

Abstract Art Against Autonomy

Infection, Resistance, and Cure Since the 60s



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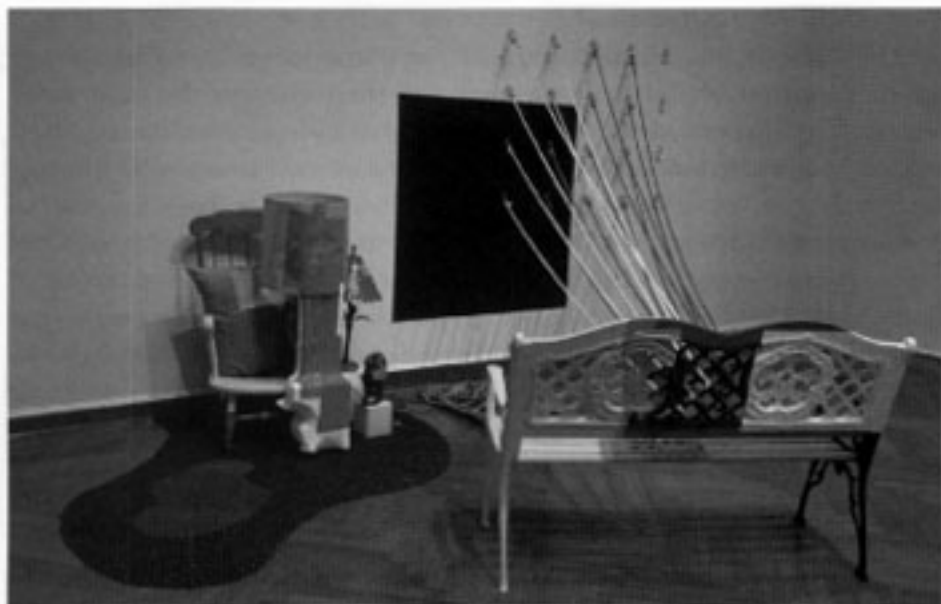
**Infection,
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2. Curative Abstraction?

I have brought the infection model of dissemination into the orbit of Klein's theatrical performance of absorption and GI's reenactment of the *Anthropometries*. Such practices create a social abstraction that again counteracts models of aesthetic purity and autonomy. One of the most extreme examples of this tendency is the installation work of Jessica Stockholder, whose exuberant, unfettered expansion of the languages of abstraction into the gallery space, although not unprecedented, enacts what she thinks of as a new way of staging the process of "meeting the world – the way it is, both physically and conceptually – with what I bring to it: a kind of abstract conceptual order and also an emotional chaos" (2000, 14). Stockholder's installations, large or small, are not abstract according to the usual art-historical definitions. They revel in using real wood, plastic, towels, and the like. Hanging pieces escape framing. Colour seems heightened for decorative effect. There is no reduction of means, and theatricality replaces any quest for a Greenbergian specificity of medium. It's easy to see why Stockholder claims Matisse as one of her inspirations. But one can see glancing allusions to conventions of abstraction in most of her sculptures, whether large or small. In one example, a piece of wood with an orange monochrome field leans against a low, half-black, half-purple table that looks sufficiently industrial to have pleased Donald Judd (before it was painted). The wall piece anatomizes the gesture of the hand and brush as a convention of expressionist painting. Cut-up photographs also cross the gilded frame here and epitomize flights from convention. Colour fields act out small plays of history. Was that an Ellsworth Kelly that fell off the wall and ended up in a new shape, draped over a fold of blue carpet? And as much as we might all wish that a black square could just be a black square, the ghost of Malevich's four black monochromes cannot be denied his (or is it now "her"?) appearance in *Ground Cover Season Indoors* (2002, Fig. 40), an expansive sculptural composition that abuts inside (artificial lighting, a chair with a cushion, an almost black monochrome painted on the wall) to outside (an elaborately festooned park bench). This apparition is tethered to the present and to the passing contemplation befitting the park bench. Stockholder runs sixteen colour-coordinated bungee cords (yellow, black, and one red, all with flecks that carry the eye from one tie to another) between the wall and seat in a mockup, or mockery, of the radiating lines in a diagram of one-point perspective. These lines of sight extend to define a new but as yet unpainted square, primed to overlap Malevich's *First Cousin Once Removed or Cinema of Brushing Skin* (Fig. 41), a large installation from 1999, does not literally move, yet all its many components coalesce and disperse in a dynamic orchestration of abstract forms and references. "Hard edge" planes lift from their Modernist station on the wall; a floor grid initially reminiscent of Carl Andre or perhaps Rachel Lachowicz's *Homage to Carl Andre* (1991–1994; a floor piece made of lipstick and wax) ricochets in its incompleteness in the one-way glass of the gallery wall. Parts of this and other forms



