

PURE MATERIALITY IN THE PAINTED LINGUISTIC TURN

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ABSTRACT

This thesis questions the notion of non-aesthetic materiality in painting. Beginning with a concern for the monochrome in early modernism, it discusses the idea of materiality in the works of Kazimir Malevich and Alexander Rodchenko on the basis of different interpretations of faktura as discussed by David Burliuk and Mikhail Larionov. The monochrome is further developed through a post-Greenberg, post-Kantian discussion of material as read by Paul de Man, and de Man's notion of pure, radical materiality is introduced and delimited against a traditional, phenomenal account of materiality. These two forms of materiality are explored through the work of Agnes Martin, which also provides the ground for the progression from the material turn as manifested in the works of the Russian avant-garde and the writings of Greenberg to the linguistic turn as proposed by de Man. De Man's call for a non-phenomenal, linguistic turn in art that allows the observer to read a picture rather than to imagine meaning is discussed in detail. The findings of this discussion anchored by Kazimir Malevich and Agnes Martin are brought to bear on Markus Amm's work. In the Conclusion, the idea of materiality oscillating between its phenomenal and non-phenomenal forms of manifestation will be distilled from the discussion and tied into questions relating to my own practice.

INTRODUCTION

This project started life through the death of a Virilian concept of representative painting that I was using in the studio¹. I had reached what felt like an end point in my painterly practice: within the framework of my earlier train of investigation, the excessively speculative nature of my paintings had led me to a point of exhaustion. At some point I decided to overpaint my works; and ended up with a number of painted-out canvases in my studio. What became of interest to me, there seemed to be a separation of appearance as things and how they had been arrived at. In terms of things, they were mainly gestural paintings of whitish impasto with a trace of the surface underneath. In terms of mere appearance, they announced themselves as monochromes. But I had not set out to paint monochromes. I realised I was not sure whether one was different from the other in terms of appearance, and whether the distinction mattered. I felt I had liberated myself and my practice from a deadlock through material. This made me think about the relationship of material and painting in general, but more specifically, about the link between materiality, the monochrome, and whether the monochrome was an end point of painting, a beginning, or indeed both.

“And Manet reinvents (or perhaps he invents) the picture-object, the picture as materiality, the picture as something coloured which clarifies an external light and in front of which, or about which, the viewer revolves.” (Foucault, 2013, p.31)

What Foucault identified in this lecture he gave in Tunis in 1971 was painting as a picture-object, as material manifestation of relevance (relative to illusion)². This ties in with my own experience and

¹ Paul Virilio (b. 1932) is a French philosopher, cultural theorist, and urbanist. His writings are broadly based on the notions of speed and power, and how technology has developed on that basis.

² It was arguably with Manet that questions of material qua material first became relevant in painting. Prior to Manet, as Foucault points out, material would have been seen in the context of its representational qualities, its suitability for creating an illusion, its ability to mask the two-dimensionality of the surface. Manet forces a first substantial crack in this mask.

If Manet caused a crack, it was the Russian avant-garde that finally took off the mask completely. Rodchenko and Malevich, and with them the Russian Productivists, shifted their

resulting concerns in the studio: painting as material. In this thesis, I will contend with the extent to which materiality has been at stake in certain aspects of painting in the modernist period. My interest is in how material has been read, and can be read, in contemporary painting. This investigation will look at certain questions pertaining to the monochrome within the context of materiality, which will also be informed by my studio practice. One could argue that the monochrome lends itself to the exploration of its material economies not the least on account of its reduced set of aesthetic variables, and it did indeed emerge to prominence around the time of the Russian avant-garde, a period when artists first became acutely concerned with materiality in visual art (NB. and in poetry). The monochrome has remained within the universe of modernist painting ever since. Tracing the Russian avant-garde through late modernism as presented by Clement Greenberg I will dedicate a section to materiality in Agnes Martin's work. This will allow me to take a closer look at the reading of her work on the basis of the writings of Paul de Man, who calls for a linguistic moment in painting that hinges on non-phenomenal, radical materiality and what he calls the linguistic turn. I will conclude with thoughts on the relevance of de Man's non-phenomenal reading of materiality for contemporary painting, and I will relate the reading of radical materiality in Agnes Martin's work to that of the German painter Markus Amm.

One of the modalities of this thesis is that it feeds the conclusions of my research back into my practice on an ongoing basis. My process is such that there is constant conversation set up between my studio work and my research. The studio practice triggered my interest in materiality. A close reading of the notions of the linguistic turn and de Man's pure, radical materiality via Agnes Martin and the locating of these concepts in contemporary painters like Markus Amm will open up a new perspective on materiality, whose relevance will in turn be manifested in my own painting.

focus of interest from representation to the material, which led to a first idea of what painting qua painting, the notion of reflexive painting, i.e. a form of painting that discusses its own conditions, might look like. The thread was taken up by Clement Greenberg some four decades later, when he famously postulated that painting, like other forms of art, should divest itself of all its non-essentials. This led to a deeply entrenched form of aestheticised materialism that has spawned cycles of formalist painting to his day.

THE MONOCHROME: MALEVICH, RODCHENKO, AND FAKTURA

Kazimir Malevich painted the first monochrome of modernism – whether that title goes to the *Black Square* (or Black Quadrilateral, as its official name is) from 1915, which is black on white, or *Suprematist Composition: White on White* from 1918, in which a white form is suspended, or hovering, on a white surface, the canvas. This series of paintings marked a threshold in twentieth-century art that coincided with the October Revolution following WWI in Russia. The emergence of this historical threshold curiously resonates with the borderline characteristics of the subject at hand, i.e. the monochrome itself. The latter has often been subject to liminal considerations, for example by Rose: “[the monochrome] is the end, not the beginning” (2006, p.76). While there are arguments in favour of the view that, in contrast to Rose’s perspective, the monochrome can also be seen as a beginning, the crucial point here is the fact that this form of painterly expression is seemingly deemed more probable to come into existence at a “liminal node” than at any other (more) random point on a continuum.

While Alexander Rodchenko’s Constructivism (see below) was clearly in line with the ideology of the times, the revolutionary forces, having laid fertile soil to a thorough re-evaluation of artistic ideas, caused Malevich to ricochet in a completely different direction altogether: “Art no longer cares to serve the state and religion, it no longer wishes to illustrate the history of manners, it wants to have nothing further to do with the object, as such, and believes that it can exist, in and for itself, without ‘things’ “ (Malevich, 1927; however, he had started developing the idea of Suprematism around 1913/1914 (Wilson, 1991)). This seemingly radical statement ultimately emanated from Malevich’s long-standing interest in Zaum poetry – a style of poetry based on linguistic experiments that resulted in the creation of a made-up language, Zaum, without any definite meaning³. In 1913, Malevich designed the stage of Mikhail Matyushin’s opera “Victory over the Sun”, whose libretto had been written by Aleksei Kruchonykh in Zaum language. Malevich in turn linked the origins of his abstract

³ “Zaum”, translated from Russian, literally means “beyond the mind”.

turn to stage design and later attempted to emphasise the connection by sending three new drawings to Matyushin to publish as part of the original design (Shatskikh, 2012, pp.33-53).

With Ferdinand de Saussure giving his final lectures on semiotics around 1913, the time was ripe for the emergence of linguistic concepts that called into question the absolute relation of language to the real object. Malevich's move towards the abstract, towards Suprematism was a result of his wide contextualisation of language that came in the codified shape of verbal, visual, and musical expression, and his "desire to explode these conventions and open up radically new creative possibilities." (Chlenova, 2014, p.66). Malevich and the visual artists, writers, and composers around him regarded their newly-found language as material from which to build "a more immediate and more meaningful communication." (Chlenova, 2014, p.66). As Alexei Kruchonykh wrote in a founding manifesto of Zaum, "common language binds, free language allows for fuller expression." (Kruchonykh, 1913, p.76). Artists across all registers were aiming at the renewal of perception, which was to be facilitated by the making-strange of language in its wider sense; for painters, this meant the subversion of automated vision, which would ultimately lead to the materialisation and coming-into-existence of the pictorial sign in relation to its referent. In other words, the sign would start adopting a life of its own. Roman Jakobson, founder of the Moscow Linguistic Circle and one of the founders of structuralism, called the pictorial signs palpable. The connotation of an underlying materiality is emphatically apparent.

In an attempt to create Zaum in painting, Malevich, having worked through and overcome a number of -isms of art history in brisk fashion, turned to collages of inscriptions and collaged readymades; and it was the collage that eventually led him to the idea of isolating the colour planes that emerged in these works. The fruit of this labour manifested itself for the first time at the seminal exhibition *0.10* in Petrograd (St. Petersburg/Leningrad) in December 1915. The programmatic subtitle of the exhibition, "The Last Futurist Exhibition", set the general tone: it was an end, and at the same time, a

beginning. Along with the Suprematist works, Malevich showed his now famous Black Square – and judging by the icon-like positioning of the painting, he was well aware of its gravitas: this was the “zero of painting”⁴ (Malevich, quoted in Foster, Krauss, Bois, Buchloh, 2004, p.131)⁵.

