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Filip Lipiński
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Using Craig Owens' argument about the repression of the discursive in modernist art, the article provides an analytical and theoretical account of the complex and changing relationship between the visual and the textual in American painting since c. 1950. The article focuses on the status of verbal inscriptions on a canvas, their function, meaning and relation to the medium of painting. In the introductory section of the text special attention to the poststructuralist, expanded understanding of such notions as "text" and "writing" and its consequences in visual arts as well as the unresolvable dialectic of looking and reading and its theoretical implications addressed in more recent art theory. The analytical part starts with the discussion of the paradox of Pollock's drip paintings as both the epitome of modernist autonomy and a figure of "arche-writing" (a potential script); than it focuses on more specific cases of textuality in C. Twombly's, J. Johns' and E. Ruscha's works, and finally deconstructive modalities of "writing in painting" in works by Ch. Wool, G. Ligon, K. Aptekar and M. Tansey become the object of interpretation. In conclusion it is argued that latter artist's work – Reader – epitomizes the differential superposition not only of painting and writing but also of the modern and the postmodern, the past and the present experience of "reading" images. As a result, the long perspective on the process of the emergence of the textual in painting described in the article does not so much operate with the logic of binary oppositions between modernism and postmodernism or exclusion of text and its subsequent inclusion, as allows us to look at it in terms of layers of signs, always already there, coming to visibility at different historical moments.

Filip Lipiński - Art historian and critic. He studied art history and English at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań and at University College London. Doctor of Art History. Since 2010 he has worked at the Department of

Modern Art History of Adam Mickiewicz University as an assistant professor. From 2016 to 2019 he served as secretary and from 2020 as deputy editor-in-chief of the Artium Quaestiones academic journal. He is interested in modern and contemporary art and visual culture; United States art; methodology and theory of art history; links between art history and film / film studies. Author of the book Hopper Virtual. Images in a remembering gaze, academic articles in journals such as Oxford Art Journal, Artium Quaestiones and RIHA Journal, translations of academic texts from English. He is an allumni of the Kosciuszko Foundation, Terra Foundation for American Art and Fulbright Foundation.

Inscribed Canvases. The Emergence of the Textual in American Painting

In his 1979 article "Earthwords," Craig Owens noticed that a necessary condition and constitutive element of modernist art was the repression of its discursive aspect.[1] In his view, discourse understood both as a semiotic code (a text, in the poststructuralist sense) and a contextual force became an unconscious, "invisible reserve" in high modernism, which favored an autonomous conception of art.[2] The critic's remark is, in principle, true – albeit particularly pertinent to modernism as notoriously defined by Clement Greenberg's critical paradigm, emphasizing the autonomy of art and medium specificity, with the leading role of painting as a *par excellence* visual art.[3] The Greenbergian modernist project – especially as regards painting – attempted to purge the medium of both internal elements of discourse (figuration as narrative, linguistic signs, titles) and external ones (context, extra-artistic explanation). However, discourse as a driving force of art returned in the 1960s, gaining increasing importance in artistic practices and the analytical methodologies applied to describe them, especially in conceptual, neo-avant-garde currents. Even though painting seemed to be left on the margins of this dynamic transformation within the landscape of contemporary art, the changing position and function of discourse and language as a sign system also left its mark, sometimes literally, on canvases produced since around the mid-twentieth century.[4]

Taking Owens' argument as its starting point, this article focuses on one aspect of the phenomenon, namely the changing vicissitudes of textual signs in American painting from abstract expressionism to the late twentieth century. I strongly believe that the reappearance of linguistic marks within the "sacred" modernist medium of painting was not so much the result of a radical divide between modernism and postmodernism, but the

symptom of a process which I would describe as the emergence or resurfacing of language/discourse as an always constitutive, but more often than not repressed aspect of painting. Hence, instead of thinking about the process only in terms of a diachronically or metonymically structured history of inscriptions and erasures, I discuss it in terms of a "deep structure" and the gradual coming to visibility of the textual, gaining semiotic and material form on the pictorial surface, which, of course, had further political implications. As a result, the article provides an analytical and theoretical account – although necessarily selective – of this changing relationship between the visual and the textual, successfully complicating the binary opposition. It also reflects on the expanded understanding of notions of "text" and "writing" in the light of poststructuralist theory, and their consequences in the visual arts. I narrow down the diverse manifestations of verbal language in the visual arts to their – contentious as the notion may be – American "origin" and to just one medium, which, among other things, not least of which is limiting the scope of this broad subject, allows me to trace a contingent process of the discursive dismantling of what I consider the last great myth of American art – the pure abstraction of high modernist painting.[5] An American focus seems justified here due to the importance and persistence of modernist, especially Greenbergian criticism, as well as the impact of painterly abstraction on further generations of American artists, especially painters, manifest in their attempts to negate and suppress this legacy while consciously (or not) referring to it. One way of doing that was, along with different modes of figuration, letting the linguistic sign emerge as a constituent element of a painting. Last but not least, the discursive inscription within the pictorial field, which opened allegedly autonomous art to political issues (the sphere of social and cultural difference), may also be seen as a symptom of the gradual crumbling of the fundamental American myths of unity

and equality, especially apparent since the 1960s with the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War crisis.

American mid-twentieth-century abstraction, with its founding narratives, provided younger artists with an artistic and discursive ground to act upon, to paint over and "re-write" critically, to negate, through the use of language, artistic paradigms, and expand the meaning of their art toward socio-cultural issues with diverse political agendas. Set against the dominant critical discourse, polarized by the interpretations of modernism by Greenberg (the autonomy and opticality of painting) and Rosenberg (abstraction as the direct expression of an artist's self and a bodily trace),[6] the discursive elements in painting can be perceived as a subversive "other," disturbing the desired presence of an artwork or the directness of the trace testifying to the past presence of its maker. Through the selection and juxtaposition of material (*oeuvres* and artistic idioms rather than specific works), I will argue that a gesture of verbal inscription on a canvas becomes the concretization of a potential that has always existed in the domain of painting in general, and that the second half of the twentieth century turned out to be particularly adventurous in this respect, when practice and theory overlapped and sometimes went ahead of each other. Despite the fact that some of the artists and artworks under discussion here are relatively well known, a perspective that would theorize the trajectory of this process in painting at large in terms of the discursive "unconscious" of a picture, which gradually comes into visibility (and legibility) rather than being grafted on from the outside, has, to the best of my knowledge, not so far been explored. Hence, while I refer to works, texts, and ideas that may seem familiar, these serve the purpose of constructing a more general argument about the multidimensional, stratified character of painting as a medium within which different strata (or different orders of signification/expression) come to visibility at different historical

moments, or, repressed, remain invisible, to perform different functions. In this particular case I limit my discussion to the explicit appearance of the textual sign in painting commonly interpreted as a manifestation of transition from modernity to postmodernity, and the resulting restitution of discursive agency within the medium of painting. Such a "geological" perspective, however, nullifies any claim of sequential and definite change from one artistic current to another. Instead, the changing relationship between the visibility and invisibility (or virtuality) of discourse in painting (or, on the other side of the coin, of a painterly trace, with all its modalities) is a matter of the degree or intensity and efficacy of its constituent aspects at a given time and under specific circumstances, rather than the presence or absence of any of these.