40. Jessica Stockholder, *Ground Cover Season Indoors*, 2002. Bench, rope, hardware, blue and green Astroturf, electric cords, power bar, wooden chair, pillow, lamp, lamp shade, plaster and papier mâché, metal plant lamp, rooster lamp, two plastic containers, shower curtain plastic pieces, shellac based primer, acrylic paint. Artist's collection. Photo courtesy of Gorney, Bavin, and Lee, New York, installed at the Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Mass., for the exhibition *InSite: Nine Contemporary Artists*, May 4–July 31, 2002. Photo by Lesley Maloney.

end up across the border of the gallery wall, where a transport trailer fictively loads shapes and colours into the gallery, blending inside and outside. Or does it collect its cargo for dissemination? Stockholder's gift is to bring us back to the wonder of imagination, to what she calls "thinking processes as they exist before the idea is fully formed" (cited in Cooke). Her work is playful in the fullest sense, allowing us potentially to assess our own perceptions of space, colour, pattern, confusion, and regularity. She constructs and makes active the shifting perceptual and cultural intensities of a space in terms of its own multifarious components and what we contribute as interlocutors.

The social abstraction of Hamilton, Ontario artist C. Wells may be less known than much of the work I have discussed so far, but it is profoundly illustrative of the role abstraction can play in the contemporary art world. To be different from our everyday lives, yet to make a difference in them, works of art need to be at once approachable and strange. We require a connection – otherwise, we literally won't see – but there is little point in going exactly where we have been before. For progressive contemporary painters, the familiarity of the medium is a virtue that must also be challenged. Much of Wells' work in the exhibition *1911* seems familiar as painting, at least to those schooled in art history since the 1950s. At a glance, it looks like formalist abstraction. For example, *homophone (ks, x)*, from

the series titled *yellowyellow* (2000, Fig. 42), is strikingly reminiscent of Claude Tousignant's double-banded yellow monochrome *Hommage à van Gogh* (1956). Were they hanging side by side, we would of course also notice many subtle differences: size, a horizontal versus vertical format for the yellow bands, and the equality of the expanses of yellow in the Wells versus the smaller yellow strip at the top of the Tousignant. Similar as they nonetheless look, these paintings don't speak the same language. Where the Tousignant locates its homage in a radical