A few years later, Alexander Rodchenko would arrive at an equally critical point of painting, but on a different trajectory. Whereas Malevich had tried to sever the ties of pictorial sign and referent along the lines of Zaum language, Rodchenko and the other Constructivists had a different agenda and tried to overcome “easelism” (i.e. basically any form of autonomous art object, be it painting or sculpture; see Foster, Krauss, Bois, Buchloh, 2004, p.174) in favour of production. The idea of Productivism developed, and construction was to replace composition. Every aspect of the work was to emerge from its material condition, not from its a priori conception; to a certain extent, Malevich and Rodchenko converged at this point: Malevich based his Suprematism on the “palpable” material that Zaum provided him with, thus abstracting from in-universe referents; Rodchenko and the Constructivists’ work was contingent on the material. Or, semiologically, “a construction was a ‘motivated’ sign, that is, its arbitrariness is limited, its form and meaning being

⁴ I like this term because it remains open: painting as the beginning or the end; or even both. It addresses temporality by doing away with it, seeing as there is no before and after, only a now. It brings us into the present and presence of painting – this particular kind of painting, the monochrome. In a wider sense, it also reminds me of questions of cosmogony in that in its purest register, the monochrome is uniform, bereft of any differentiation, which echoes in the accounts of Creation across various religions: the monochrome is even less differentiated than for example formless and void Earth in the Bible: “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.” (The Bible, Genesis. 1:1, 1:2) Formlessness and void initially seem to indicate an absence of differentiation that resonates in the monochrome, but as Casey points out,

“[n]ot only does ‘the deep’ ... pre-exist creation, but it already has a ‘face’. The face itself is not superficial: it is the face of ‘of the waters,’ that is, of something quite elemental, and it is determinate enough to be moved over. In the beginning, then was an elemental mass having sufficient density and shape to be counterposed to the movement of the spirit ... of God.” (Casey, 1998, p.12)

Interestingly, the number of cosmogonic accounts that start from a status of absolute non-differentiation is actually quite small in comparison with those that allow for at least some primordial form of differentiation. One account that seems to echo the monochrome is the slush of indetermination of the Ainu people of Japan (see Casey, 1998, p.11): “In the beginning the world was slush, for the waters and the mud were all stirred together. All was silence; there was no sound. It was cold.” (Leach, 1956, p.205) This seems to point to a situation that precedes place, a mass of nothingness without place. Placelessness entails lack of movement, lack of change. The idea of this cosmogonic monochrome is based on an absolute lack. This lack encompasses a set of concepts that are absent: differentiation, space/place, time, movement, change, shape/form, boundaries, thresholds: “the zero of painting”.

⁵ The zero, as Staff (2015, p.11) points out, also comes up explicitly in a letter Malevich wrote to the composer Mikhail Vasilievich Matiushin in May 1915 where he claimed that “we intend to reduce everything to zero... [and] will then go beyond zero.” (Boersma, 1994, p.35).

determined (motivated) by the relationship between its various materials, ... whereas a composition was 'arbitrary' " (Foster, Krauss, Bois, Buchloh, 2004, p.177). Constructivists abhorred material excess in their work, an attitude that went hand in hand with the deductive nature of the work, which in turn resulted from material giving the primary impulse. In a painterly practice, this meant that at the end points of the practice, there was only the monochrome (or, arguably, the grid). Anything else would have given rise to pictorial composition and created excess space and illusion, which was squarely at odds with the notion of material efficiency. As a result, Rodchenko invoked the end of painting by showing his famous monochrome triptych at the 5 x 5 = 25 exhibition in 1921, *Pure Red Colour, Pure Yellow Colour, Pure Blue Colour*. Rodchenko deemed it "the last picture" and immediately moved on to work on the establishment of a Productivist platform with friends and fellow artists.

One term that would repeatedly come up among the Russian avant-garde was that of *faktura*. Containing a broader array of concepts than *facture* or *fattura*, *faktura* was first defined in the Russian context independently by David Burliuk (in his futurist manifesto "A Slap in the Face of Public Taste") and by Mikhail Larionov (in his "Rayonist Manifesto"), both in 1912. As outlined by Yves-Alain Bois (1976), Larionov argued that *faktura* was the essence of painting and, in a somewhat structuralist vein, pointed out that "the combination of colours, their density, their interaction, their depth, and their *faktura* would interest the truly concerned to the highest degree."⁶ In a text titled "Faktura", David Burliuk would differentiate between "a unified pictorial surface A and a differentiated pictorial surface B. The structure of a pictorial surface can be I. Granular, II. Fibrous, and III. Lamellar. I have carefully scrutinized Monet's Rouen Cathedral and I thought 'fibrous vertical structure.' ... One can say that Cézanne is typically lamellar." Bois also points out countless references to *faktura* in Malevich's writings, for example one passage where Malevich calls Cézanne "the inventor of a new *faktura* of the pictorial surface". In 1919, the constructivist artist Lyubov Popova made reference to the

⁶ While this collection of definitions of *faktura* (please see also Burliuk's ideas as outlined in the text above) seems to border on the tautological or evasive side, it seems that the term, especially when used by or in connection with the Russian avant-garde, cannot be pinned down to a stable definition, but instead changes (and indeed, expands) over the years.

relevance of the concept when she pointed out that “the content of pictorial surfaces is faktura”. And in his essay “Futurism”, the aforementioned Russian linguist and writer Roman Jakobson identified faktura as a strategy employed by avant-garde poets and painters who were concerned with the “unveiling of the procedure: therefore the increased concern for faktura; it no longer needs any justification, it becomes autonomous, it requires new methods of formation and new materials”. Jakobson’s assessment of faktura, with its focus on processes and didactics, is later echoed in the work of modernist artists such as Robert Ryman. It is no coincidence that Bois, in another essay, making reference to Ryman, quipped “Ask him why, [and] he’ll always answer how.” (1990)

The definition of faktura was in constant flux during the second half of the 1910s while at the same time encompassing an ever-broadening scope of material connotations. In response to major technological progress during that time (e.g. the discovery of electromagnetic waves, the x-ray) and to theories vaguely footed in or around this field that were highly influential in Constructivists circles such as Wilhelm Ostwald’s energetism, the term started adopting both transformative and dialectic qualities: material was on the one hand assigned activating (i.e. transforming) characteristics in the viewer; faktura thus went beyond the realm of the work of art as such and started extending through the space of its environment to the viewer. And on the other hand, the “immaterial qualities of objects were of equal importance to their material properties and were designed to stimulate sensations and mediate experiences intended to communicate the cultural and social values of modern society” (Lösckke, 2012, pp.93-94), thus setting up a dialectic of materiality and immateriality folded into material itself.

It was in Hegel’s Aesthetics (Hegel, 2010, pp. 69-90) that material acquired proper physicality as central meaning for the first time. Hegel referred to *Materie* as physical matter in contrast to mind or spirit. With regard to the work of art, Hegel’s notion contained a split between material and content⁷. Via Marx and his definition of art as

⁷ A split disregarded by modernism some 150 years later, when Carl Andre wrote his laconic

product of the material foundation, material in the work of art experienced further broadening amid the discourse of early-20th century on reproduction by, among others, Walter Benjamin. In the 1940s, Clement Greenberg picked up on the material turn with his focus on the significance of the material and physicality in visual arts (at first, specifically avant-garde art)⁸; a stance that he later largely recanted by shifting his focus from the physical features of the medium of painting and its support, i.e. from materiality, to the question of the perceptual experience of the viewer – in other words, his account changed to a more phenomenologically inclined one⁹. Following Greenberg, Michael Fried pitted art against objecthood, or avant-garde art against minimalism. “Like the shape of the object, the materials do not represent, signify, or allude to anything; they are what they are and nothing more”, as he stated (Fried, 1967, p.22). Material had become the defining factor of what is art and what is not.

The aforementioned material turn was facilitated, yet made more complex, by the ontological scrutiny the meaning of material had been put under by phenomenologists. Notably so by Martin Heidegger, who imposed a wide strand of meaning onto the word thing (*Ding*); at its widest extension, according to Heidegger, a thing was anything that was “a something not nothing” (Heidegger, 1971). Thus Heidegger effectively includes every conceivable category of being in the concept of thing, which goes beyond the realm of physicality and invites abstract meaning. As a result, the threshold of the material becomes blurred, and material can now refer to the abstract nature of things. One effect of this widening has been the emergence and popular use of the nominalised form of material, i.e. materiality, in the second half of the 20th century. It seems to capture material per se, i.e. the physical matter that was traditionally referred to by the term, plus something “beyond” that idea. Indeed, the

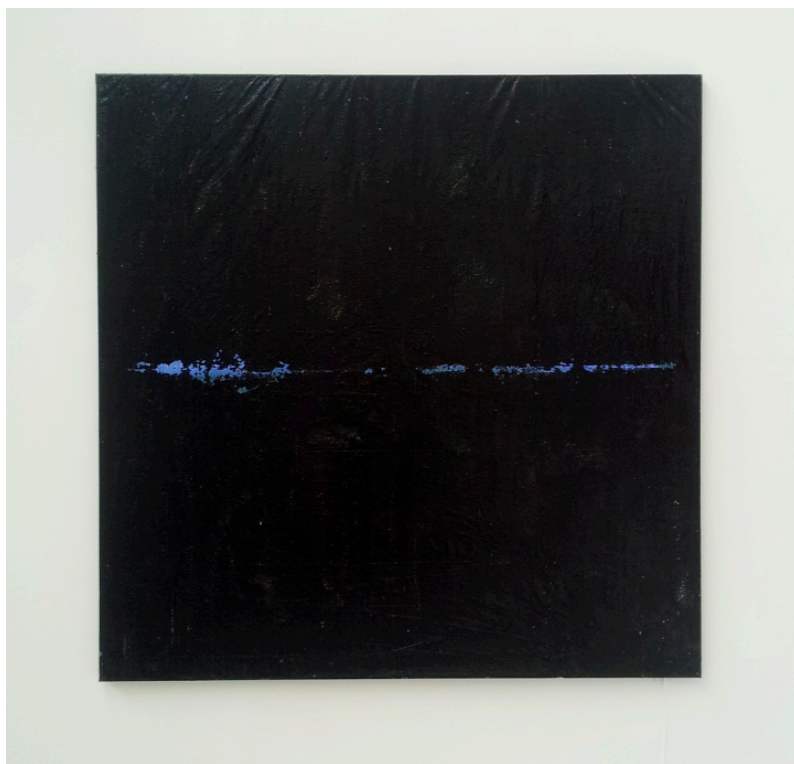
statement called “Preface to Stripe Painting” for Frank Stella:

“Art excludes the unnecessary. Frank Stella has found it necessary to paint stripes. There is nothing else in his painting. Frank Stella is not interested in expression or sensitivity. He is interested in the necessities of painting. Symbols are counters passed among people. Frank Stella’s painting is not symbolic. His stripes are the paths of brush on canvas. These paths lead only into painting.” (Andre, 1959, p.76)

⁸ As Foster, Krauss, Bois, and Buchloh explain, “Greenberg saw modernism’s acknowledgement of its medium as a form of materialist objectivity that this kind of painting shared with contemporary science.” (2004, p.441)

⁹ In his 1960 essay “Modernist Painting”, Greenberg famously identified flatness as the distinctive feature, the area of competence of painting.

discourse about (new) media, and about art based on them, that has cropped up in recent decades has taken a significant cue from the Heideggerian conception of the material and things: the material that is immaterial. A prominent example of said media discourse manifested itself in the 1960s in Marshall McLuhan's concept of media as extensions of man. In addition to physical matter, this notion of materiality includes any material that comes without a fixed or, in fact, any form, such as electricity. By emphasising the content of, for example, electric light, McLuhan highlights its materiality, despite what at first glance one perceives as bereft of content and of form.