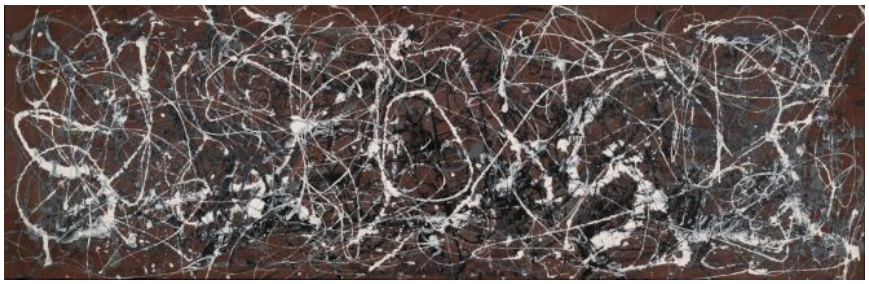
Naturally, the idea and practice of including a textual element within pictures is neither new nor restricted to American painting. Moreover, the issue of pictorial inscription implicates a series of general, theoretical questions about Lessing's famous binary of space and time,[7] assigned to the visual arts and literature respectively, as well as the ambivalent modality of perception, oscillating between the activities of looking and reading.[8] Paintings bearing written signs within their pictorial fields complicate the clear-cut distinction between image (the visual) and text (the verbal). They become – to varying degrees – painterly "imagetexts," literal composites of image and text. W. J. T. Mitchell, who coined this term, points out that the real question does not concern the differences between words and images, but the results of such differences, asking: "Why does it matter how words and images are juxtaposed, blended or separated?"[9] Hence, it is not enough just to read the verbal, look at the visual, and then additively determine their meanings, but to find a way to deal with this impure representation in the mixed medium. This is also the case because writing itself is never transparent – it is a visual, graphic mark with a meaningful and

differing form. Invoking Jacques Derrida, whose grammatology gives special attention to the written sign, Mitchell notes that "writing, in its physical form, is an inseparable suturing of the visual and verbal, the 'imagetext' incarnate."[10] Therefore, in this article, inscription (as an instance of either writing or text) has a double, complementary meaning: it refers to painted or drawn words on/in material support of a painting, and to a broader, deconstructive condition of generating and proliferating meaning through differential relations between signs; of writing, aptly defined by Jonathan Culler, as "a series of physical marks that operate in the absence of the speaker," subverting the idea of immediate artistic expression, presence, and intentionality.[11] Derrida claims that while spatial works of art present themselves as "silent," and their "mutism" produces the effect of full presence, they "are in fact already talkative, full of virtual discourses and from that point of view the silent work becomes an even more authoritarian discourse – it becomes the very place of a word that is all the more powerful because it is silent [...]."[12] Seen from this perspective, the silence of the visual is not metaphysical but contingent on the discourse of silence, and thus a literal combination of the pictorial and the textual reveals – makes visible – the inalienable differential and heterogeneous status of any work of art, whether visual or verbal. Obviously, such an assumption violates the basic tenets of modernist painting, which buried the textual or writing (in both the literal and deconstructive senses of these terms) under a dense layer of paint. This is not to imply the reverse – the textual reduction of the visual – but rather to illustrate the inherent impurity and complexity of any medium, implicating a deconstructive understanding of "text" and "writing" as a productive network of signs not limited to a specific code. Hence, as I intimated earlier, a written sign in painting, or its graphic correlate, is not a matter of its presence or absence, but the degree of its visibility, symptomatic of cultural and

historical conditions, and the openness to admit its constitutive role in the formation of any given work of art.

Despite modernist criticism which proposed the eradication of any implication of language or anecdote, and implied that artworks "associated with the creation of a pictorial world *ex nihilo*" were better off avoiding such elements as titles – verbal names which open up to "memory, usage, culture"[13] – the linguistic sign transpired in some major abstract works, creating a productive, unresolvable tension between painting and writing, looking and reading. Despite his disavowal of such an idea, Franz Kline's broad black-and-white paintings have been discussed in terms of Asian calligraphy.[14] Works such as Robert Motherwell's *Le t'aime* (1955) included actual words in their overall gestural, abstract composition.[15] Mark Tobey, following his trips to China and Japan, came up with a series of paintings he called "white writing."[16] All of these reveal the porosity of any controlling, paradigmatic framework over the actual artistic practices, and serve as symptoms of the underlying discursive potential of painting. That said, I argue that it was Jackson Pollock's classic "all-over" works, seemingly void of figural traces (not to mention linguistic ones), which played a foundational role in the emergence of the textual in painting. Pollock's abstract, dripped paintings surely epitomize the modernist desire for purity, but they also invite a variety of interpretive paths countering visual autonomy, related to the body, expression, performance, formlessness, and – just as importantly – writing. A justification for Pollock's (rather than the other aforementioned artists') primary role in the phenomenon under discussion consists in the paradox of his work being both the epitome of American modernist art and an opening act for future generations of artists trying to negate modernism. Moreover, his dripped paintings constitute by far the most consistent body of work of all the aforementioned artists, and it is Pollock's works, rather than Kline's, Motherwell's, or Tobey's, which served as

a synecdoche of pure painterly abstraction and American modernist painting.[17]



Jackson Pollock, *Number 13A. Arabesque*, 1948. Oil and enamel on canvas. 94 x 297.2 cm. New Haven, Yale University Art Gallery. Gift of Richard Brown Baker, B.A. 1935. © 2020 The Pollock-Krasner Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Pollock's dripping technique, its effect and function, was compared to the automatic writing [*ecriture automatique*] invented by André Breton. This surrealist practice involved a loss of rational control, relegating the work of meaning-making to the free association of flowing words, which was to reflect the culturally unmediated reality of the human body and mind. Indeed, Pollock's process resembled writing through the horizontal orientation of a canvas on a hard surface, and the coils of paint drawn with a stick, dried brush, or poured directly from the can, which, as Michael Fried argued, did not circumscribe any form or shape, but were self-sufficient lines to be received optically.[18] The effect of some kind of basic form of script was enhanced in works whose format was horizontally elongated, implying the potentiality of a narrative, as in *Number 13A: Arabesque* (1948) [fig. 1]. The myth of abstract expressionism had it that a mark of paint was the most direct transposition of an artist's self, the unconscious impulses driving his body, an indexical sign of his active (but still non-symbolized) presence.[19] The canvas was then the site of a literal inscription of the artist into painting, direct painting, or writing himself on the canvas.

Despite Pollock's assertions as to being in full control of his process,[20] critics have always been divided in this respect. Here

I follow Anna C. Chave's deconstructive and demythologizing interpretation of his work.[21] She claims that the underlying principle of dripped paintings was Pollock's loss of control, and hence his refusal of mastery. Chave notes that after 1942 Pollock's paintings began to resemble "tablets inscribed [...] with obsessive jottings and marks until he finally lifted his paintbrush from the canvas."[22] In fact, Pollock's dripping technique involved the loss of touch, marked by the space between the brush and the surface, a moment of "letting the paint go." His all-over works were, in Chave's view, "an ingenious way of testifying to the failure of writing, or painting and drawing, to represent experience," and that "the significance of Pollock's tangled script lay [...] not in its communicativeness but in the act of writing itself"[23] – non-referential writing, which becomes its own image, emphasizing its spacing rather than transparency of meaning. Hence, Pollock's dripped paintings induce the desire – continuously frustrated – for the signified. They seem to be an as-yet-unstructured sphere of the potentiality of an utterance, rather than an utterance itself. As a result, they are a site of numerous "ordering" inscriptions performed by viewers – a field of usually failed searches for a figure or actual words. If Pollock's all-over canvases epitomize pure writing as a principle of meaning-making, his text – to use Roland Barthes' categories – is neither readerly nor writerly (produced by the reader), but closer to what the French thinker elsewhere called the "receivable" text: "The *receivable* would be the unreaderly text which catches hold, the red-hot text, a product continuously outside of any likelihood and whose function – visibly assumed by its *scriptor* – would be to contest the mercantile constraint of what is written; this text, guided, armed by a notion of the *unpublishable*, would require the following response: I can neither read nor write what you produce, but I *receive* it, like a fire, a drug, an enigmatic disorganization."[24] This "disorganized" text, written and painted

but undecipherable, is thus a figuration of what we could describe as "painterly arche-writing" – a still-formless energy of script, pulsating with potential (but as yet unrealized) forms and meanings.[25] Such an interpretation can be supported by Rosalind Krauss, who argued that Pollock, with his gravitational dripped paintings, went, "out of the field of vision and out of the cultural surface of writing and onto a plane that was manifestly below both, below the body."[26] In view of the above discussion, I propose seeing the phase of Pollock's dripped paintings as a moment when modernism in its purest abstraction unexpectedly but symptomatically met the infrastructure, a deeper level of the symbolic order of language, anticipating the soon-to-come emergence of the textual in contemporary art. If, as Owens claimed, discourse was relegated to the domain of the modernist unconscious, Pollock's work may thus be viewed both as the peak of late American modernism – involving a successful repression of the textual – and as the driving force of artistic practices using language in painting, which began to germinate in the mid-1950s.