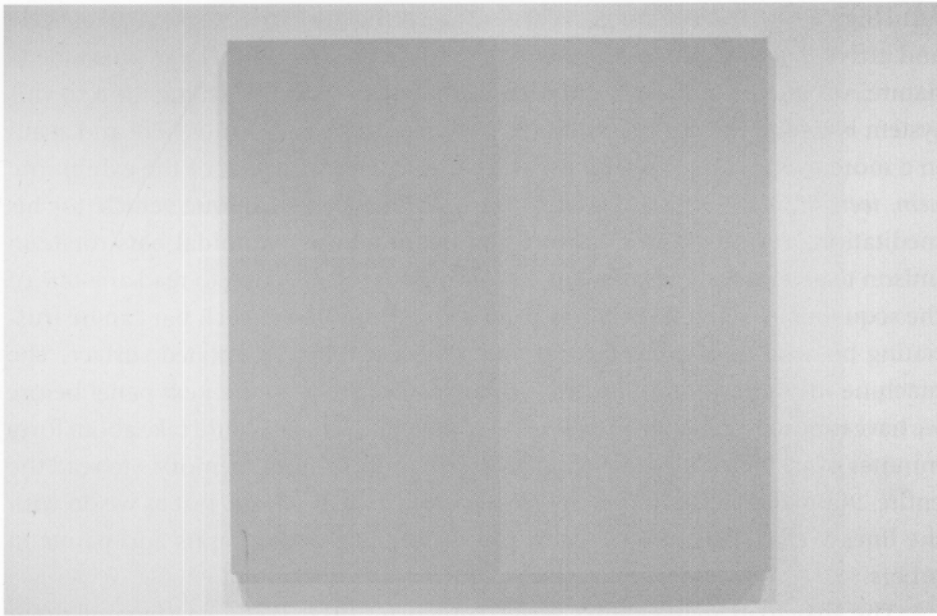


41. Jessica Stockholder, *First Cousin Once Removed or Cinema of Brushing Skin*, detail, 1999. Dimensions variable. Installed at the Power Plant, Toronto, June 26–September 6, 1999. Photo courtesy of the artist.

distillation of van Gogh's signature yellow pigment, Wells' painting is notably antiformal. In its unwavering regard for society and its norms, it is what he deems "post-aesthetic." Although his work is decidedly material – taking road lines, which Wells thinks of as painting's found object – into an art context, the work is for the same reason wedded to a tradition of conceptualism.

On what grounds might we claim that two works that look so neighbourly can be seen to inhabit very different worlds? We know, and can only know, by context. On their own, like words without a sentence, paintings as reductive as these don't tell us much about their possible interpretation. But neither are they meaningless or unchanging. Wells' work trades on how context drives change, how a familiar semiotic system – the yellow, white, blue, black, and (very rarely) red paint markings on roads and highways – gets us from one place to another without arousing much attention. His exploration is a conceptual in its consistent attention to understanding and finding schematic equivalents for the system, but it is, again, material in its rigorous restriction to the materials of road marking itself: the special line marker paint, the small vocabulary of shapes and widths, the restricted palette – chosen for its visibility – that, ironically, we usually only attend to peripherally. Wells' art is figural in its attention to landscape motifs yet also abstract in its historical and semiotic reference points. His pieces are antimimetic in the sense that he transposes rather than reproduces the line markings. But the resulting paintings, photographs, performances, and texts are at the same time post-aesthetic because they can never remain in such an autonomous realm of contemplation. Wells' art is never far from the social concerns of travel, borders, and permissions. He paints over these social lines so that we may better see them. Reminiscent of Robert Smithson's dialectic of site and nonsite, in *1911*, what is outside art (road painting) crosses a line to the inside (the fine art of painting or photography), but only temporarily and conditionally.

It is one of the paradoxes of the genre that painting over, or "overpainting," can suggest either the erasure or accentuation of a painterly mark. One can paint over a mistake or revise a motif in a canvas and show something else entirely, or one can build up the pigment to emphasize one area. Road marking tends to the latter route, as Wells' reminds us by repainting these lines in *the hand loves that which is hard, #1, virtual* (2000–2002). Here he develops his initial image of a road line from the Trans-Canada Highway near Banff, Alberta, in 1996 into an ongoing performance, a ten-panel, ink-jet series in which the same road and line are placed in stereotypical landscapes in each Canadian province. His line repainting in situ on the McMaster University campus in Hamilton, Ontario, for this exhibition was part of this continuing series and underlined the fact that road lines are both highly specific to a place and instantly generalizable, both geographically and by medium. These humble sequences perform their delimiting safety functions without drama: line marker paint can appear to be the same, and function in the same way, in very different places. We have no trouble believing that the "same"



42. C. Wells, *homophone (ks, x)* from the *yellowyellow* series, 2000. Road line marker paint on canvas. 60 × 60 in. Photo courtesy of the artist.