(Richard Zeiss: *XXXVI*, 2015, egg tempera and yacht varnish on tarpaulin, 155 x 155cm, backlit; at the RCA, London)

The materiality of light enables people to create social spaces in the night, it facilitates and shapes human (inter-) action. In other words: we have come full circle to the Constructivists and faktura – “immaterial qualities of objects ... of equal importance to their material properties ... designed to stimulate sensations and mediate experiences intended to communicate the cultural and social values of modern society” (see also above, Löscke, 2012, pp.93-94).

McLuhan's writings hinge on the claim that a medium itself, not the content it carries, should be the focus of study. In a Greenbergian world as laid out by Thierry de Duve (1998, chapter 4), "... anything in a work of art that can be talked about or pointed to automatically excludes itself from the 'content' of the work [and is therefore medium, or subject matter; author's note] [and anything] that does not belong to its 'content' has to belong to its 'form' [i.e. medium, or subject matter; author's note]" (de Duve, 1998, p.210). Or in simpler terms: form (medium/subject matter) vs. content. McLuhan's concept of materiality, when translated into art criticism, is therefore of a strongly formalist nature. That being said, his take on Cubism, which according to him clearly announced that the medium was the message, comes with a strong undercurrent of phenomenological totalisation: Cubist art required "instant awareness of the whole" (McLuhan, 1994, p.13). The artwork had to be considered in its entirety.

In 1985, Jean-Francois Lyotard organised the exhibition "Les Immatériaux" at the Centre George Pompidou in Paris. In an interview he gave in the run-up to the exhibition, Lyotard seems to be picking up a thread that we first encountered in connection with the question of material vs. immaterial among the Constructivists: the borders between material and immaterial have become increasingly blurred, to an extent where, on the back of the discoveries in physics over the past 100 years, everything ultimately is energy – the "immaterial turn" within the material turn:

"The exhibition also has another theme that tries to give legitimacy to this 'monstrous neologism - the immaterials'; we make the point, obviously enough, that all of the progress that has been accomplished in the sciences, and perhaps in the arts as well, is strictly connected to an ever closer knowledge of what we generally call objects. (Which can also be a question of objects of thought.) And so analysis decomposes these objects and makes us perceive that, finally, there can only be considered to be objects at the level of a human point of view; at their

constitution or structural level, they are only a question of complex agglomerates of tiny packets of energy, or of particles that can't possibly be grasped as such. Finally, there's no such thing as matter, and the only thing that exists is energy; we no longer have any such thing as materials, in the old sense of the word that implied an object that offered resistance to any kind of project that attempted to alienate it from it (sic!) primary finalities.” (Lyotard, 1985, p.4)

In their 1968 essay “The dematerialization of art”, Lucy Lippard and John Chandler identified the dematerialisation of art as it was edging towards the ultra-conceptual end of the spectrum; this form of art “emphasizes the thinking process almost exclusively” (Lippard and Chandler, 1968, p.34). They went on to caution that,

“[as] more and more work is designed in the studio but executed elsewhere by professional craftsmen, as the object becomes merely the end product, a number of artists are losing interest in the physical evolution of the work of art. ... Such trend appears to be provoking a profound dematerialization of art, especially of art as object, and if it continues to prevail, it may result in the object's becoming wholly obsolete.” (Lippard and Chandler, 1968, p.35)

I would argue that this quote actually illustrates an understanding of materiality that does not do full justice to the width that Heidegger's concept of the thing (*Ding*) afforded it. In their example, the process chain is lengthened, integrated, and it contains a wider spectrum of material ramifications, much like in Robert Ryman's work. The physicality is still there – it just is at a different place. The case gets more complex, of course, if the dematerialisation occurs all the way through to the presentation of the work, with the presentation, or indeed incarnation, of ideas bordering on the absence of any form of materiality even in its widest, generally accepted sense. Similar to Malevich's Black Square invoking the idea of zero-degree painting,

ultra-conceptual art in its liminal state would invoke the notion of zero-degree materiality.

Where Lippard and Chandler converge with Lyotard's thoughts on dematerialisation and immateriality, respectively, is the focus on the dramaturgy of information, the importance of presentation. Lyotard, in preparing the exhibition "Les Immatériaux", insisted that the aim of the exhibition was "to make visible, even palpable (and so 'present') a kind of 'post-industrial' techno-scientific condition" (Rajchman, 2009, p.2). Notably, in his essay Rajchmann uses the term "palpable" (in translation) after it earlier emerged in connection with Roman Jakobson, the Russian linguist, who used it to illustrate the material nature of the pictorial signs that the transrational language Zaum facilitated. It would seem that there has been an underlying, and over the decades frequently re-emerging, agreement ever since Russian avant-garde's focus on faktura according to which not only can materiality contain the immaterial, but the immaterial itself can almost have a certain sense of tactility to it. As Rajchman (2009, p.3) points out, "In Lyotard's labyrinthine theatre of the new ... 'condition' of information, 'immateriality' was no longer conceived in terms of freeing concepts or ideas from all materials, but, on the contrary, of shifting the idea of 'materiality' away from that of 'formed matter' (including the 'modernist' distinction between form and content) and towards the 'techno-sciences' and the city." Lyotard's tactility is an urban one, defying Greenberg's and Fried's concepts of modernism and its self-referential materiality. At the same time his project substantiates the link as much as the blurred nature of the borders between the material and the immaterial; indeed, it goes further than that and questions that dialectic within materiality (in the sense that perhaps there should not be a DIA-lectic, but a multi-lectic of sorts, along a continuous scale of materiality vs. immateriality).

AGNES MARTIN

Though unlikely, questions of materiality that are manifest in the Russian avant-garde and early monochromes can also be identified in the work of Agnes Martin. As Rosenberger explains about Martin's work:

“Perhaps it is because narratives, particularly teleological narratives, simply do not register with regard to her paintings. Unlike Reinhardt, she did not continually refine her approach in order to create an ultimate expression – a ‘first’ or a ‘last’ painting. Nor was her goal the reduction of form or material effects to their logical conclusion... The particularity of Martin's paintings was not achieved solely by her hand-drawn lines, as many have suggested; instead it was the sum of her decisions about the *material facture* [my emphasis] of her paintings that bore the unique effects of the work.” (Rosenberger, 2011, p.112-113)

Although I have pointed out earlier that the Russian term *faktura* exceeded its English counterpart, *facture*, in terms of expanse (NB. to what extent it was doing so at any point in time remains only vaguely defined at best, seeing the ever-shifting and never fully defined nature of the term *faktura*), Rosenberger's focus on the “material *facture*” comes across as lynchpin of her argument. And it is when Rosenberger concedes that “Martin is often thought of as a painter of diaphanous acrylic washes, thinned and dematerialized” (2011, p.108) that the expanded field, the immaterial of the material shines through and sets up a link with *faktura* as known and used by the Russian avant-garde. Rosenberger's essay is in fact not the only one that takes the materiality in Agnes Martin's work as its cornerstone (see below for a discussion of Michael Newman's essay that originates from a similar starting point). This is why I would claim that the – at first glance – unlikely line of investigation (Malevich, Rodchenko, Martin) is actually not an extroverted choice as much as it explores questions of materiality that have emerged in the work of

these artists. Malevich and Rodchenko ended up with the monochrome on their trajectory of material enquiry. Agnes Martin takes a conscious step away from the undifferentiated, formless monochrome and engages with the grid – the other archetypically form of modernist aesthetic expression, where tabula rasa and the last painting meet (although, as discussed above, not as part of any teleological project of her own).

Agnes Martin would sit in her rocking chair and wait for inspiration, sometimes for hours. Inspiration would come to her in the form of a stamp-sized version of the finished painting in her mind (a story told by Arne Glimcher in conversation with Frances Morris at Tate Modern (2013)). The stamp-sized, perfect picture in her mind had to be translated into the format of the canvas – 72 x 72 inches at first, until 1995, when she changed to 60 x 60 inches. To this end, she would do pages of calculations that contained the fractions she needed for her canvases to reference the idea in her mind. She would put two layers of gesso on and then sketch out the lines. As Rosenberger points out, Martin “described herself as a ‘pretty speedy painter’, [but] her attention to scale suggests a creative process based on the careful deliberation through which the possibilities of her material elements were utilized to produce precise formal structures.” (2011, p.106) Along similar lines, and with reference to the transformation process from Martin’s idea into the finished canvas, Wilson (1966, p.46) observes that “pencilled lines and corrections show the painter correcting the canvas, according to some visions that exist independently of the canvas. The vision is not discovered in the act of painting... The image in her mind is brought total to the canvas.” And with respect to the materiality of one of Martin’s paintings, Wilson says

“Martin makes great use of the fabric of her canvas. These paintings are in the grain, with the grain... The precise small linear imprints that make up the large central geometric forms appear... out of the fabric, which is plain ground of deftly tinted with pale textured

grounds... Agnes Martin's paintings seem to grow out of the fabric." (Wilson, 1966, p.47)

The monochrome might be considered suspended in time, or indeed, before time. This is Agnes Martin's point of departure as she introduces the subtlest traces of pictorial decision-making into her works. Her traces expand into delicate lines, and these lines in turn take the monochrome out of its temporally suspended state twofold: Martin infuses the work with time by taking it through a lengthy, traceable process; every line of her pencil testament to the seconds, minutes, and hours spent on it, indeed, she seems to create time lines as she is moving horizontally and vertically across the canvas. And the same painterly decisions generate a form of differentiation that the monochrome does not offer: the void formlessness of the monochrome is put into a dialogue with, and juxtaposed by, traces, marks, and lines. Where there is differentiation, there is place. And with place, there comes time. Martin thus lifts the monochrome out of its temporal suspension.