Achim Hochdörfer convincingly argues that in the late 1950s, with the rise of pop art and happenings, the process of questioning painting as a legitimate and contemporary medium began, and that ultimately, with the ascendancy of minimalism, an unfavorable verdict was declared in the mid-1960s. In this transitional period, "artists explored possibilities that were subsequently largely suppressed, until recent practices reengaged them. These latent strategies would include an investigation of the dialectic between painterly substance and aesthetic transcendence, the use of the painted gestural mark beyond expressionism and the semiotization of the mark itself" – wrote Hochdörfer.[27] Concurring with this diagnosis, I would also add that in the 1950s, not only did distinctive figuration ("the bad dream of modernism" about a painting becoming a picture)[28] and even three-dimensional objects begin to emerge as constituent

parts of American painting, but writing also gained a more concrete manifestation in the form of actual textual signs. If, to paraphrase Rosenberg's famous dictum, a canvas used to be an arena to act, now it increasingly often came to be an arena to write – and to read.

Cy Twombly, *School of Fontainebleau*, 1960. Oil, wax crayon graphite and colored pencil on canvas, 200 x 321.5 cm. bpk / Nationalgalerie im Hamburger Bahnhof, SMB, Sammlung Marx / Jochen Littkemann © Cy Twombly Foundation

The question of writing has been consistently addressed with reference to Cy Twombly's paintings, covered in scribbles suggestive of words, or actual words scrawled in paint, with a crayon, or scratched in a seemingly disorderly composition on the surface of a canvas [fig. 2]. Many critics see Twombly's work as "an interpretative project, with Pollock as his primary referent."[29] Perceived in this context, his works from the mid-1950s onward seem to have emerged from the formlessness of Pollock's canvases, as both their denial and continuation. Krauss sees the younger painter's graffiti work as a "strong misreading" of Pollock, with special attention given to the experience of the trace and its violence – "violence against the very possibility of presence,"[30] in line with Derrida's conception of trace, which denies stable reference and is rather a condition of oscillation, movement, and the production of meaning. Even so, Twombly's paintings enable Pollock's formless writing to emerge and

become more concrete. Twombly, despite his frequent references to the high European culture of antiquity, by drawing and overdrawing, smearing and erasing, overtly renounces any pretense to mastery (like Pollock) and grand narratives, which through the form of their evocation lose their grandiosity and even become grotesque. This clumsiness of figure and text becomes his subject; he delivers graphic signs as if they had just been born, still uncertain about their task of signification. The younger artist seems, after Pollock's destruction of representation (the "all-over" as "finished"), to be literally "starting from scratch," a scratch on the surface of a canvas or sheet of paper – already a sensitive membrane, an interface for the differential interlacing of drawing, writing, and painting. The traces of pencil or crayon on canvas or paper, like scribbles that connote both legible and illegible signs, sometimes imply writing as an activity or concept; other times they form actual words. While the horizontality of Pollock's work is literalized by Twombly in the whiteness of many of his paintings, connoting a sheet of paper, he also plays with the idea of "primary" writing in his blackboard paintings with Pollockesque loops – suggesting verticality but also primary schooling, the initial stage of learning a language.

Roland Barthes wrote beautifully about Twombly's clumsy writings – his "graphism" – as something that remains "after writing, which is a powerful erotic action, what Verlaine calls *la fatigue amoureuse*: that garment dropped in a corner of the… canvas."[31] In Barthes' view, the artist makes one see the things he manipulates and not those he represents; in other words, he makes his writing stand on its own, dropping its referential function for the sake of graphic denotation.[32] His writing-in-painting is "decipherable but not interpretable"; it is vague, and that vagueness keeps his work "alive," says Barthes.[33] Hence, even though Twombly concretizes writing, he does not make it definite and informative: there is excess or inadequacy in both

the perversity of his written signs, neither childish nor calligraphically accurate, and in their seemingly random placement, as if on the margins of a book, like handwritten notes. In Barthes' view, even the surfaces of canvases that lack any verbal inscription seem to be repositories of all writing: "No surface, wherever we consider it, is a virgin surface."[34] The textured surface of Twombly's work functions similarly to Pollock's potential script; the difference is that in Twombly's canvases letters actually appear, even if lacking the "fine hand" of a painter/scriptor, and hence manifesting their being newly born.

All of that seems be in discord with Twombly's interest in "high" European culture, signaled in titles such as *School of Fontainebleau* (1960) or *Leda and the Swan* (1962), which seem to awaken cultural master-narratives as discursive pretexts underlying his works. However, it is exactly this paralyzing paradox – the vagueness resulting from the combination of a potentially endless symbolic reservoir with inadequate means of graphic representation – that holds the spectator/reader in front of the canvas, without resolution. Twombly's paintings tease and leave one shivering in limbo between the low and the high, between reading and looking, writing and painting. Abandoning Twombly for the sake of our own investment in paintings may come to our rescue. As Anna Lovatt wrote: "The subject of writing is not an isolated author, but a layered system of differential relations in which the writer, the instrument of inscription, the reader and society all play a part."[35] Seen in this light, Twombly seems to go at least one step further than Pollock: he allows Pollock's "receivable," illegible script to crystallize on certain parts of his canvases into the cultural code of writing with potential – yet held at bay – reference to the European "fatherly" legacy, denying American "virginity" or any kind of clean start. He teases one into the familiar mythologies of antiquity, into this foundational, cultural writing, but remains in

a zone between the mute repressed discourse of abstraction and the postmodern revelation of rapidly circulating, mixed-media messages.

While Twombly's writing-in-painting always connotes some kind of handwriting, Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg incorporated into their paintings printed and/or stenciled words. Here, the textual elements in painting no longer bear the idiomatic character of the artist's hand, but are ready-made, reproduced, and reproducible. Marks of gestural painting still feature in some of their works, signaling the onerous painterly idiom of abstract expressionism. However, they are used as signs for a pre-coded artistic language of painterly abstraction rather than as direct indexes of bodily presence or nameless specimens of still-triumphant modernism. Brushstrokes and drips of paint function as quotations and critical appropriations. In the works of Johns and Rauschenberg, figuration and actual signs, accompanied by a residue of abstraction, return in two, apparently contradictory ways: in the form of a material, "found" object, and as diverse kinds of visual and verbal reproduction. Here, the voided and formless (in Pollock), or ambivalent and "superficial" (in Twombly) become on the one hand more concrete, "objective," while on the other hand the concrete is also mediated by words and images. In consequence, the subject of many of their artworks is the untenable boundary between reality and mediation in the rapidly developing mass culture of the 1950s. The formerly repressed discourse – whose apparent non-existence protected the self-sufficiency of an artwork – now emerged as a symptom of historical and cultural change in an art which effectively erased any clear-cut distinction between a visual text (with or without verbal elements) and its con-text. At the same time, they – Johns in particular – kept raising a variety of questions regarding the semiotics of painting and language as its constitutive part.

In Johns' iconic *Flag* (1954), under a semi-transparent layer of

wax and relatively loose strokes of paint (a residue of painterly abstraction forming the familiar pattern of stars and stripes), we can see fragments of newspaper – barely legible, but recognizable as such. Benjamin Buchloh wrote that "The rigid iconic structure functions like a template or framing device which brackets two apparently exclusive discourses, high art and mass culture, yet the junction paradoxically reveals the gap between them all the more."[36] The last remark, about the incongruity of the two domains, offered from a rigidly modernist perspective, seems debatable. Reproduced, mass-distributed, and culturally determined, the printed text haunts the painting, returns as a still-ephemeral but distinctive element underwriting the meaning and form of the national symbol and modern American painting in general. Johns' *Flag* reconnects the art of painting with "life," but more specifically with the political dimension of representation and (mass) culture.

In other works, Johns also uses writing-in-painting by applying a stencil, which enables repetition and reproduction, rejecting the directness of a handwritten text. If Twombly, through painterly, naïve-looking procedures, neutralized the logocentric metaphysics connected with the myth of modernist painting, Johns distanced himself from the directness of manually executed signs as abstract marks of an artist's subjectivity, uncovering the inevitable cultural and historical contingency of each work of art. In *Flag*, the actual content of the newspaper is not important – it is a metonymy for the returning importance of text

Jasper Johns, *Alphabets*, 1960/1962, Oil on paper mounted on canvas. 86.4 x 61 cm. Jointly owned by Art Bridges and Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art. Photography by Edward C. Robison III

and context. His stenciled "alphabet" series, in turn [fig. 3], can be interpreted as demonstrating "*langue*" as opposed to "*parole*" – language as a system rather than language in use. These paintings preserve the modernist grid, which now relies on language: Johns' alphabet paintings are "potential images" – paintings that do not yet "speak" but come across as the endless possibility of painterly writing, waiting to be activated and given voice. As a result, in several of Johns' works, language becomes a system waiting to be made functional, rather than a unique idiom connoted by a handwritten text, which, despite diverse displacements, is still suggested in Twombly's paintings. Johns seems to take his cue from his friend Rauschenberg, who said that he used the printed background of newspapers "so that even the first stroke in the painting had its own unique position in a gray map of words."[37] This suggests that textuality has always virtually inhabited the blank canvas but awaited the right impulse to become explicit in and by means of painting – to "come out of the closet." Paint "develops" the textual on the canvas, makes it legible and visible, and displays the work's embeddedness in the broader sphere of (mass-)cultural context.

