined to the present, and is so limited even when an image of the work refers to a past and future in which it is seen to be historically embedded.

The constancy of thought in relation to the realistic image. Thought is constant in relation to a realistic image in that the same concept, or concepts, can be understood to apply to the image each time that it is an object of perception. Image identity is not simply preserved over time, but remains the same, within limits, in spite of spatial changes of angle to, and distance from, the image of the observer. (Such limits are tested by late Monet paintings, for instance, which become abstract paintings when viewed from a short distance from the surface of what appears to contain an image from a distance.) Thought will also defeat conceptual challenges to images posed by intervening media, or change in ambient lighting, as long as these do not rise to the level of so interfering with perception that the data on which images depend can no longer be properly seen. This relation between concept and image echoes the assumed constancy of identity of the artwork to which the image belongs since the work is conceived of as something that will present the same data to awareness each time that it is seen. Although it is known to physics that the physical substrate of a perceptual object is constantly changing, the perceptual object has a cultural stability over time that is linked to its continuity in consciousness and perception. The relations noted of thought to image and thought to work that remain in spite of the sort of changes stated reinforce the significance of the cognitive dimension of perceptual art and artistically relevant perceptual objects, and can themselves be used in artistic exploration. This cognitive importance also pertains to the relation of thought to the linguistic symbol of meaning in artworks that include or use words in the determination of their identity, and underlines the need to speak of conceptual idealism in the ontology of art.

Abstraction, thought, and perception. Although the relation to thought of the identity of an abstract work, such as Newman's *Cathedra* (1951), is the same as to that of a realistic work, such as Vermeer's *The Art of Painting* (c. 1662–1668)—in the sense that we expect to see the same thing when we see it again—there is a difference between them that is worth noting. Because abstract paintings are about their visual data as visual—and are not meant to be, or consist of, an image—different perceptions of them that are due to changes in observer's angle and distance can have a greater effect on what we take the work to be, and so how it relates to thought in addition to sensation. Although the visual data of any painting will change in relation to change in observer angle and distance, because of the constancy relation maintained between thought and image, these data are typically seen as things to be overcome or ignored in realistic paintings, whereas they might be thought to be of great importance to, or even to be partially constitutive of, an abstract work. Thus, the whole of an abstract painting might not only be thought to consist of

abstract visual data rather than images, but to consist of these things as seen from different observer positions at different times, and so to introduce a subject-dependent temporality into a work that is otherwise seen to be stable in the constancy of its identity. However, this is temporality without a temporal order in that a sequence of observations of the work can occur in any sequence over any given period. Given that, and the difference of the relation of observer and perceptual events to surface, the nature of an abstract painting can be understood to echo the temporal dimension of the ontological discontinuity of the artwork as dependent on thought and perception. How we think and talk about abstract works then changes in relation to the perception of the surface data of abstract visual works, and that fact raises the possibility that there may be other ways to investigate the relation of visual information to thought and perception that may be of artistic, aesthetic, and philosophical interest and importance.

4 LANGUAGE, SURFACE, THOUGHT, AND PERCEPTION

Images, surface data, and language. Although language used in a visual artwork, or in a work that depends on a visual object, may itself have an important visual dimension, language that is conventionally related to a standard planar surface is more about what the language conveys—as a thought—and is less about the language being seen in a formalist or expressive way that has to do with the shapes and textures of its words and letters and their treatment in two (or three) dimensions. In that sense a word in art is more like an image in a realistic painting that uses the surface to get beyond the surface to things that, in being understood, are recognized to be external to the surface on which the image that represents them depends. An image in a realistic painting and a word used in a Conceptual work have in common being symbolic means of representing or triggering ideas. They differ in that the image, but not the word, can appear as the reflection of something in the external world, and this is the case even when an image accompanies the understanding of a word since it is the conceptual content of the understanding that is necessary to that comprehension, and not the appearance of an image in the mind, which is contingent.

Thought, perception, and transparency. Seeing is transparent in the sense that, in seeing, the focus is on the thing seen, and not on the act of seeing on which a perceived object, as perceived, depends. Thinking is similarly transparent in that, in thinking about something, one does not see, focus on, or think about the thinking but about the object that the thinking concerns (except of course when thinking reflexively takes itself as its own object). However, seeing terminates in something seen, and thought terminates in an object of the intellect to which thought is directed. An object of perception is typically opaque, and even if an object of thought is not characterized by a similar opacity it is still something in which thought concludes, and so has in common with

perception, as an Intentional act, an Intentional object that is the terminus of the act. Because the word *intentional* is relevant to philosophy of art both in relation to an act done with purpose and to the act-object structure of perceptual and conceptual consciousness, I follow Searle here, and in other works, in capitalizing the word when it pertains to the latter usage (Searle 1983).

Image, language, and opacity. Although either a painted image or a written word is opaque, it depends on transparent light to be seen, and it must engage the transparent conscious processes of seeing and thinking to refer beyond itself and to function in a work of art.

Abstract and visual boundaries. Every visual artwork, and every visual object on which an artwork depends, has a visible boundary—typically a frame or the unframed perimeter of the rectangle containing the visual information of the visual work. Every word has a conceptual boundary that pertains to its meaning. This conceptual boundary consists of the logical relation of identity that the meaning of the word has to itself and the logical difference of that meaning from everything other than that particular meaning. The conforming use of the public meaning(s) of a common word can be understood to mirror, in conceptual form, the conforming use of a rectangular planar surface in most visual works of art. And the logical boundary of meaning can be understood to echo in transparent conceptual form the perceptual boundary of the perimeter of a rectangular surface that features a word or image.