Martin in turn could be thought of as suspended in her own utopian quest for ideal states of existence and perfection for each painting she made. Hers was not a teleological project (in contrast to, for example, Ad Reinhardt, as Rosenberger (2011, p.112) points out). In Martin's own words: "One must see the Ideal in one's own mind. It is like a memory of perfection" (Martin quoted in Cooke, 2011, p.11). The quest for perfection is indeed a leitmotif running through Martin's process as well: she would destroy any work that fell short of her own standards, regardless of how much praise it might have garnered from others: "[I destroy paintings] as I go along. My inspiration is an image in my mind that I can see and I try to paint it. If I don't get the exact scale it's no good." (Martin, quoted in Eauclaire, 1993, p.17)¹⁰ Critics have always been quick to laud Martin's work for its alleged simplicity, pointing out the lyrical, reduced, and spiritual qualities of her work¹¹. However, I wonder whether this tendency might not also

¹⁰ In a conversation at Tate Modern, Glimcher (2013) called her "the best editor of work of any artist who ever lived."

¹¹ While Lynne Cooke made reference to Martin's "narrowed syntax" and her "... astonishing sparseness" (2004, Introduction), Hilton Kramer suggested that Martin's paintings were "almost a form of prayer" (1976). Yet at the same time, due to the transcendent character that critics have attributed to her work, the physical features of her paintings tend to take a backseat when it

have to do with the fact that an engagement with the materiality, indeed the *faktura*, in Martin's work may initially not seem as obvious and compelling as the focus on its aforementioned, less tangible but probably more often vocalised aspects of a spiritual and transcendental nature. Describing it as "an oscillation in the optic nerve", Peter Schjeldahl comes to the conclusion that analysing the *faktura* in Martin's work is "a conceptual traffic jam: sheer undecidability. My analytic faculties, after trying to conclude that what I'm looking at is one thing or another, give up, and my mind collapses into a momentary engulfing state that is either 'spiritual' or nameless." (Schjeldahl, 2004, p.95)

Michael Newman's essay "Phenomenality and Materiality in Agnes Martin" (2011) is a central piece of critical writing when it comes to the analysis of materiality in Agnes Martin's work. The title is a nod to Paul de Man's essay, "Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant" (1996)¹². Newman bases the initial part of his essay on Rosalind Krauss's reading of Agnes Martin's work ("Agnes Martin: The /Cloud/", 1992), which in turn hinges critically on the phenomenological approach pursued by Kasha Linville in her own text ("Agnes Martin: An Appreciation", 1971). Newman, much like this short canon quoted, recalls his own experience when looking at Martin's work. As he says, he finds himself "moving back and forth, coming close to inspect the surface, then moving across the painting Then I step back, moving gradually about eight feet or so away to take in the painting as a whole. ..." (2011, p.199). This echoes Krauss's tripartite account of materiality/atmosphere/opacity in Agnes Martin, a distinction that equally results from varying distances of viewing the work: "the materiality of the canvas and graphite lines from close up, the moment when illusion takes over (not spatial

comes to critical reception and analysis. Brendan Prendeville for example points out the "rudimentary material facts that one might otherwise treat as beneath regard" (2008, p.64). As Christina Bryan Rosenberger pointedly says, "The wonder, it seems, is that so much expression can be conjured from so little material substance." (2011, p.103). One critic who did focus on the materiality of Martin's work was Thomas McEvelley, claiming that "[at] the heart of Martin's work is the dichotomy between an ordered system and a particular event within that system – the personal feeling of the lines, which proceed over the surface with a heartbreaking delicacy of touch" (1987, p.94). While this analysis clearly carries connotations of tactility, McEvelley's approach to the materiality of the paintings also problematically allows the projections of the viewer's subjective consciousness to take over, as Michael Newman (2011, p.224, FN 3) rightly points out.

¹² The popularity of this essay manifests itself not the least in the fact that yet another essay had come out before Newman's above-cited work with a title that played on Paul de Man's original work, i.e. T.J. Clark's "Phenomenality and Materiality in Cézanne" (2001).

illusion but an atmosphere, like mist), then the point at which the lines are lost and the painting, according to Linville, quoted by Krauss 'closes down entirely, becoming completely opaque.' ” (Linville and Krauss quoted in Newman, 2011, p.199). Krauss rejects readings of Martin's work that by interpreting landscape and transcendence invoke the abstract sublime and thus attribute to landscape and transcendence the role of the signified of the painting's aesthetic manifestations. Instead, she claims that “atmosphere” in Martin's paintings functions not as a signified, but as a signifier. It does not stand on its own, but relates to other signifiers. It stands for something else. Krauss then proceeds to identify the signifier /atmosphere/ as the “optical” that is bracketed by the “tactile” moments of materiality in Martin's work, i.e. the woven surface (up close) and the square panel (from afar)¹³. Newman resists Krauss's somewhat static reading here, pointing at the transitionality and fluency involved in the experience of Martin's paintings. The material dominates, or insists, up to a certain (vantage) point, from which onwards the painting becomes optical, or phenomenal. These liminal regions carry a particular degree of “edge”, a kind of dynamism that is brought about by being suspended for an instant in the in-between.

At this point, and in line with the discussion of materiality vs. phenomenality, Newman introduces two kinds of materiality into his account. The dichotomy of subjective projection¹⁴ and materiality that is indifferent to the subject, that resists said projection raises the question of what the relationship is between the experience of the former vs. the latter. How does the materiality resisting phenomenological projection relate to the differential nature of signifiers such as /atmosphere/? “[Signification] resulting from the difference between terms does not depend on the sensuous qualities of those terms. The materiality of the signifiers in its difference is not the same as the materiality of ‘stuff’” (Newman, 2011, p.202).

In Greenberg's optical (rather than tactile; see Krauss, above) account of modernist painting that defines itself through what it is not

¹³ She does so by bringing in Alois Riegl's account of a late Roman bronze belt buckle (Riegl, 1988).

¹⁴ Newman refers to “perceptual intentionality” (2011, p.201).

– for example, sculpture – he still resorts to a material basis: flatness¹⁵. He thus sets it up in a field of oscillation between phenomenal experience and the materiality that makes it possible yet resists (or escapes) it: the painting as signifier and, at the same time, material practice. Does the resistance of materiality depend on the notion of phenomenal experience as largely or exclusively optical? Greenberg points out that painting is restricted by conventions that prevent the reintroduction of three-dimensional space. The question is whether such an illusion can ever be totally avoided, whether total flatness can ever be absolute. “The first mark made on a canvas destroys its literal and utter flatness, and the result of the marks made on it by an artist like Mondrian is still a kind of illusion that suggests a kind of third dimension. Only now is it strictly pictorial, strictly optical third dimension.” (Greenberg, 1960, p.90) Greenberg argues a case for the purely optical, or visual, character of painting. This is where Krauss disagrees, having introduced the aforementioned notion of tactility into her account. The introduction of tactility renders opticality less totalising and less diametrically opposed to non-relational materiality (see below).

In the second half of his essay, Newman subjects Martin’s work to an analysis based on Paul de Man’s concept of pure, radical materiality¹⁶. This concept originates in de Man’s essay delivered as lecture, “Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant” (1983), where he constructed an alternative reading of Kant’s account of the failure of the imagination to create an image of the greatest magnitude or the overwhelmingly powerful in the mathematical or the dynamic sublime, respectively. According to de Man, that failure does not reveal the freedom of human reason, but a level of radical materiality “that is neither phenomenal (that is, a matter of intuition and consciousness) nor empirical (in the “metaphysical” sense of externally caused)”

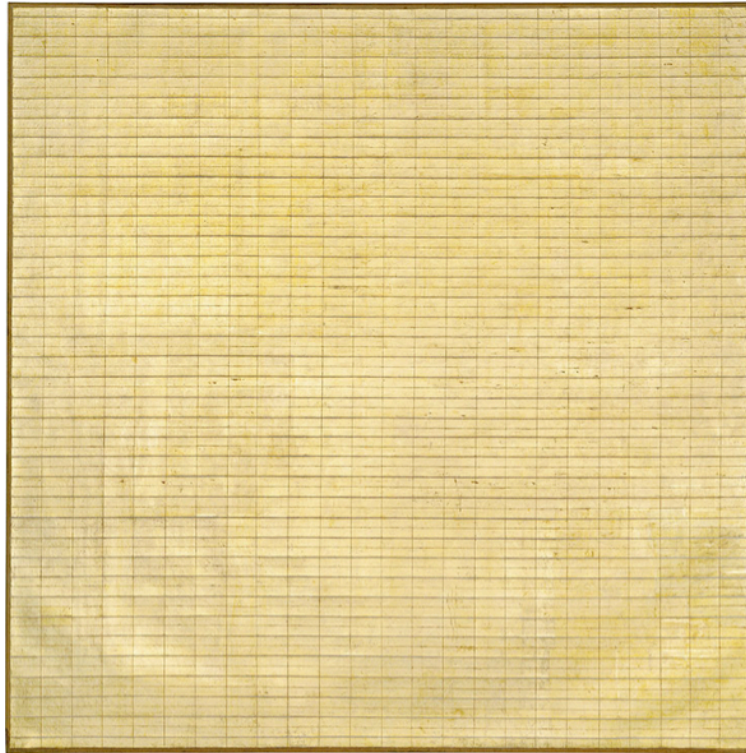
¹⁵ “It was the stressing of the ineluctable flatness of the surface that remained, however, more fundamental than anything else to the process by which pictorial art criticized and defined itself under Modernism. For flatness alone was unique and exclusive to pictorial art.” (Greenberg, 1960, p.87)

¹⁶ Newman uses several cognates for this idea of pure and/or radical materiality, including (but not limiting himself to) inscribed materiality, nonrelational materiality, bare materiality, and indifferent materiality. The variety of registers results from the scope of arguments through which he is taking the reader, and while, when taken out of context, the sheer number of different terms he uses to navigate de Man’s rather limited set of definitions may seem excessive, Newman’s choice of terminology is supportive to the respective context. To the extent that it helps the argument, I will be switching between de Man’s original terminology and Newman’s derived cognates.

(Newman, 2011, pp. 208-209). As a linguist, de Man sees this materiality emerge on the back of the three dimensions of language: de Man calls them the phenomenalised dimension, i.e. the reading where we form images in our mind (N.B. this level is made possible by rhetorical tropes); the semiological dimension, which refers to the structures of linguistic differentiation, e.g. grammar (N.B. this dimension is autonomous and without semantic depth); and lastly, the dimension of pure inscription. This is non-relational materiality, and it is necessarily forgotten in both phenomenal dimension and attentiveness to structural ties. We get the notion of pre-existence; and Newman points out that it is not part of the consciousness and might well be regarded as inhuman. While Paul de Man comes from the area of the text, Newman suggests that this concept of radical, indifferent materiality can also be brought to bear on Agnes Martin's work.