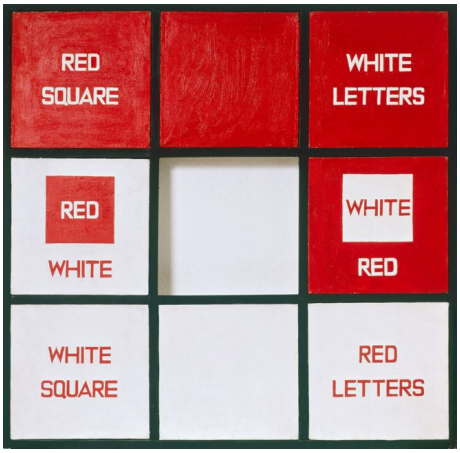
Edward Ruscha, *The Back of Hollywood*. 1977. Oil on canvas, 55.9 x 203.2 cm, Collection of Museum of Contemporary Art, Lyon ©Ed Ruscha, courtesy of the artist

Among the pop art painters who emerged as leading figures in the 1960s, Ed Ruscha stands out as the artist who gave words the most prominent place in his paintings and commentaries. He believed that words and images are "two things that don't even ask to understand each other."[38] If this is so, his art continuously addresses the lack of understanding via recurrent dialogue

between them. While Johns revealed the semiotic, language-based substructure of painting, Ruscha is more interested in representing words with a suggestion of their materiality, as if they belonged neither to the order of images nor of written script. In his paintings, words are located against abstract or quasi-photographic painted landscapes, "anonymous backdrops for the drama of words."[39] The relationship between the image in the background and the text superimposed on it often seems arbitrary, or at least ambivalent (*Sin-Without*, 1991); sometimes words refer to themselves, for instance to their shape or represented materiality (*Annie, Poured from Maple Syrup*, 1966). Ruscha's slick and unemotional handling of paint, the flat surface of color reminding the spectator of a color field or hard-edge painting, disconnects the painted words and phrases from their expressive or informative function (*Electric*, 1963). Onomatopoeic exclamations or short phrases seem to come from outside the picture, as if only heard, overlapping the image but no longer related to any specific event (*Oof*, 1962–1963). This missing (or at least questionable) connection to the referent turns them into visual objects, something more to be looked at or even touched than read.[40] One of his later works, with a circularly arranged sentence, reads: "Words without thoughts never to heaven go" (*Words...*, 1987). In fact, Ruscha's distinction between a word (a signifier) and a thought (a signified) is no longer present – there is no metaphysics, just a world of logos and slogans that take place or dominate the already simulacral visual landscape normally taken to be real and authentic. Words, as in multiple representations of the "Hollywood" sign (produced since 1968) [fig. 4], become almost architectonic objects in a cityscape or landscape, making both architecture (culture) and nature legible. "Words are pattern-like, and in their horizontality they answer my investigations into landscape. They're almost not words – they are objects that become words,"[41] the artist declared. Ruscha is a landscape

painter – landscape as a cultural construction rather than a natural creation. In fact, landscape, in its horizontal development and as space to be traversed spatially and temporally, becomes a narrative to be viewed and read at the same time. This is especially true in the context of the United States, where landscape as an image became an important carrier of the American mythology of nature, the Western frontier, and freedom. In Ruscha's work, words become emblems and elements of a complex tissue of reality as a simulacrum: their suggested materiality is the reverse of the dematerialized world of things as signs, as if there really was "nothing outside the text."[42]

The conceptual movement in the art of the 1960s and 1970s – to which Ruscha also belonged through his photographic projects – consisted in a radical acknowledgment of the philosophical and linguistic coordinates of art as an idea. Because conceptual artists focused on language, with the aim of examining internal artistic conditions and principles, painting was rarely used as their artistic medium of preference, as it was seen as bourgeois and elitist. There were exceptions, though, such as Sol LeWitt's early work *Red Square with White Letters* (1962) [fig. 5], which initiated a conceptualist critique of visual autonomy or aesthetic value. As Benjamin Buchloh noted, LeWitt's work "demarcates that precise transition, integrating [...] both language and visual sign in a structural model."[43] A grid divides the pictorial field into nine red and white squares inscribed with words, with the middle square remaining empty – revealing the architectural support of the painting. The verbal



Sol LeWitt, *Red Square, White Letters*, 1962, Museum Ludwig, Cologne Photo: Rheinisches Bildarchiv Köln/Cologne

doubles the visual and vice versa (e.g. the phrase "red square" painted on a red square), reflecting each other in a circular manner. According to Buchloh, LeWitt, while acknowledging Johns' legacy of the paradoxical status of the sign in painting, gives primacy neither to the visual message nor its verbal denomination, thus "forcing the inherent contradictions of the two spheres (of the perceptual experience and the linguistic experience) into the highest possible relief."[44] What happens becomes a tautological, self-reflexive repetition across the two codes within one work. The medium of painting in LeWitt's case sets a perimeter of the avant-garde as a yardstick of contemporary changes in art. In general, however, at the very moment when minimalism and conceptualism laid the proper groundwork, respectively, for acknowledging the literal quality of an art object and for language as a carrier of art, and when both could have joined forces with painting, painting as a medium came to be regarded as obsolete and academic, and, with some exceptions, especially throughout the 1970s, was banished from artistic tendencies which were of interest to the most advanced criticism establishing the dominant, canonical narrative of 20th-century art history.[45] While modernist painting still continued well into the 1970s, it was definitely sidelined. Moreover, to many artists interested in conceptualism, minimalism, or performance it could no longer – as it was for Twombly and Johns – be both practiced and serve as an object of critique.

That being said, the late 1960s and early 1970s saw works in which the combination of painting and text carried an overtly political message.[46] Some critics also noted that such a semiotic nexus at that particular time was the preserve of women artists, often relating to the intertwined domains of their politics of identity and private experience.[47] While that may be an overgeneralization, a number of feminist painters more or less consistently integrated the overall "male" idiom of painterly

abstraction with written signs. In this particular context, the written sign could be interpreted as an emancipatory, differential element disrupting the mythologized purity of abstract painting. In 1973 Louise Fishman, an abstract painter whose work is often compared to that of Kline or de Kooning,[48] but more importantly a declared feminist and lesbian activist, decided to make a series of 30 acrylic paintings on paper called *Angry Women*, which incorporated words. As she stated, this was her way of expressing her feminist position and anger at the uneven treatment of female artists and women in general. This was also the first time when her work was expressly political and when she used writing in her generally abstract painting. Each painting included the word "angry," complemented by the first name of a woman (starting with her own): a friend, a lover, or simply an iconic heroine, like Marilyn Monroe. Sometimes, as in the case of *Angry Louise*, the message was enhanced by additional inscription, in this case "serious rage." The paintings are usually displayed together, next to each other, as a unified project, adding a communal aspect to their overall affective attitude. The degree of visibility and hence legibility of the quite crudely painted words – in capital letters – varies: from clearly defined to barely recognizable under a dense layer of cross-hatched, dynamic strokes of paint, grids, and other patterns from the reservoir of modernist painting. This combination of expressive abstraction (Fishman was fascinated by abstract expressionism, and practiced abstraction herself) with somewhat "unhinged," angry inscriptions, unpremeditated in their execution, generated the fresh and, indeed, interventionist quality of a collective female portrait of anger – a feminist attitude. There, Marilyn is no longer the Warholian icon – a subject of admiration and/or mourning – but an inscription of emotion attached to a name; a signature with its aesthetic beauty removed. The aggressive, phallogocentric thrust of gestural abstraction, when combined with affectively loaded textual elements, is turned

against itself to produce a witty, critical message.[49]