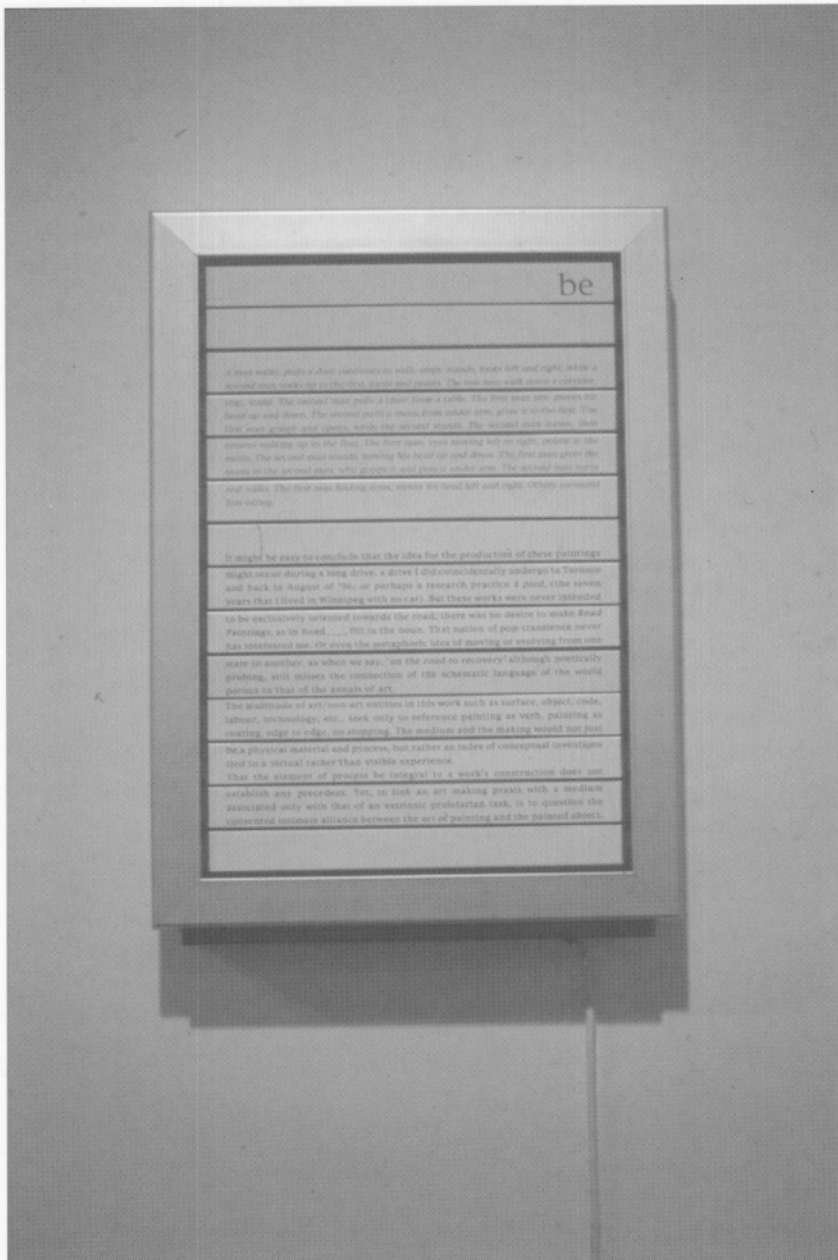
line belongs in a road scene from British Columbia or Newfoundland. Wells calls attention to this necessary anonymity in what amounts to a portrait of the road line and his performance of its semiotic life: *PLEINAIRISME* (2001–2002). Taken from a high vantage point, a large, sharp-focused photograph shows the artist, back turned to us, working on a long, horizontal canvas. His subject? A line that poses cooperatively on a street in the distance and subsequently forms the right-hand part of this work. Using line marker white paint and observing the protocols of width and saturation set in municipal road regulations, Wells portrays this line. The nearly contiguous elements of this two-part work provide context for one another: we cannot go far in thinking that the canvas makes reference to either a materialist or transcendental strain in the history of abstract painting – no Newman zip here; Klee’s quip that art is taking a line for a walk would also acquire new meaning – because the photo brings us back to “reality.” Yet its quotidian existence, a line that we would walk across as a pedestrian or drive beside as a motorist with equal oblivion, is temporarily held open to conceptual inspection.