In the mathematical sublime, Kant differentiates between two acts of imagination: apprehension, which is successive, and comprehension, which is totalising. With growing apprehension comes a more difficult comprehension¹⁷. The experience of Martin's paintings can be read along those lines: as the number of lines perceived increases, the point where we cannot apprehend both the accumulation of lines individually and the painting as a whole any more. "In an aesthetic comprehension, totalisation must be given in a single intuition" (Newman, 2011, p.209). This becomes increasingly impossible in this example. De Man compares this experience of the mathematical sublime to the phenomenal process of reading a text in which "the eye moves horizontally in succession whereas the mind has to combine vertically the cumulative understanding of what has been apprehended." (de Man, 1983, p.77)

¹⁷ "To take in a quantum intuitively in the imagination so as to be able to use it as a measure, or unit for estimating magnitude by numbers, involves two operations of this faculty: apprehension (*apprehensio*) and comprehension (*comprehensio aethetica*). Apprehension presents no difficulty: for this process can be carried on *ad infinitum*; but with the advance of apprehension, comprehension becomes more difficult at every step and soon attains its maximum, and this is the aesthetically greatest fundamental measure for the estimation of magnitude. For if the apprehension has reached a point beyond which the representations of sensuous intuition in the case of the parts first apprehended begin to disappear from the imagination as this advances to the apprehension of yet others, as much, then, is lost at one end as is gained at the other, and for comprehension we get a maximum which the imagination cannot exceed." (Kant, 1978, pp.124-125)



(Agnes Martin: *Friendship*, 1963, gold leaf and gesso on canvas, 191 x 191cm)

The oscillating appearance and disappearance of the materiality of the letter in the process of reading addressed above (“non-relational materiality”) and the experience of Agnes Martin’s paintings offer striking similarities. The materiality of the letter has to be forgotten in order for the reading process (the “totalisation”) not to stall. Otherwise the letters cannot carry the meaning inscribed into their combinations. Indeed, de Man argues for a non-perceptual, linguistic moment in painting: “... learn to read pictures rather than to *imagine* meaning” (de Man, 1986, p. 10, original emphasis). In comparison to more phenomenal accounts of “reading”, i.e. interpreting, a picture put forward for example by Didi-Huberman¹⁸, de Man suggests a non-phenomenal reading that refrains from using words to conjure up images in the mind but instead adheres to the materiality of the letter. The question arises of course how this sort of non-phenomenal

¹⁸ While Didi-Huberman does somewhat converge with de Man in terms of the simile of “reading” pictures, he takes issue with the notion of discretely defined, underlying entities such as letters existing in pictures that can be pinned down: “One of the most obvious theoretical problems posed by painting is that the treasure of the signifier is neither truly universal nor truly extant prior to speech, as is the case with language and writing. The minimal unities here are not given but produced, and moreover, not being truly discreet, like the letters of a word, for example, they pertain neither to a syntax nor to a vocabulary in the strict sense. And yet there are here treasures, structures, meanings.” (Didi-Huberman, 2005, p.263)

materiality can be seen, i.e. apprehended. Here it is crucial to remember that de Man thinks that the phenomenalisation into images through words works on the basis of linguistic tropes or figures of speech¹⁹. De Man claims to locate non-tropological “material vision” in Kant’s account of the sublime. This would be a form of vision that does not rely on tropes, on the assignment of any, say, metaphorical content to an object. Here, de Man moves from the mathematical to the dynamic sublime and highlights the way Kant introduces the kind of seeing called on when “objects in nature are susceptible of producing sublime effects [are] considered in a radically nonteleological manner, completely detached from any purpose or interest that the mind may find in them” (de Man, 1983, p.80):

“If, then, we call the sight of the starry heaven sublime, we must not place at the foundation of judgement concepts of worlds inhabited by rational beings and regard the bright points, with which we see the space above us as filled, as their suns moving in circles purposively fixed with reference to them; but we must regard it, just as we see it ..., as a distant, all-embracing vault. ... To find the ocean nevertheless sublime we must regard it as poets do ..., merely by what the eye reveals ... – if it is at rest, as a clear mirror of water only bounded by the heavens; if it is stormy, as an abyss threatening to overwhelm everything.” (Kant quoted in de Man, 1983, p.80)

In resorting to Kant’s concept of *Augenschein*²⁰, de Man introduces the idea of an appearing to the eye without intervention of the mind. “No mind is involved in the Kantian vision of ocean and heaven,” as de Man insists (1983, p.82), and he substantiates this claim with the tautology inherent in the term *Augenschein*, which contains both the eye itself and what appears to the eye. This form of appearing is what de Man refers to as a “material vision” (1983, p.82) and continues “The sea is called a mirror, not because it is supposed to reflect anything, but to stress a flatness devoid of any suggestions of depth.

¹⁹ For example prosopopeia, i.e. the personification and attribution of voice to objects; as well as metaphors, conceits, similes etc.

²⁰ German for, literally translated, “the appearance to the eye”, or “as it appears to the eye”

In the same way and to the same extent that this vision is purely material, devoid of any reflective or intellectual complication, it is also purely formal, devoid of any semantic depth and reducible to the formal mathematization or geometrization of pure optics.” (de Man, 1983, p.83) “Seeing them as meaningful,” adds J. Hillis Miller in his essay “Paul de Man as Allergen” (2001, p.191), “would occur, for example, when we view the sea as reservoir of edible fish, or the sky as a producer of life-giving rain.”

De Man’s concept of material vision takes Kant’s critique of the aesthetic into a “formal materialism that runs counter to all values and characteristics associated with aesthetic experience” (de Man, 1983, p.83). It is formal because of its lack of meaning and semantic depth. To this extent it is a bare form of materiality. De Man wonders how the concrete representation of ideas can be reconciled with pure ocular vision, and claims that what is at stake here is what he calls the “incarnational” conception of the aesthetic²¹: the work of art is regarded as an organically unified body, either literally (e.g. as a figurative sculpture), or metaphorically. This is where de Man’s late tendency towards a reading that predicates on dismemberment comes in, as he refuses to consider art or literature as symbolic unity or materially incarnated idea: we have to “disarticulate, mutilate the body... We must consider our limbs the way the primitive man considered the house, entirely severed from any purpose or use” (de Man, 1983, p.88). Putting text under scrutiny, what follows is the dismemberment of language: “... as meaning-producing tropes are replaced by the fragmentation of sentences and propositions into discrete words, or the fragmentation of words into syllables or finally

²¹ De Man points out that in

“the businesslike world of morality, even the free and playful imagination becomes an instrument of work. Its task, its labor, is precisely to translate the abstractions of reason back into the phenomenal world of appearances and images whose presence is retained in the very word imagination, *Bild*, in the German *Einbildungskraft* [power of imagination; translation mine]. Why this incarnation of the idea has to occur is accounted for in various ways. It is, first of all, a quasi-theological necessity that follows necessarily from our fallen condition. The need for aesthetic judgment and activity, although it defines man, is the expression of a shortcoming, of a curse rather than of an excess of power and inventiveness.” (De Man, 1983, p.84) Note that *Einbildungskraft* is usually translated as “power of imagination”. The interesting aspect is that in its most literal translation though, it would be the “power of unifying into one image”, based on the fact that, while *Einbildung* is generally read as imagination (i.e. the creation of an image or images), it literally and very specifically means “unification into one (“*ein*”) image”, or “establishing one image”. One could argue that the term “imagination” has thus already achieved a higher degree of linguistic phenomenalisation or totalisation.

letters” (de Man, 1983, p.89). Following de Man, it is here that the materiality of *Augenschein* becomes the “prosaic materiality of the letter” (de Man, 1983, p.90).

How can we apply this form of dismemberment in Agnes Martin’s paintings? The parallel lines in Martin’s works can arguably be seen as form of dismemberment: on the one hand, the drawn lines carry the history of drawing as a practice (e.g. of the body of a human subject or any other 3-D shape); on the other hand, the drawing of parallel lines or a grid takes apart, dismembers the memory of that history by moulding it into form, i.e. formalising it, just like written letters are both constituent and dismemberment of the word²². Remembering Krauss’s earlier account of Linville’s three distances and the conversion of the signified atmosphere into the signifier /atmosphere/, Newman sees both disarticulation and dismemberment as given in Martin’s work: disarticulation as the “unsynthesizability of proximate and distant views” (Newman, 2011, p.213), and dismemberment of the embodiment of drawing.

²² Note that the act of drawing serves as embodiment.

INSCRIPTION

Following de Man's rationale, Agnes Martin's lines are meaningless inscriptions, like letters in a text²³. They come without semantic depth, and in their uniformity of execution shun rhetorical tropes (see above, the "phenomenalised dimension"). That being said, there are of course numerous readings of Martin's work, not the least nurtured by a certain tendency to read Martin's own writings, that interpret them along the lines of natural, or indeed, transcendental references in spite of the formal materialism of the paintings. Newman holds that this contributes to the tension they exude: the relationship of material inscription (like the letters of a text) and (or, versus) natural phenomena projected by a subject – "The material inscriptions make possible the tropological references while at the same time undoing them, because in themselves they have no relation to meaning and, as signifiers, have no intrinsic qualities whatsoever" (Newman, 2011, p.212). The materiality in Agnes Martin's paintings thus emerges between the failure to totalise, phenomenalise them as viewer and the non-relational material turn facilitated by the material inscription that harks back to de Man's idea of the role of letters in text.

De Man locates the idea of inscription at the level of pure materiality of a text. It is the kind of inscribed nonrelational materiality that Newman talks about in connection with Agnes Martin and that has to be forgotten in favour of the other two dimensions of language: the phenomenalised or tropological dimension and the semiological dimension. There is something primordial, something forever preceding yet eluding about this idea of non-phenomenal materiality, as de Man develops it, while re-reading Kant, out of Derrida's notion of originary writing, the inscription that has always already been there. Derrida equates grammar with writing as a system of inscription²⁴. This system precedes any individual effort of linguistic production. Writing does not rely on a point of origin. It relies on the

²³ In the context I am setting up here, they are "meaningless" individually to the extent that their meaning can only be unlocked upon assembly (phenomenalisation). So strictly speaking, they are not entirely bare of meaning in that they carry unrelated, elementary building blocks of meaning in them from the beginning (or, following Derrida (see below), they have always had them inscribed without an actual beginning as such). Access to them is via the phenomenon, to paraphrase the earlier account of pure materiality.