Joan Snyder, Double Symphony, 1976, oil, crayon, ink, graphite, gesso on board, 40.0 x 81.3 cm; private collection, courtesy of the artist

Another example of a female artist who emerged in the 1970s as an abstract painter drawing on abstract expressionism was Joan Snyder. In her now famous "stroke paintings," begun in 1971, she arranged series of horizontal bars of different colors in a way that was suggestive of the sequential character of textual or musical notation. Hochdörfer sees Snyder's abstractions as an attempt at "systematically working her way back to the point at which painting was left behind in the mid-'60s." Her analytical and only suggested semiotization of the abstract idiom was made more explicit in paintings that actually included writing, such as her "symphonies." In *Double Symphony* (1976) [fig. 6], a small work on paper, she divides the picture into two main parts: a figurative, prevalently monochromatic picture of a house with a garden on the left side, and an abstract house on the right. These are separated by two vertical bands with written/painted words. The left side stands for traditional life, with its constitutive "garden" and "household" lists; the textual elements are listed in the middle (itself bisected) of the painting, e.g. cucumbers, a chicken, a dog, six cats and, in a separate section at the bottom, "a husband." On the right we also see an architectural structure, but one which is more of an abstraction, resembling a Hoffmann or Diebenkorn painting, with vivid, geometrical fields supplemented by a ink sketch of the composition, illegible

scribbles (counterparts of the "garden and household lists" on the left), and four terms surely applying to the creative domain of the right-hand side of the painting: "dynamics, intensity, violence, passion," and eventually, opposite "husband" we read "pain," as well as, across both bands at the bottom, "in search of my sexuality." These dichotomies, expressed both in painting and text, pertain to Snyder's personal issues and dilemmas, concerning her difficult marriage and her sexual and artistic identities, combining two sides of her life and contradictory value systems.[50] In a more general way – inseparably connecting the private and the political – one can read the painting as addressing the social and cultural challenges of a woman (lesbian-to-be) painter and socially assigned gender-specific codes: the "lists" are juxtaposed with abstract scribbles, "written figuration" with abstraction. *Double Symphony* can in fact be interpreted as a great example of a meta-picture which, through the combination of figuration, abstraction, and writing, lays bare both the contradictions inscribed in the practice of painting at the time, and the politics and psycho-social tensions inscribed into the work of female artists. While these issues still have some currency, it was in the 1970s that such an explicit, multi-coded, gendered (self-)analysis gained special weight. This is confirmed by Hochdörfer's remark concerning an earlier triptych titled *Small Symphony for Women* (1974), where "Snyder connects gendered expressivity to writerly gesture, painterly materials to linguistic meaning."[51] The artist's strategy of including words that frame the image with the private-as-political turned out to be a challenge in itself and became a litmus paper of art-world biases: as she noticed, her practice was deemed by some critics as that of a "feminist" who "wears her heart on the sleeve," while, when Rauschenberg, Twombly, or Schnabel did the same thing, "they are considered very sensitive."[52]

A more welcoming ground for the combination of painting and

text, which lacked the aforementioned tensions and critical edge, and allowed verbal signs to inhabit canvases both differentially and symbiotically (as it were), was eventually created in the intellectual and artistic climate of postmodernism in the 1980s and 1990s. It was premised on a few circumstances, both practical and theoretical. Firstly, the 1980s were a time of renewed interest in painting in the United States, represented by painters such as David Salle, Julian Schnabel, and Eric Fischl. This return of painting, however, no longer meant a fresh start. It was based on the strategy of the appropriation of a medium, a style, or a specific motif, rather than an attempt at reincarnation of the masterly creative stroke. To the apparent satisfaction of the fasting art market, artists restituted the vaunted medium of painting by blowing up pop-cultural references and quasi-Rauschenbergian combinations of materials to a massive scale. At the same time, an important theoretical impulse, inspired by the American reception of French poststructuralism in the field of art history and criticism, could also be noticed in diverse postmodern art practices, most often related to photography. The so-called "Pictures Generation" artists (such as Sherrie Levine, Cindy Sherman, and Barbara Kruger), through a strategy of appropriation – working on at least partially ready-made material – made it clear that a work of art is never self-present, autonomous, and original; rather it is and has always been a heterogeneous patchwork of quotations and signs. As Douglas Crimp put it, artists and critics gave up their "search of sources or origins and instead became interested in the 'structures of signification': underneath each picture there is always another picture,"[53] They thus revealed the contradictions of phallogocentric notions of creative individuality, controlling authorship, and ownership and originality. Moreover, the semiotic and deconstructive definitions of an artwork as a text or writing, which I referred to above, were now present both in critical discourse and applied to artistic practices.[54] As

a result, art combining painting and text received a contemporaneous theoretical legitimation, stronger than ever, and at the same time (consciously or not) partook in the shaping of postmodern discourse.[55] It came to function as a dynamic, discursive field, critiquing the contemporary conditions and mechanisms of production of meaning that propelled visual (mass) culture in the age of late capitalism.

In the 1980s and 1990s text gained a prominent place in the work of Christopher Wool and Glenn Ligon. After a few years of making films, Wool returned to painting in 1981 to produce numerous semi-abstract canvases, many of which strongly recalled Pollock's all-over works with their drips and loops. Bruce W. Ferguson wrote that "Wool accepts that he is and that his paintings are, at any moment, within what Richard Prince calls 'wild history,' subject to the intertextual meeting of various discourses,"[56] while Hochdörfer suggests that "Wool aims to unearth suppressed or displaced ties between Pollock and Warhol, rendering the affinities between, say, Pollock's use of house paint and the glam grit of street culture."[57] This did not result in the resurrection of artistic presence or the indexical weight of a painterly sign, but only in "the arbitrary order of carefully achieved randomness."[58] Words started to appear in Wool's canvases in 1987; stenciled in black on a white background, often with small drips of paint, they are quotations from popular culture. On the canvas, not only are they extracted from their original context, but their meaning is literally

Christopher Wool, *Untitled*, 1988. Enamel on aluminium. 182.9 x 121.9 cm. © Christopher Wool; Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York

deconstructed through their pictorial arrangement: unpunctuated sequences and clusters of words, contractions, unconventional divisions into lines, more rarely elisions of single letters which visually reflect pronunciation, thus making deciphering more difficult ("Tro/jhn/hors" in *Untitled*, 1998) [fig. 7]. Such "fractured" written messages ("leaking" paint), playing with the idea of the materiality of signification, obstruct easy reading, despite the simplicity of the black/white contrast, as well as the large size of the letters and canvases themselves. Indeed, the human scale of the canvases makes a potential reader more of a spectator confronting a semi-abstract composition of black forms than a reader. Put differently, a reader has to struggle against the visual, non-linear structure which gets in his or her way – s/he stutters, gets stuck, is led astray by an unexpected anagram, goes back, tries another way... In consequence, Wool's "word-pictures" (or imagetexts) thematize and perform the heterogeneity of the visual text – a signifying structure which is neither visual nor verbal, but based on the constant productive dialectic of both.

At first sight, a similar visual effect is accomplished in Glenn Ligon's black-and-white "written" paintings. While Wool concentrated on visualizing the signifying structures of text and painting, Ligon's work is strongly political. He deploys text in order to bring up issues of identity, in his case doubly marked as African-American and gay, engaging in what Owens called "the discourse of others"[59] – giving voice to the marginalized. Ligon's career began in the 1980s, when postmodern aesthetics dominated the American art scene, along with a new impulse to paint. He covers his canvases – much more densely than Wool – with stenciled, appropriated texts "all-over" the monochromatic surface of a painting. A phrase or a sentence is repeated sequentially in lines, as if the canvas was a notebook page with no space to waste. Importantly, the lettering is hardly ever "clean" or reproduction-like: the letters constitute the

physical, prominent texture of the canvas, and the paint becomes the substance of the letters. In other words, letters become containers (or contours) for paint. The amount of paint applied, and the resulting changes in the intensity of an inscription, make the painterly matter a differential element – a verbal enunciation, repeated throughout the pictorial plane, differs from itself. Darby English noted that Ligon's practice amounts to "a postmodernism that engages modernism deconstructively rather than dismissing it."[60] His appropriation is dual in nature: firstly, he revisits the medium of painting; secondly, he utilizes quoted texts from various authors, such as James Baldwin, Zora Neale Hurston, and Jean Genet. Thus, even though Ligon's canvases become "scenes of writing," pointing to their discursive, political potential, most of them cannot, due to their pictorial aspects, be simply consumed in the activity of reading. In a vertically oriented *Untitled* series, such as *Untitled, I'm Turning Into a Specter before Your Very Eyes and I'm Going to Haunt You* (1992) [fig. 8], Ligon repeats the title phrase (by Genet, from his 1958 play *The Blacks: A Clown Show*) throughout the door-sized surface, in lines meaningfully weaving the black text as a "figure"