Wells moves road marks into the aesthetic sphere to encourage us to see them more completely. Typically, if we see them at all, it is when we are moving and when, in a sense, they move us from point to point. Thus in *parcel the journey with the destination* (2001–2002), a large photo mural of another, almost clichéd northern landscape, is painted over with the abstract codes of line markings. The transition from yellow lines to white, if we pay attention, means we have moved

from highway to town markers. A curve suggests that we can leave the road entirely and arrive. The system works in reverse upon departure. In seeking "unspoiled" nature, we move via the acculturated norms of the road. Our attention to this system is, again, brief at best, though Wells slows the pace for us here and again in a more overtly time-based piece whose title plays with that of the exhibition: *nein, teen, 11* (2001–2002, Fig. 43). Here Wells adopts a unique vehicle for his meditation, a "Rotographic" advertising board whose pyramidal bars rotate in unison to give us three related but discontinuous texts. Trying to read any one of the sequential texts that Wells has painstakingly applied to each bar can be frustrating because he has put far too much text on the accumulated surface. The machine inevitably accomplishes its interruptive move to the next panel before we have time to read many lines. Wells has calculated that it would take about forty minutes of sustained viewing – and an excellent short-term memory – to read the entire, 900-word sign completely. We travel with the text here, just as we do with the lines Wells writes about in this piece and both photographs and paints in others.

The first road marker lines were painted in 1911. Wells has repainted (or painted over) a section of this original site in a homage performance, reclaiming a history in Trenton, Michigan, where these first lines were set down. In the exhibition *1911*, we see his typically filtered versions of this memorial activity. The number 11, he muses, is in a sense a portrait of the common double road line. We see this image in the most abstract looking of the paintings in this exhibition: *threeway* (2000). Part of the *yellowyellow* series, this painting also builds on Wells' 1998 *two ways of achieving an end*. Instead of two double line "elevens," here we have three. Each "way" is strictly instrumental, a technique for marking a road's median, of warning drivers where their permission to travel ends. In the southwestern United States, Wells discovered, the blending of road, earth, and sky has necessitated the bold edging of a black line inside two yellows that we see on the left in *threeway*. Moving from left to right across this image, and also both geographically and temporally, we then see the most familiar portrait, the double yellow line. This version, however, is painted in the original yellow oil line marker paint. A newer version of this line marker paint, a yellow latex pigment, is seen on the right. In *homophone (ks, x)* (Fig. 42), Wells puts the two paint types side by side, with equal emphasis, so that one can see their subtle differences, their different "ways." The oil and latex yellows serve the same function on the "thruway" whose name he invokes, but in a painting, their discrimination matters.

Painting Ends (2000–2001) places the two yellows in a temporal display of literal over painting. Transposing two curb ends, each the standard six inches wide, Wells has painted latex yellow over the "older" oil, leaving overlaps to remind us of the painting over practices that we can see on the road itself, traces remaining as uses change or perimeters need to be remarked. As in *TRENTON* (2001), where lines from the road reveal their new inhabitation of high art painting by