²⁴ "De la Grammatologie" (1967; bibliography: 1976, translated)

possibility of inscription as a generally available option, referred to as “arche-writing” – a writing without origin²⁵.

In his “Confessions” (1979), de Man talks about the machine-like, formalist ruthlessness of pre-inscribed patterns, which ultimately takes us back to the idea of the not-yet-phenomenalised level of language, i.e. in de Man’s mind, the territory of letters constitutive of pure materiality.

“By saying that the excuse is not only a fiction but also a machine one adds to the connotation of referential detachment, of gratuitous improvisation, that of the implacable repetition of a preordained pattern. Like Kleist’s marionettes, the machine is both ‘anti-grav’, the anamorphosis of a form detached from meaning and capable of taking on any structure whatever, yet entirely ruthless in its inability to modify its own structural design for nonstructural reasons. The machine is like the

²⁵ Derrida argued that the so-called linguistic turn in twentieth century philosophy was crucial to the emergence of the science of grammatology. Following on from the linguistic turn and in the context of Derrida’s work, A. Bradley suggests a “scriptural turn” (Bradley, 2008, p.52) that acted as a catalyst for Derrida’s thought about writing. At the time of preparing “Of Grammatology”, Derrida was able to observe numerous examples of this scriptural turn within a vast array of fields, i.e. not only within philosophy, but also in life and cognitive sciences: the genetic code (or script) of the DNA; and more importantly, cybernetic theory. Derrida took particular interest in the sort of systems that were structured by inscription. The coding or programming lodged in systems of biology and cybernetics, for example, inverts the logocentric structure (i.e., in Derrida’s terms, the way in which the philosophical, literary, and cultural discourses of the West privilege certain terms in a text at the expense or exclusion of others and thus suggests a stable or central meaning of text that actually does not exist) of spoken versus written discourse by regarding language as a sub-species of the more general concept of writing, as opposed to the other way around. Derrida considers writing the originary condition of language (in the original referred to as *arche-écriture*, with “arche-writing” and “originary writing” representing its increasingly translated equivalents); his point here is a logical one, not a chronological one. As Bradley (2008, p.54) explains,

“Derrida is going to argue that a certain idea of ‘writing’ is not simply a linguistic condition but rather approaches the status of something like an ontological *condition*: what we understand as consciousness, culture, and (if molecular biology is to be believed) even the very building blocks of life itself are structured according to the principles of mediation, difference and relation that for the last two millennia have been synonymous with ‘writing’ alone. In this sense, too, we cannot see writing as something that arrives on the scene *after* an original state – speech, nature, or presence – because it is already there at the origin itself. (Bradley, 2008, p.54 [emphasis in the original])

Given that writing is already there in the beginning, Derrida, with his concept of originary writing, does not attempt to define a new point of origin. Rather, he subverts the idea of an absolute origin to begin with by unhinging any pure form of historical, theological, or philosophical “point of ‘presence’ to which everything can be traced back” (Bradley, 2008, p.55). Cybernetics is a case in point: here, writing undermines the metaphysical project of establishing absolute hierarchies geared towards the institution of an original presence. The question of where a cybernetic system begins is, in philosophical terms, a kind of category error. A cybernetic system is a feedback loop, an “originary complex” (Bradley, 2008, p.55) with no beginning and no end and continuously moves information around. The “origin” of cybernetics and other grammatologies consists of an originary state of relation rather than a simple ground or point, i.e. a singularity. Derrida calls it “an element without simplicity” (Derrida, 1976, p.9).

grammar of the text when it is isolated from its rhetoric, the merely formal element without which no text can be generated. There can be no use of language which is not, within a certain perspective thus radically formal, i.e. mechanical, no matter how deeply this aspect may be concealed by aesthetic, formalistic delusions.” (de Man, 1979, p.294)

Here we have de Man’s allusion to a “ruthless machine”²⁶, an allusion that ties together the notions of inscribed materiality in the letter and Derrida’s idea of grammar as machine that is at the heart of linguistic production. It is this idea of the ruthless machine following formal necessities that also reverberates in a piece of literature that takes the idea of inscription to the extreme, while arguably touching on incarnation and dismemberment, i.e. Franz Kafka’s “Penal Colony”²⁷.

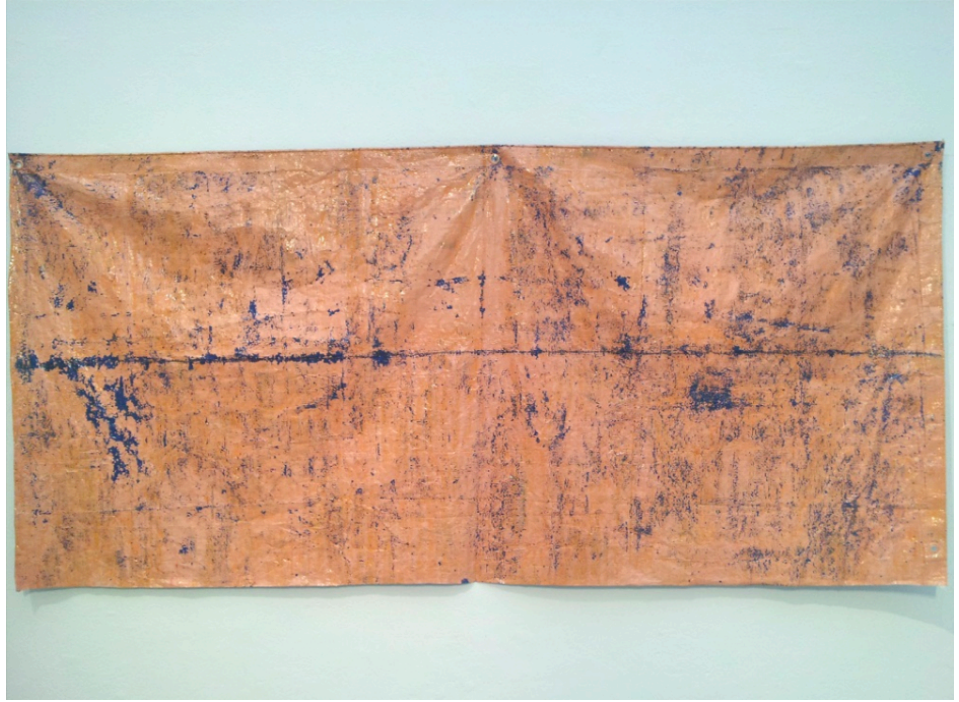
In Kafkas’s text, the prisoner does not know his sentence. He is supposed to learn it on his body, in a long and terrifyingly inhuman procedure of inscription. Curiously that term, inhuman, strikes a chord with how Michael Newman describes de Man’s discussion of the letter: “As pure inscriptions, letters are senseless and distinct, each without relation to the others. This inscribed nonrelational materiality is necessarily forgotten in both phenomenal reading and reflexive attentiveness to structural relations – it is not a matter of consciousness, and one might even say inhuman.” (Newman, 2011, p.209)

²⁶ “Ruthless machine” – a term that Derrida uses in his discussion of de Man (2001, p.307).

²⁷ The crucial passage:

“ ‘Whatever commandment the prisoner has disobeyed is written upon his body by the Harrow. This prisoner, for instance ... will have written on his body: HONOR THY SUPERIORS!’ ... Many questions were troubling the explorer, but at the sight of the prisoner he asked only: ‘Does he know his sentence?’ ... ‘No,’ said the officer... ‘There would be no point in telling him. He’ll learn it on his body.’

‘[T]here are two kinds of needles arranged in multiple patterns, Each long needle has a short one beside it. The long needle does the writing, and the short needles sprays a jet of water to wash away the blood and keep the inscription clear. Blood and water together are then conducted here through small runnels into this main runnel and down a waste pipe into the pit. ... The Harrow is beginning to write; when it finishes the first draft of the inscription on the man’s back, the layer of cotton wool begins to roll and slowly turns the body over, to give the Harrow fresh space for writing. Meanwhile the raw part that has been written on lies on the cotton wool, which is specially prepared to staunch the bleeding and so makes all ready for a new deepening of the script. Then these teeth at the edge of the Harrow, as the body turns further around, tear the cotton wool away from the wounds, throw it into the pit, and there is more work for the Harrow. So it keeps on writing deeper and deeper for the whole twelve hours.’ ” (from: In The Penal Colony. Kafka, 2005, p.149)



(Richard Zeiss: *XXXIII*, 2015, egg tempera and yacht varnish on tarpaulin, 206 x 110cm; at Hockney Gallery/RCA, London)

By referring to the aforementioned passage of the sublime in heavens and the ocean (“as poets do”)²⁸ in Kant, Paul de Man basically attempts to illustrate how such nonphenomenal reading could manifest itself. It brought me back to the prisoner in Kafka’s Penal Colony. The text is not fully conclusive, but it seems the prisoner’s death and “enlightenment” as the officer calls it, that is to say, the phenomenal turn, occur roughly at the same time. Much like in Newman’s reading of Agnes Martin’s work, so here, too, both mathematical and dynamic sublime can be brought to bear. The process of machine-led, quasi-formalist inscription on the prisoner’s body as a protracted process of apprehension and comprehension, similar to the way Kant uses these terms in the discussion of the mathematical sublime, seems to echo the way those two principles

²⁸ Again, for reference:

“If, then, we call the sight of the starry heaven sublime, we must not place at the foundation of judgement concepts of world worlds inhabited by rational beings and regard the bright points, with which we see the space above us as filled, as their suns moving in circles purposively fixed with reference to them; but we must regard it, just as we see it ..., as a distant, all-embracing vault. ... To find the ocean nevertheless sublime we must regard it as poets do ..., merely by what the eye reveals ... – if it is at rest, as a clear mirror of water only bounded by the heavens; if it is stormy, as an abyss threatening to overwhelm everything.” (Kant quoted in de Man, 1983, p.80)

are at work when Newman illustrates them in his essay on Martin. “It is possible here”, says Newman “to bring up for comparison the experience of Martin’s paintings: as we attempt to increase the number of drawn lines that we apprehend, a point of saturation is fairly quickly reached at which we cannot perceive both the accumulation of lines in their individual distinctness and the painting as a whole.” (Newman, 2011, p.210)