Glenn Ligon, *Untitled, I'm Turning Into a Specter before Your Very Eyes and I'm Going to Haunt You* 1992, Oil and gesso on canvas. 203.5 × 81.6. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Purchased with the Adele Haas Turner and Beatrice Pastorius Turner Memorial Fund, 1992-101-1

against the background, from top to bottom. The painting – and the reading – starts with a quotation and is followed by its repetition, which makes the "always already" quoted original increasingly intelligible. This visual-discursive situation can be interpreted in a variety of ways. Firstly, the gradual loss of legibility reveals the difference between what is seemingly the same, not so much through lost meaning but its unavoidable transformation through never-ending inscription as a general rule of writing. Secondly, in more phenomenological terms, the repetition of the same (yet differently looking) phrase, infused with the materiality of the visual which obfuscates the alleged transparency of words into their referents, generates a loss of interest in reading in favor of observing, and the gradual transition from one activity to another. But our usual habit of reading from the top down can be reversed due to the observer's bodily identification with the work as something to be confronted, seen, and experienced physically in the first instance. The text becomes a figure, seen as emerging from the dominant, materially distinctive darkness in the lower part, to take the form of an increasingly legible and immaterial text at the top. As a result, the paintings do not pose obvious binary oppositions but constitute perfect examples of Mitchell's imagetexts – revealing simultaneously the materiality and visuality of text and the textuality of the image.

These differential facets of Ligon's work translate into political meanings related to race (and in other cases to sexual orientation). In his best-known, black-and-white paintings, the colors used, seemingly natural if we think about a page of writing, are in this context loaded with racial connotations. It is the "visible voice" or a script of the black experience, which normally remains invisible and inaudible, muffled under what W. E. B. Du Bois called "the veil" of racial prejudice imposed on African-Americans.[61] While this problem, especially with reference to painting, would require a separate study, let us

just remark that in Ligon's work painting is reclaimed as a sphere where racial and sexual otherness can become manifest in paint and text (as consubstantial; the veil of both invisibility and illegibility gets at least partially removed or becomes porous), as opposed to predominantly white, heterosexual, male-dominated mainstream modernist painting.[62]

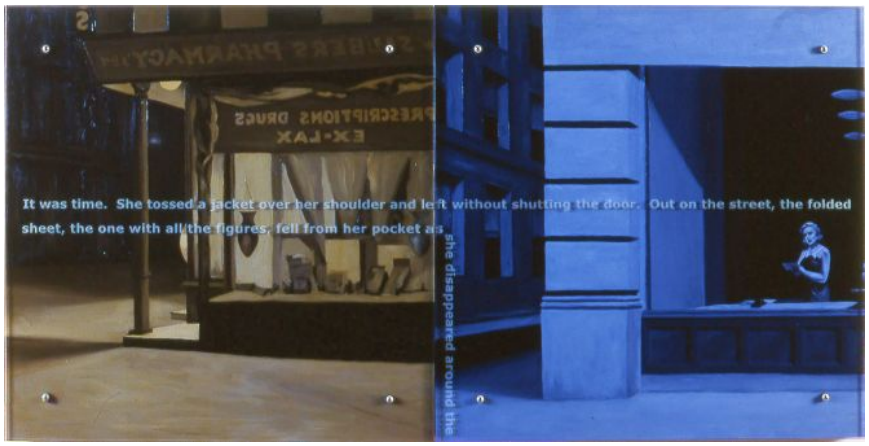
Ligon also demonstrates how the legibility of this discourse fluctuates, comes into focus, and melts down to near-absolute abstraction. In works like *I'm Turning into a Specter...*, apart from the obvious dialectics of black and white that translate into signifiers of race, diminishing legibility is related to the repetition of the same statement, like a mantra with no one to hear it. While the textual clarity at the top of the canvas is able to carry the message, it gradually gives way to paint, which dominates writing and depoliticizes it, pointing toward the modernist indifference to extra-artistic issues (but still maintaining the discursive within it). The text at the bottom of the painting comes close to being a black "stain," with blackness as a generalizing and unifying racist sign, without much distinction, or a diversity of signs which would allow for reading toward an emancipatory production of meaning.

Both Wool's and Ligon's work, seen in a diachronic perspective of mid-twentieth-century American modernism, demonstrate the decisive emergence of the textual in the field of painting, deconstructing the binary oppositions between text and image, writing and painting, reading and looking. In both cases, however, the image as an iconic representation is somehow controlled by the letter. That said, the differential co-existence – or symbiosis – of a figurative image and text, representation and "a little discourse," is perhaps best demonstrated in Ken Aptekar's work. Not only does he combine image with text in his paintings, but he also incorporates the inevitable intertextual relationship between images.

Ken Aptekar, *What if he didn't, what if he wasn't?*, 1994. Four panels, oil on wood, sandblasted glass bolts. 76.5cm x 305 cm. Courtesy of the artist

Aptekar's procedure is of crucial importance here: he copies, in oil on wood, an element of a picture that interests him, usually changing the color palette of the original, or sometimes combining fragments from one or several works. He then covers the paintings with a glass plate, bolted to the surface, bearing a sandblasted inscription. Over the decades from 1990 until today, the character of textual elements has varied: an ironic commentary on the picture; its status, meaning, or potential narrative; a play on words describing it; the artist's or another viewer's associations and commentaries; his biographical memories evoked by the image, etc. In *What if he didn't, what if he wasn't* (1994) [fig. 9] he combines two fragments of Rembrandt's *Polish Rider* – one showing the soldier (up to his neck) on a horse, the other representing a close-up of his confused face. Such a juxtaposition plays on the tension between military bravery or confidence and the uncertainty of the individualized facial expression. The titular questions, inscribed on both elements, emphasize this ambiguity and also introduce issues concerning the authorship of the painting. Aptekar also demonstrates a visual-verbal interaction between paintings and spectators in his project *Talking to Pictures* (1997) for the Corcoran gallery. Here, his paintings reference items from the collection and include the verbal responses of individual viewers, himself included, as in *I went searching for Jews* (1997), where the search for representation of the Jewish community in the gallery's collection relates to Aptekar's own descendants. In *It was time* (2004) [fig. 10], he connected two paintings by Edward Hopper – *Drug Store* and *New York Office*

, both similar cityscapes, with a lone female figure in the latter. The text combining Hopper's works – usually regarded as "quiet" or "silent" – activates a "withheld narrative" and discharges the discursive tension. Additionally, the arrangement of words plays an essential role here: the end of the two-line story, crossing the central division of the panel, suddenly goes vertically down, as if responding to the corner of a building but also breaking the sentence, making its ending – following the words "she disappeared round the" – literally disappear.



Ken Aptekar, It Was Time, 2004. Two panels, oil on wood, sandblasted glass bolts. 89 cm x 178 cm. Courtesy of the artist

Aptekar's works may serve as the most explicit visualizations of the inalienable co-existence of image and text: his paintings disclose the mechanisms of the perception of an image by becoming showcases for the activity of verbal discourse in the visual, and also for poststructuralist text as a combination of signs "at work," regardless of the code they belong to. The layer of glass holding a semi-transparent text can be interpreted as an omnipresent infrastructural layer of discourse, but activated only fragmentarily. The two layers (image and text) overlap, making the reception of the work a confusing task of disruption: as Mieke Bal aptly reported in her experience of Aptekar's picture, "I read the text even though my reading was constantly interrupted by the painting that was looking back at me, nagging that I ought to look at it first."[63] Aptekar's works are a kind of interface for interaction between their constituent elements and the

viewer – between the past that the referenced works represent and contemporary, often personal, discursive responses to them. Indeed, his artistic practice is nothing short of an interpretation of the works of art he encounters in various museums, a manifestation of what Bal called "preposterous history," which – defying chronology or historically sanctioned causality – renders the art of the past, as seen through the art of today, important and proliferating with meaning for contemporary viewers. Aptekar, like a Benjaminian surgeon (camera operator) in the age of mechanical reproduction, opens up the body of each referenced painting and simulates an operation on its signifying structure, revealing its inherent semiotic heterogeneity and giving it a new, "preposterous" life.[64] His paintings as imagetexts testify to the necessary expansion of the agency of an artwork onto individual and collective (culturally and historically determined) responses – discourse "that overwrites the older works so as to bring them up-to-date" with diverse framings provided by viewers.[65] As Bal puts it, "the discrepancies between the words and images emphasize the irreducible gap between the two media. But the gap does not entail separation; rather, it compels us to process the complementarity and conflict between the two in an assessment of integrative cultural agency."[66] Regardless of the irreducible differences between codes and the signs that structure them (and due to their necessary co-existence), postmodern theory and the artistic practice it informs – exemplified in Aptekar's as well as Ligon's and Wool's works – visualized the necessary opening up of the visual arts, including the stubborn medium of painting, to a vast field of cultural discourse. This is not to say that the meaning of, for example, abstract painting was not contingent on cultural or political issues, but that these contingencies were too often successfully suppressed – or silenced – and needed to be reconsidered by scholars in the decades to follow.