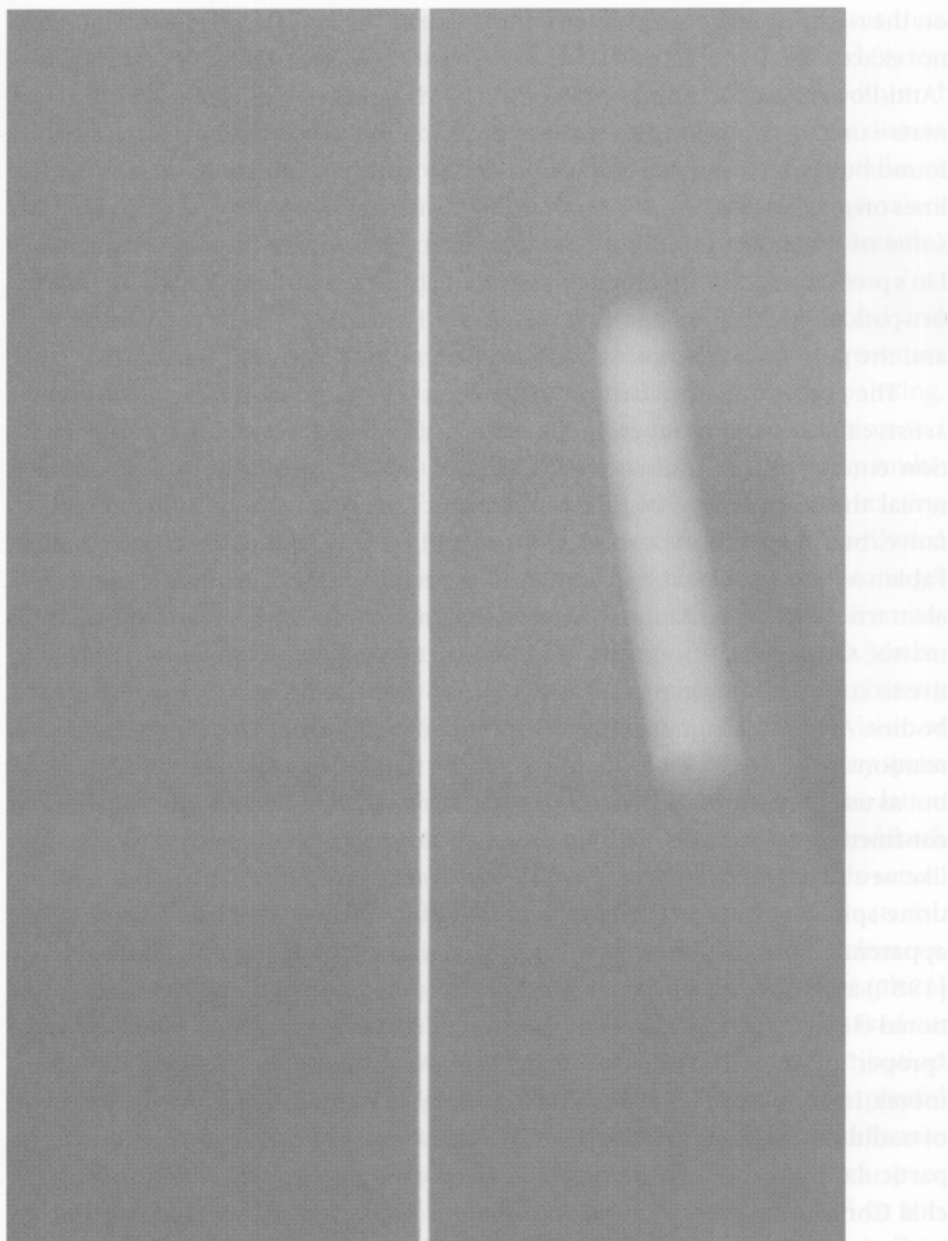
43. C. Wells, *nein, teen, 11*, 2000. Text on electric rotating sign. 30 × 20 × 3 in. Photo courtesy of the artist.

fitting perfectly within the panels' boundaries, the "ends" here are schematic. They function as repeatable templates. Wells typically mixes historical research with conceptual questioning. He found out from a road painter in Calgary that lines, ends, and the like were, in the 1950s and before, set down by hand, using wooden templates. But *Painting Ends* is not produced this way, nor does it refer

solely to road painting. In this worldly genre, an "end" is a limit or perhaps a functional goal. In the history of abstract painting especially, "end" connotes a terminus, a point of either futility or transcendence that has been envisioned in monochrome painting since Malevich's Suprematism and Rodchenko's materialism. These speculations on the end of painting took place within a decade of 1911 and have been renewed several times since. Thinking of how Wells' paintings, photographs, and performances link the everyday world and that of painting's habits and traditions, however, we might well ask what his work can say about painting's ends, its role and purpose within the social. To this purpose, let me imagine a rotographic text piece that takes off from *PLEINAIRISME*, one that – following Wells' punning practices – I will call Plain/Heir/Ism.