Whether materiality is inscribed into letters (de Man), lines (Martin/Newman), or arguably in a space between them (Kafka’s Penal Colony), their meaning as individual signs and as a compound is independent and incompatible. “When you spell a word, you say a certain number of meaningless letters, which then come together in the word, but in each of the letters the word is not present. The two are absolutely independent of each other.” (de Man, 1986, p.89) The idea of inscription as used by de Man is difficult to fathom²⁹. In fact, it so escapes our phenomenised senses that de Man, when describing the materiality of inscription, becomes unsurprisingly vague: “The materiality (as distinct from the phenomenality) that is thus revealed, the unseen ‘cristal’ [sic!] whose existence thus becomes a certain *there* and a certain *then* which can become a *here* and a *now* in the reading ‘now’ taking place, is not the materiality of the mind or of a time... – none of which exist, except in the figure of prosopopeia³⁰ – but the materiality of an inscription.” (1986, p.51; original emphasis; special characters edited) And he continues, tracing out an area rather than a point by explaining what inscription is not: “Inscription is neither a figure, nor a sign, nor a cognition, nor a hypogram, nor a matrix...” (1986, p.51) It is not explicitly clear, what inscription is, then, yet it is material enough, so to speak, to be constituent of words, sentences, and thus language. Much like in so-called virtual salami fraud³¹, the individual constituent parts (in the

²⁹ As pointed out earlier, Derrida suggests an account of writing and as such inscription that has no origin and thus has always been there. The parallels to certain religions are as difficult to miss as the challenge to grasping this concept in a tangible fashion is unsurprising. Paul de Man seems to follow Derrida’s account in this context.

³⁰ A rhetorical device in which a speaker or writer communicates to the audience by speaking as another person or object.

³¹ “The classic story about a salami attack is the old “collect-the-roundoff” trick. In this scam, a programmer modifies the arithmetic routines such as interest computations. Typically, the calculations are carried out to several decimal places beyond the customary 2 or 3 kept for financial records. For example, when currency is in dollars, the roundoff goes up to the nearest penny about half the time and down the rest of the time. If the programmer arranges to collect

context of this paper, inscribed letters; in salami fraud, the third and following decimal places of an amount of money) are not defined, or most literally do not compute, in the overarching, phenomenised system. Yet by way of accumulation they then pass the invisible threshold into that system: fractions of cents, not actually on the books in accessible form, add up to millions of, for example, US dollars. And Agnes Martin's work is synthesised despite the "unsynthesizability of proximate and distant views" (Newman, 2011, p.213).

these fractions of pennies in a separate account, a sizable fund can grow with no warning to the financial institution." (Kabay, 2002, p.1)

FROM TELEOLOGY THROUGH AGNES MARTIN INTO THE PRESENT

I have discussed how painting has been under critical scrutiny from its early theorisation by Malevich and will further develop how it appeared to be a dialectic of expanded materialism and transcendental ideas: expanded, because it was footed on the idea of an artificial language (Zaum) as material, expanding artistic possibilities³²; transcendental, because, as Foster, Krauss, Bois, Buchloh point out,

“Malevich was not a positivist (he always stuck to an antirationalist point of view that brought him, especially in his late, postrevolutionary texts, close to a mystical position). Even in the most ‘deductive’ of his canvases, he always made sure that his squares were slightly skewed so that (by virtue of the [making strange] one would notice their stark simplicity and read them as stubbornly ‘one’ (both unique and whole) rather than identifying them as geometric figures. For what mattered most to him, as he kept repeating, was ‘intuition’” (Foster, Krauss, Bois, Buchloh, 2004, p.132)

Malevich’s practice was also driven by a strongly essentialist teleology: “Malevich thought that each art had to define its own essence by eliminating those conventions deemed unnecessary and, in this evolutionary march, each work was to be a step beyond the preceding one...” (Foster, Krauss, Bois, Buchloh, 2004, p.134) The empathically teleological nature of Malevich’s project also manifests itself in the way he would date his paintings: his was the conviction that, while a flashback or review was acceptable, it would have been “morally wrong to present something which could (and should) have been done in 1912 as dating from 1928” (Foster, Krauss, Bois, Buchloh, 2004, p.134)

³² As Chlenova (2014, p.69) explains, “[t]he boundless space that Malevich extolled from his first Suprematist manifestos was... a very concrete result of as sustained scrutiny of the way in which language functions as a system of arbitrarily established signs whose immobilising net could be lifted by radically new artistic forms.”

Malevich's essentialist teleology would re-emerge in the writings of Clement Greenberg, albeit in a more positivist fashion and (therefore) bereft of Malevich's mysticism. In his often-cited essay "Modernist Painting" (1960), Greenberg famously claimed that "[t]he essence of Modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence." (Greenberg, 1960, p.85) He isolates flatness as the unique factor of paintings (see also p.12, FN9), and focusing on the issue of materiality, he continues

"Realistic, naturalistic art had dissembled the medium, using art to conceal art; Modernism used art to call attention to art. The limitations that constitute the medium of painting – the flat surface, the shape of the support, the properties of the pigment – were treated by the Old Masters as negative factors that could be acknowledged only implicitly or indirectly. Under Modernism these same limitations came to be regarded as positive factors, and were acknowledged openly. Manet's became the first Modernist pictures by virtue of the frankness with which they declared the flat surfaces on which they were painted." (Greenberg, 1960, p.86)

Greenberg appraised, and gave critical licence to, painting about painting, a form of practice that was centripetal, self-referential, and self-critical in nature. This kind of painting would ponder its conditions and, (in its purest form) rejecting external references, would put its own materiality under scrutiny. As Lucy Lippard put it, "[The paintings of] Ralph Humphrey, Robert Ryman, and Brice Marden... emphasise the fact of painting as painting, surfaces as surface, paint as paint in an inactive, unequivocal manner." (1969, p.58)

Greenberg arguably wrote the aforementioned essay, "Modernist Painting", on the cusp of what is often referred to high or late modernism. It was from around that time onwards, and more so in the second half of the 1960s, that painters would start trying to negotiate

a way of expanding the narrow limits set by Greenberg's text. This is not to say that they would not continue to explore the modus operandi of painting and questions of materiality. Sam Gilliam, whose work seems to be going through a renaissance of recognition and commercial success as we speak, is a case in point. In the second half of the 1960s he started exploring the bandwidth of parameters that the support of paintings offered him. His suspended and draped paintings, rather than deliberately trying to reject Greenberg's formalist framework, would seek to expand said parameters. However, Staff claims that

“[the paintings] repudiated a number of precepts that worked to underwrite, if not legitimise the formalist reading of painting. Firstly, the paintings played fast and loose with modernism's articulation – both verbal and physical – of painting. Whilst they were, indeed, foregrounded by their materiality, their physical presence, their somewhat theatrical timbre, eschewed the ostensibly reductivising impulse of formalist aesthetics. Rather than engage in a discourse that was organised around a process of purification and repudiation of what was deemed to be unnecessary, extraneous detail, a painting such as *Light Depth* (1969) ratcheted up both the seemingly flamboyant and the playful within modernist abstraction – characteristics that formalist criticism had sought to avoid.” (Staff, 2013, p.24; original emphasis)

Although it seemed like Greenberg's ideas had been sidelined by the mid-1970s, they never really went away. They always remained in the common consciousness of painting, even if at times they did so more as a negative soundboard than as a positive set of rules along which to align one's painterly practice. Their positive or negative relevance has been of an almost cyclical nature, and painting about painting has been sometimes more, sometimes less loosely manifest in contemporary practice until now, as has the prevalence of questions of materiality. It would appear that modernist and postmodern

painting have been astutely aware of the underlying meta-narrative of the material turn, as it has been referred to³³.

One way Agnes Martin is relevant in this context is through Paul de Man's reading of the materiality in her work (via Michael Newman). De Man's notion of pure materiality rests on the re-reading of Kant's sublime which in turn, following de Man, would appear "non-aesthetic" – or so I interpret his statement, "What makes the sublime compatible with reason is its independence from sensory experience; it is beyond the senses..." (1983, p.125). This takes de Man to the linguistic moment in painting and music, which results from the function of literature³⁴.

"Literature involves the voiding, rather than the affirmation, of aesthetic categories. One of the consequences of this is that, whereas we have traditionally been accustomed to reading literature by analogy with the plastic arts and with music, we now have to recognise the necessity of a non-perceptual, linguistic moment in painting and music, and learn to *read* pictures rather than to *imagine* meaning." (de Man, 1986, p.10, original emphasis)

By setting up this linguistic moment in painting (and music; within the context of this paper, I am of course focusing on painting) that is suspicious of aesthetics, de Man implicitly postulates the relevance of

³³ Iris van der Tuin from Utrecht University: "[T]he material turn focuses on the agency of artistic material itself." (2014)

³⁴ The way de Man arrives at this statement is through his semiotic considerations, which hinge on the relationship between word and thing: according to de Man, while the phenomenality of the signifier (i.e. the sound) does play a part in the correspondence between the name and the thing named, the link between word and thing, that is to say the relationship, is not phenomenal. De Man calls it "conventional" (1986, p.10), which I read as non-aesthetic. According to de Man, this freedom from referential restraint makes the language "epistemologically highly suspect and volatile" (1986, p.10), as its use is now arguably no longer determined by considerations of truth and falsehood, good and evil, or beauty and ugliness. What we are dealing with here is the autonomous potential of language, and where this negative knowledge about the reliability of language is made available, is, as de Man points out, literariness, or indeed, literature. (NB this lack of reliability of literature somewhat echoes Blanchot's take on the defiance of literature to interpretation.) Consequently, the material, phenomenal aspects of the signifier are being foregrounded, which "creates a strong illusion of aesthetic seduction at the very moment when the actual aesthetic function has been, at the very least, suspended. It is inevitable that semiology ... be considered formalistic in the sense of being aesthetically rather than semantically valorised, but the inevitability of such an interpretation does not make it less aberrant." (de Man, 1986, p.10) To paraphrase: there is no aesthetic link between word and thing, yet the word/signifier is mistakenly seen as aestheticised. As a result, when approached from this, in de Man's eyes, flawed angle, semiology, i.e. the study of the making of meaning, hinges on aesthetics, on material accessible to sensual perception, and thus becomes phenomenalsed.

a crucial passage in his essay “Resistance to Theory” by analogy not only for literary texts, but also for painting:

“Literary theory can be said to come into being when the approach to literary texts is no longer based on non-linguistic, that is to say, historical and *aesthetic* considerations or, to put it somewhat less crudely, when the *object of discussion is no longer the meaning or the value but the modalities of production and of reception of meaning and of value prior to their establishment* – the implication being that this establishment is problematic enough to require an autonomous discipline of critical investigation to consider its possibility and its status.” (de Man, 1986, p.7, my emphasis)

To paraphrase again, de Man is interested in the question of how meaning and value is produced and received in literature – and by analogy, in painting – rather than what the meaning and value is. This also ties in with earlier accounts of dismemberment geared towards the analysis of the part as opposed to the phenomenised whole in Agnes Martin’s paintings. From a broader perspective, this approach folds back to an enquiry into “painting as painting” (see above, Lippard, p.19) and its economies of production and reception. The difference to more traditional accounts of investigation into materiality in late modernism is that de Man seems to consider it crucial to pare down on (incarnational) aesthetics, on phenomenality. This is where the linguistic moment and the aforementioned lack of teleology afforded by disarticulation come into play. They could potentially facilitate a closer, certainly a different reading of painting, breaking down tropes that foster processes of phenomenalisation.