Mark Tansey, *Reader*, 1990. Oil on canvas. 195.6 x 126.4 cm. © Mark Tansey. Courtesy Gagosian

I conclude this account of "inscribed canvases" and the return of the textual in the American art of the second half of the twentieth century with an analysis of a painting by Mark Tansey, which can be seen as emblematic for this discussion of signifying strategies between modernity and postmodernity. Tansey's monochromatic, photorealistic, and neo-surrealistic pictures from the 1980s and 1990s are in fact pictorial interpretations of postmodern theory. In his *Reader* (1990) [fig. 11] we see the back of a man running – or in fact disappearing – into a dark abyss of barely legible printed text, an image that resembles canvases by Ligon. The painting represents a written – and at the same time painted – book page from Paul de Man's *Blindness and Insight* – an important 1971 collection of poststructuralist essays. Blindness is potentially a moment of the utmost insight and, as de Man wrote, "reading an endless process in which truth and falsehood are inextricably intertwined."[67] The painted page is from an essay on modernity in which, on this specific page (no. 147), de Man analyzes Friedrich Nietzsche's thoughts on modernity, a condition of which seems to be "ruthless forgetting, the blindness with which he throws himself into an action lightened of all previous experience."[68] The reader, represented here as a runner, seems to be doing just that: he is not someone rationally distancing himself from the text, but physically running into and disappearing inside a textual abyss, forgetting himself in the action. This painted text – to return to my initial remarks

– can be seen as akin to Pollock's "arena in which to act," and being able to forget oneself in direct contact with the canvas, through entering it with one's body and mind.

However, as de Man demonstrates a few pages further, Nietzsche eventually realizes that forgetfulness and disconnection from the past and history are impossible, leading to an aporia in which the desire for a clean start becomes another modernist utopia. Thus, the represented runner is not only the figure of a reader, but also that of a viewer in front of a picture who, instead of coming up against the silent, auratic, distant presence of the canvas, encounters its densely inscribed surface, where writing-in-painting becomes writing-with-painting and painting-as-writing, and each trace of paint being a potentially meaningful and eloquent sign that not only opens up the prospect of a new future, but refers us to the past as discourse; not only reconnects us with it, but transforms it. Indeed, Tansey's work functions as a figure of the repressed discourse, dormant under the thick, abstract layer of seemingly silent paint and the grand narratives of modernity, which historically stratifies and differentially combines the visual and the textual, rather than substituting or separating them. Tansey's painting folds modernity into the postmodern, disrupting the decisive "post" with a differential dialectic tension, never to be forgotten.

1 The first, much shorter and more general version of this paper was delivered as a talk at the *Wordstruck: American Artists as Readers, Writers and Literati* conference in May 2015 at Marie-Curie Skłodowska University, Lublin, co-organized by the Terra Foundation for American Art.

2 Craig Owens, "Earthwords," in: *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 45. Importantly, Owens' understanding of discourse went far beyond linguistic signs in pictures, which are the focus of this article; it included a number of artistic practices modeled on and using language, from artists' commentaries, via language in conceptualism, to "narrative art" or "fundamentally linguistic concerns of performance art" (ibid., 46).

3 See: Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," in: *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, *vol. 4*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 85–93.

4 A brief note on terminology is in order here. Even though the field of reference in this article is much narrower than Owens' "discourse," I will also use this term when referring to linguistic signs in painting, especially when explicitly serving to contextualize the work. Alternatively, I use the notions of text and writing, which will oscillate between their basic meaning and their poststructuralist understanding as a language-based network of disseminating signs, linguistic or otherwise, which, like discourse, have the emancipatory force of introducing difference into the mythologized purity and autonomy of painting. Finally, the notion of a "verbal sign," recurrent in this article, is the most general, and even if it may also implicate orality, it is meant here to refer to written/painted signs within a pictorial field. That said, while the above terms will sometimes be employed as alternatives, the concept of a text or the textual, used in the title of this essay, is perhaps the most fundamental and emblematic for my thinking here, as it designates the condition of signs, linguistic or visual, as dynamic and diffusive, both disruptive and productive.

5 This mythology was aptly described by Michael Leja: "Not only is it believed to mark the coming to maturity and independence of the visual arts in the United States, but also it is generally interpreted as the quintessential artistic embodiment of the qualities and ideals that the nation's mainstream, middle-class culture holds dearest: individual freedom, boldness, ingenuity, grand ambition, expansiveness, confidence, power." Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (New Haven–London: Yale University Press, 1993), 5.

6 Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," in: *Reading Abstract Expressionism: Context and Critique*, ed. Ellen Landau (New Haven–London: Yale University Press, 2005), 189–197.

7 See: G. E. Lessing, *Laocoon: An Essay upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry* [1767], trans. Ellen Frothingham (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005).

8 For more on the (lack of) distinction between looking and reading images, see: Mieke Bal, "Reading Art?," in: *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts: Feminist Readings,* ed. Griselda Pollock (New York–London: Psychology Press, 1996).

9 W. J. T. Mitchell, "Beyond Comparison: Picture, Text, and Method," in: idem, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 91.

10 Ibid., 95. See also: Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997).

11 Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca–New York: Cornell University Press, 1989), 91.

12 Jacques Derrida, "An Interview with Jacques Derrida," in: *Deconstruction and the Visual Arts: Art, Media, Architecture*, eds. Peter Brunette and David Wills (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 13.

13 John C. Welchman, *Invisible Colors: A Visual History of Titles* (New Haven–London: Yale University Press, 1997), 36. The second quote is from Roland Barthes, discussed at length by Welchman (p. 24). See also: Roland Barthes, "Proust and Names" (1967), in: idem, *New Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), 60–67.

14 For more on Klein and Asian calligraphy, see: Jules Langsner, "Franz Kline: Calligraphy and Information Theory," *Art International* 7, no. 3 (March 25, 1963), 25.

15 For more on Motherwell and textual/literary references, see: Marcelin Pleynet, "Art and Literature: Robert Motherwell's 'Riverrun'," in: *Interpreting Contemporary Art*, eds. Stephen Bann and William Alien (London: Reaktion Books, 1991), 11–26.

16 Morley discussed his work in terms of "an all-over matrix of calligraphic marks, that [...] deliver inscription from the linear syntax of the linguistic form, substituting instead a total field of dynamic somatic traces." Simon Morley, *Writing on the Wall: Word and Image in Modern Art* (London–New York: Thames and Hudson, 2003), 108.

17 Kline's signature large abstract canvases developed somewhat later than Pollock's drippings, around 1950. If they are sometimes suggestive of calligraphic signs, they do not address the tension between the activity of writing and painting in the way that Pollock did. Tobey's "white writing," declarative in its "writerly" form and consisting of a dense mesh of linear elements suggestive of calligraphic signs, could possibly serve as a good example of a matrix for emergent writing within painting, but its impact had a much more restricted range. Motherwell, in turn, the most eloquent and best educated of the so-called New York School painters, painted only a handful of works that incorporated words, and whose origin was not so much structural or semiotic but founded rather in his interest in literature.