ALL THE THINGS I KNOW
 BUT OF WHICH I AM NOT
 AT THE MOMENT THINKING—
 1:36 PM; JUNE 15, 1969. (Robert Barry 1969)

Problems of language and surface. There are both problems and possibilities that come with using written language in art on a two-dimensional surface. The character of no Conceptual or other linguistic work with which I am familiar even reflects recognition of these problems and possibilities, let alone exhibits a formulated way of addressing them. In most, language is written once on a wall or positioned a single time in the blank white space of a page or other rectangle, as in the work by Robert Barry in the illustration above. The problems are those of *number*—how many times to use the same language and why; *distribution*—how to position repeated instances of the language in relation to one another; *figure and ground*—how to relate the distributed instances of language as figure to their surrounding space as ground; and *asymmetry*—how to deal with the unyielding visual and linguistic orientation determined by the unitary direction of reading of a language like English.

There are in fact ways to approach these problems that are not only of aesthetic interest and value, but different solutions of the difficulties cited enable one to investigate not only how ideas can be designed to function in relation to the subject comprehending them, but how ideas can be made to function in

relation to the subject functioning in relation to the object. That is, it is possible to investigate how ideas can function as a consequence of, and in relation to, how the subject stands in conscious relation to the apprehensible information of the manipulated perceptual object—the information that is responsible for causing the ideas that can stand in relation to the things to be investigated. Further, the ideas can not only be designed to be so related to the things in which they stand in the kinds of relation noted, but they can be designed to reflect in themselves their standing in those relations. (For further on this, including the notions and relations of deep form and layered content, see Strayer, Jeffrey *Essentialism and Its Objects: Identity and Abstraction in Language, Thought, and Action* (forthcoming)) This indicates then that the artistic interest in the planar surface can be continued in work that develops out of the sort of history of image and surface in art whose nature and relation this article is intended to provide.

5 CONCLUSION: FROM IMAGES TO IMAGELESS

The notion “from images to imageless” describes the progression in the history of art from images as perceptible information to words as conceptual information. This is the transition from the working and data of perception to the acts and objects of pure imageless thought, as that route is affected and shaped by the things stated in this article. And although an imageless end is reached, the objects of imageless thought are themselves produced in relation to, and may be affected by, the comprehension of language situated in a planar surface that is so marked by the manner of its distribution as to become a complex space of apprehension.

The things mentioned in the previous section—including the relations of mind to an apprehensible surface and to visual and verbal information that characterize that surface; relations of thought and perception as transparent to opaque and transparent things to which they are directed, and on which they depend; and relations of abstract and visual boundaries—are mentioned as things that might be included among relevant foci of creative aesthetic investigation, as much as realistic and manipulated images, visual data, and surfaces have been for various kinds of visual work in art history. The question naturally arises whether these things can be combined, as matters of creative interest, with other things of importance cited above, in considering the contrast, relations, and interactions of thought and perception—as temporal and impermanent—and objects and images seen and concepts and objects of thought—as, at least ostensibly, permanent—as a complex and fruitful area for artistic investigation. That the answer is *yes*, that there are ways of proceeding, and that there are aesthetic, artistic, and philosophical reasons that underlie these ways, are things that in other works and places I have attempted to illustrate (cf. Strayer 2007, 2017; cf. also www.JeffreyStrayer.com and Fig. 5).

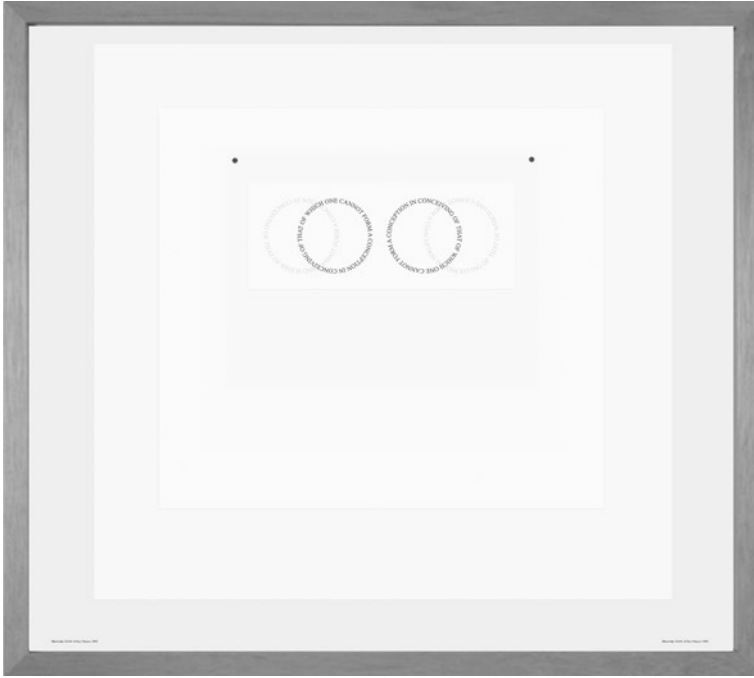


Fig. 5 Jeffrey Strayer, *Haecceity 12.0.0*, 2002; photo courtesy of the author. Each instance of the repeated circular text reads: that of which one cannot form a conception in conceiving of that of which one cannot form a conception...

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