Aspects similar to those in Agnes Martin’s paintings emerge in Markus Amm’s work. He is a contemporary painter who upholds the tradition of post-Greenberg painterly exploration of material and the monochrome³⁵. Amm’s is an experimental, almost illusionist

³⁵ The reason I have decided, in terms of current painting, to talk solely about Markus Amm is that the way he uses material very clearly echoes aspects of my own studio practice. Markus Amm is acutely aware of the external references of his input materials, and often sets them up

formalism. However, his illusions stay within the realms of the material occurrence. Material parameters like cracks, gaps, surfaces, and the hanging of the work are not always what they seem at first to the observer. They do not refer to any external referent either; whenever the viewer is thrown, the way he catches himself is by realising he is still within the limits of materiality rather than outside of them. By setting up a loop of material signifiers and referents within the work and invariably taking the viewer through this loop, Amm, with his interpretation of modernism, navigates a circle of self-references that is wider than the formalism he borrows from. Amm discusses modernism in a contemporary context by resorting to highly charged techniques, processes and forms of manifestation (NB. the monochrome), all the while allowing him to subject them to material with clearly contemporary connotations of urban culture and consumerism (e.g. nail varnish, photo collages).

The linguistic moment in Amm's work would necessarily be tantamount to the breakdown of what I referred to as illusionist formalism on some level. Much like in Martin's work, that is not to say that illusion, phenomenalisation, will not take over at some point. But prior to that take-over, we may find ourselves in a space where we get a glimpse of the "modalities of the production of meaning" before its establishment. The cracks in some of his works; paper collaged onto canvas; tape; photograms and the monochrome as modernist tropes: just like Martin's inscribed materiality (i.e. the graphite lines), Amm's economies of production also hinge on constituent "letters", in a manner of speaking. In difference to Martin's homogenous lines, however, Amm's letters are more prone to cluster into phenomenalised patches. The non-teleological *Augenschein* has to be almost aggressively disruptive, anticoagulant, so as to facilitate a reading that is closer to radical materiality. We have to create a blind spot to be able to see "like the poets do", actively refraining from seeing teleological, referential purpose in any of the material tropes Amm uses. This is not the least due the fact that one of Amm's

against each other, to throw not only the viewer, but also their own respective connotational background through economies of mutual reinforcement, shifts, or subversions of externally derived teleologies. This chimes with my own work, for example when I use materials like egg tempera and tarpaulin. I therefore find his painting particularly pertinent to my research and practice.

painterly strategies is in fact, as outlined above, the creation of illusion: material, to a certain degree self-referential illusion, but illusion all the same. Amm's range of different material input offers a wide potential for tropes, quite in contrast to Martin's lines. These different topological materials are keyed into different narratives of incarnation, so one could argue that they required different forms or degrees of dismemberment to act as catalyst for non-relational materiality. Non-teleological perception will be harder to produce for some of the material manifestations Amm resorts to than for others. The fact that achieving non-teleological vision is not exactly straightforward suggests a potential for an oscillation in Amm's work between pure materiality and phenomenality; a falling into phenomenality, of sorts. In Martin's work, this oscillation was driven by proximity vs. distance, whereas in Amm's pictures, it is not only the distance and the resulting differences in perception that fuel this oscillation, but also the degree to which different processes and materials in Amm provoke said falling into the phenomenal.



(Markus Amm: *Untitled #4*, 2008, oil paint, oil-based enamel paint and paper on canvas, 130 x 185cm)

CONCLUSION

De Man's look at pure materiality and the translation of his linguistic moment into painting seems like an approach that complements, enriches the investigation into materiality that we have seen in modern painting over the past decade. In accepting phenomenalisation at the far end, it never claims to be an exclusive alternative to purely phenomenological, aesthetic accounts. Instead, what de Man provides us with is a complementary approach, a different angle. It comes with the territory of visual arts that the attempt to see/perceive/sense pure, radical, non-relational materiality as described above will always cause a kind of phenomenal catch 22. De Man offers a way of seeing such form of materiality in Kant's sublime; a materiality that is of a non-teleological nature and detached from any purpose. This material vision and disarticulation are what de Man suggests can allow us to see radical materiality. As it turns out, bringing this concept to bear on painting is conceptually more easily posited than put into reality for individual paintings. I would suggest that the merit of de Man's contribution lies within a higher level of conceptualisation than on that of the individual work of art. While the default setting of traditional accounts of materiality for example in Greenberg explores the modalities of the production of meaning from a thoroughly aestheticised perspective – Greenberg seems to shift his focus from material to opticality, and thus from production to reception over time – a de Manian reading adds to that another layer of exploration. This might help in teasing out the modalities at play more clearly and facilitate a fresh approach to how materiality in contemporary art is looked at.

Resorting to Zaum language, Kazimir Malevich started something in painting that has now re-emerged on the linguistic level and heralded a linguistic turn as postulated by Paul de Man. What makes de Man's contribution contemporary is the fact that by introducing a kind of materiality that occurs prior to sensual perception, de Man suggests if not a way of overcoming, then at least an extension of, the canonised accounts of phenomenised materiality. Polemically speaking, his approach puts the *post* in Greenberg's post-Kantian critique by re-

reading Kant non-aesthetically. As pointed out above, the translation of de Man's linguistic concept of pre-phenomenal materiality into the field of visual arts comes with one major implied challenge: strictly speaking, it calls for non-aesthetic "perception" of a visual medium. However, the power of de Man's approach maybe lies within its liminal nature: it takes the engagement with painting to the limits of the senses and, since one will also find it impossible to put the experience into words, to the limits of language. And one finds oneself engaging with painting on a level that is beyond the senses and that defies description – literally.



(Richard Zeiss: *XXXV*, 2015, egg tempera and yacht varnish on tarpaulin, 155 x 155cm; at T-A-P, Southend)

In terms of my own painting practice, one of the crucial questions has been what to take from de Man's reading of materiality – indeed, of radical, pure materiality – and how to bring it to bear in my work. Specifically, the friction of non-aesthetic materiality vs. phenomenised materiality has been a lynchpin of my thinking. The issues associated with de Man, on the tangible level of the studio, are obvious and have been discussed above: in simple terms, the

question of how pure material vision can relate to specific paintings is particularly complex.



(Richard Zeiss: *XXXIX*, 2015, egg tempera and yacht varnish on tarpaulin, 170 x 120cm, backlit by daylight; at NN Contemporary Art Northampton)

My approach involves an alchemical aspect to the extent that I am aware of some of the properties of the materials I use, but when combined, they amount to something potentially unknown. Materials come with connotations, external referents, indeed, teleologies: egg tempera, often my medium of choice, arguably refers to pre-modernist, often religious painting; another material I have used frequently, tarpaulin, may come with connotations of industrial sites, construction, and is generally held in low esteem, if one were to establish a hierarchy of materials. By combining the two, I might argue I am causing a clash of connotations, of references, of teleologies of the respective materials. Here, rather than having to go through the process of dismemberment or disarticulation with regard to the materials involved, as was the case with Markus Amm and Agnes Martin, I suggest I might be ending up with materials that have

already subverted each others' teleology. Conceptually, one might argue I would be looking at non-teleological, pure materiality.



(Richard Zeiss: *No.51*, 2016, egg tempera and yacht varnish on tarpaulin, brass grommets, tension wires, 163 x 106cm (net); London studio)

While it is crucial to my practice for me to know how I can navigate the field of potential non-phenomenal materiality “in the flesh”, I find it important to bear in mind the underlying notion that de Man’s posit might not be an accessible option throughout my work and at all times. As we have seen, both Agnes Martin and Markus Amm fall into phenomenality, depending on certain variables. What I can hope for my practice, and what I think could be productive, is to negotiate the economies of non-phenomenal vs. phenomenal oscillation in a deliberate fashion; to find where the threshold lies, and what the drivers of the turn are; and to see whether they are located more on the side of production, or on the side of reception.



(Richard Zeiss: *No.52 & No. 52 (detail)*, 2016, egg tempera and yacht varnish on tarpaulin, 74 x 188cm; at the RCA, London)

EPILOGUE I

I have recently been working with silver gelatine. Due to studio logistics I would use that medium not as potential carrier of information of light and dark but as medium deprived and exhausted of its fundamental capabilities. In other words, I would work with silver gelatine that had been exposed to daylight and was therefore, for lack of a better word, dead. I was using its corpse, its empty shell. The more often I worked with this corpse, the harder I would find it to shake off a slight disgust, yet a perverted sense of material necrophilia brought me back to the canvas every time. There I was, applying a liquid cadaver that was still pristinely white and suggested a virgin state, yet with the first ray of light that touched it, it had already passed into a state of in-between. The strangeness I feel about this work is echoed in Blanchot's "Two Versions of The Imaginary", when he says that "it could be that the strangeness of a cadaver is also the strangeness of the image. What we call the mortal remains evades the usual categories: something is there before us that is neither the living person himself nor any sort of reality, neither the same as the one who was alive, nor another, nor another thing." (Blanchot, 1955, p.81)

EPILOGUE II

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(Richard Zeiss: XXXV (detail), 2015, egg tempera and yacht varnish on tarpaulin, 155 x 155cm)

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