18 Michael Fried, "Jackson Pollock," *Artforum* 4, no. 1 (1965), 14–17.

19 For an analytical account of the issue, see, for instance: Richard Shiff, "Performing an Appearance: On the Surface of Abstract Expressionism," in: *Abstract Expressionism: The Critical Developments*, ed. Michael Auping (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1987). For a critical, deconstructive reading of expressionism, see: Hal Foster, "The Expressive Fallacy," *Art in America* (January 1983), 80–82, 137.

20 "Technic is the result of a need / new needs demand new technics / total control /denial of the accident." Jackson. Pollock, handwritten statement, 1950, in: *Jackson Pollock: Interviews, Articles, and Reviews*, ed. Pepe Karmel (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1999), 24.

21 Anna C. Chave wrote that his "classic poured and dripped paintings evince complex manuscripts or palimpsests covered by a snarled, alien script. That script also may recall the physicalized and sprawling scribbles of the preliterate child who tries to produce handwriting by furiously willing a legible text onto a page." Anna C. Chave, "Pollock and Krasner: Script and Postscript," *RES* 24 (Autumn 1993), reprinted in: *Jackson Pollock: Interviews, Articles, and Reviews*, 267.

22 Ibid., 271.

23 Ibid., 274. Chave, quoting literary theorist Barbara Johnson, compares Pollock to Stéphane Mallarmé, who, "introducing space or spacing into reading [...] gave a 'signifying function to the materiality – the blanks, they typefaces, the placement on the page, the punctuation – of writing'."

24 Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkley–Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 118.

25 For more on arche-writing, see: Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 56–60. Derrida's term has also been used in the context of art-historical writing by Yves-Alain Bois with reference to Matisse's drawing (Yves-Alain Bois, "Matisse and 'Arche-drawing'," in: idem, *Painting as Model* [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995], 22–23). He identifies an underlying principle of drawing in what he calls "the Matisse system" – drawing understood "in a larger sense, as a generative category." As Bois commented, "Just as 'arche-writing' is 'prior' to the hierarchization of speech and writing, and, being productive of difference itself, forms their common 'root' [...] so 'arche-drawing' would be 'prior' to the drawing/color opposition, that is, without in any way denying the specificity of drawing and color in the history of painting, it would constitute the 'originary' source from which both emerge." If I use this term with reference to Pollock, it is to show that action paintings are also generative, productive, and function beyond clear-cut categories of painting and writing; 'arche-writing' is a category which can be regarded as "originary" for both of them.

26 Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 289.

27 Achim Hochdörfer, "A Hidden Reserve: Painting from 1958 to 1965," *Artforum*48, no. 2 (2009) (online version) (accessed April 18, 2020). I want to thank an anonymous reviewer of my article for drawing attention to Hochdörfer's important article.

28 David Joselit, "Marking, Scoring, Storing, and Speculating (on Time)," in: *Painting Beyond Itself: The Medium in the Post-Medium Condition*, eds. Isabelle Graw and Ewa Lajer-Burcharth (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), 16–17. The phrase "the bad dream of modernism" used in this context by Joselit comes from T. J. Clark.

29 Jeffrey Weiss, "Cy Twombly. Tate Modern, London," *Artforum* 47, no. 2 (2008), (accessed July 13, 2018).

30 Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, 256.

31 Roland Barthes, "Cy Twombly: Works on Paper," in: *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art and Representation*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985), 159.

32 Roland Barthes, "The Wisdom of Art," in: *The Responsibility of Forms*, 178.

33 Barthes, "Cy Twombly," 160.

34 Ibid., 161–162.

35 Anna Lovatt, "Fifty Years of Work on Paper," *Papers of Surrealism* 2 (2004), (accessed July 13, 2018).

36 B. H. D. Buchloh, "Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art," *Artforum* 21, no. 1 (September 1982), 46.

37 Robert Rauschenberg, quoted in: B. W. Joseph, *Random Order: Robert Rauschenberg and the Neo-Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 116.

38 Bernard Blistene, "Conversation with Ed Ruscha," in: Ed Ruscha, *Leave Any Information at the Signal: Writings, Interviews, Bits, Pages*, ed. Alexandra Schwartz (London–Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 302.

39 Ed Ruscha, quoted in: Bill Berkson, "Ed Ruscha," *Shift* 2, no. 4 (1988), 16.

40 This issue echoes the title of Liz Kotz's book *Words to Be Looked At: Language in 1960s Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007). She analyzes a variety of artistic language-based practices from the 1960s, giving further credence to Owens' argument on the importance of the return of discourse after modernism. My project complements hers by looking (in a more synthetic way, of course) at the field of painting (which she is not concerned with) – an allegedly *par excellence* modernist medium.

41 Blistene, "Conversation with Ed Ruscha," 289.

42 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 163.

43 B. H. D. Buchloh, "Between Ideology and Poetry," *Brooklyn Rail*, (accessed June 1, 2017).

44 Buchloh, "Between Ideology and Poetry."

45 Hochdörfer, "A Hidden Reserve."

46 "'Always Wild At Heart' – An Interview with Louise Fishman," *YEAST – Art of Sharing*, http://www.yeast-art-of-sharing.de/kunst/always-wild-at-heart-an-interview-with-louise-fishman/ (accessed April 18, 2020).

47 In a conversation with Louise Fishman, Carrie Moyer makes an interesting remark on abstraction, language, and women artists at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s: "using words in painting has been a massive taboo for a long, long time. If the painting is good enough, why does it need text? They would seem to negate each other. It's interesting to me at that moment (late 1960s) there are all these women artists thinking about text, language, and the language of painting." "Zero at the Bone: Louise Fishman speaks with Carrie Moyer," *Art Journal* 71, no. 4 (2012), 40. A more general claim about the belated recognition of new painting in the 1970s being due to the fact that many of the artists were female, was made by David Reed, quoted in Arthur Danto, "The Mourning After," *Artforum* 41, no. 7 (2003), 210.

48 Archie Rand, "Louise Fishman," *BOMB* 77 (2001), 42–45.

49 Fishman introduced calligraphic marks into her abstract paintings later in her career, from 1996. See: John Yau, "Drawing a New Line," *Art on Paper* 8, no. 3 (2004), 58–60.

50 I want to thank Joan Snyder, who generously commented on and made available a reproduction of her work (email correspondence between Joan Snyder and the author, April 21, 2020).

51 The text in the painting reads: "There is a female sensibility, language, art / emerging how can an all male faculty at Douglass choose select judge / women artists who apply? They / Can't they didn't..." It also includes a list of hues and materials used to paint/write the picture, as well as the individual words: "flesh," "landscape," "women hunger," and "wounds." See: Hochdörfer, "A Hidden Reserve."

52 Joan Snyder, quoted in: Martha Schwendener, "The Consciousness of a Feminist Expressionist," *New York Times*, May 14, 2011 (online version) (accessed April 18, 2020).

53 Douglas Crimp, "Pictures," *October* 8 (1979), 87.

54 An expanded definition of writing, incorporating other codes, was offered by Derrida: "Now we tend to say 'writing' for all that and more: to designate not only the physical gestures of literal pictographic or ideographic inscription, but also the totality of what makes it possible [...]. And thus we say 'writing' for all that gives rise to an inscription in general, whether it is literal or not and even if what it distributes in space is alien to the order of the voice: cinematography, choreography, of course, but also pictorial, musical, sculptural 'writing'." Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 9.

55 On the issue of the impact of so-called "French theory" on American art from the 1970s onward, see: *French Theory and American Art*, eds. Anaël *Lejeune*, Olivier *Mignon*, and Raphaël *Pirenne* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013).

56 Bruce W. Ferguson, "Patterns of Intent," *Artforum* 30, no. 1 (September 1991), 95–98.

57 Hochdörfer, "A Hidden Reserve."

58 Ann Goldstein, "What They're Not: The Paintings of Christopher Wool," in: *Christopher Wool*, exh. cat. (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1998), 255–264.

59 Craig Owens, "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism," in: *Beyond Recognition*, 166–190.

60 Darby English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), 213.

61 See: W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* [1903] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

62 The issue of a gender bias in American modernist painting is discussed, for instance, in: Ann Eden Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics* (New Haven–London: Yale University Press, 1999).

63 Mieke Bal, *Narratology: An Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 68.

64 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in: idem, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 248–249.

65 Mieke Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 5.

66 Ibid., 5.

67 Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight* (Oxford–New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), ix.

68 Strangely enough, in Tansey's work the page number is 146, not 147, which does not match any edition of *Blindness and Insight* I was able to consult.

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