In his two-part work with this name and in the exhibition generally, Wells plays with the tradition of painting outdoors, en plein air, in front of the motif, that we think of as quintessentially French. But as we have seen, he constantly schematizes, moves, and thus examines the ultimate outdoor painting, that done with line marker paint, by bringing it indoors and into "art." Substituting "plain" for "plein" suggests the connection to the semiotically saturated social world we live in, with its often invisible rules, boundaries, and materials. Plain is unpretentious but not unsophisticated: a new latex yellow superseding a slower drying oil. The line we see in *PLEINAIRISME*, framed by foliage and then by canvas, is plain in these ways. It works. "Heir" is of course what painting today is as a genre, the inheritor of high-art traditions. One does not need to paint consciously in the wake of these habits and reference points to have them figure in contexts of reception. To produce the abstract work in 1911 is to work in a line of production that includes the monochrome, field painting, formalism, conceptualism, and even the diagrammatic realities of Peter Halley's conduits, which I discuss below. In the same way, contemporary painting cannot but be the heir of many "isms," from the sweeping ones such as modernism and postmodernism, to those with more local inflections and varying suffixes. Especially when one paints in a way that looks abstract, "heir" and "ism" pull toward a separate world of aesthetic priorities and concerns. But in Wells' practice, "plain" keeps the social in our minds. Or perhaps he reminds us that the social has, more often than not, been in view in abstraction. Mondrian designed Neo-Plasticism to function as a template for ideal relations in society. Think of the spectacular career of Newman's *Voice of Fire* (1967), which was a touchstone of American cold-war liberty in the American Pavilion at Expo '67 in Montréal and then the butt of public outcries when purchased by the National Gallery of Canada in 1989.¹⁵ Contexts and meanings change, as we see in the movement from the road to the gallery and back in Wells' work generally. Walking or driving down the street, we may well reconceive the evanescent social life of abstraction.

Abstractions by C. Wells and Ellsworth Kelly that look alike may not be at all alike when their visual appearance is contextualized. This point applies equally to



44. An Te Liu, still from *Prepared Ground*, 2003. Colour film transferred to DV, 13:30 loop. Photo courtesy of the artist.

the work of An Te Liu. The enticing title of his 2004 show at Artists Space in NYC – “Tackiness and Anti-Power” – might, in a Greenberg moment, seem to allude to kitsch or its defeat at the hands of purified abstraction. But no. His elaborate piece *Prepared Ground*, (2 images), a sixteen-millimeter colour film transferred to digital video, has, when we admire a still, an immediate reference to Newman’s signature zip paintings, some of which were green (Fig. 44). But what is that blur

on the right, and why are the surface and line so perfect? We can learn, but likely not exactly see, that the context is sport, specifically table tennis. "Tackiness" and "Anti-Power" are the names of energy-absorbing cushions – we might think of mats – used on ping pong bats. Liu recontextualizes other "abstract" sign systems found but again not much attended to in the world of recreation, such as marker lines on gymnasium floors. What he calls "game-space" is at once in dialogue with some of the abstract traditions we have been examining and also architectural. Liu's preoccupation with "surface" is evident, but it is a surface – whether of a floor or a paddle – that allows one to move socially. He claims to "unite the autonomous and the pure with the contingent, the real, and the possible" (Liu, 2003).

The purpose and production of a remarkable number of today's best known artists can be examined anew in the contexts of positive, social infection. Abstraction enters and contaminates social spaces, setting off reactions that test and reveal the resistance of both art and sociocultural systems. A short, representative, but by no means complete list would include Lydia Dona, Peter Halley, Fabian Marcaccio, David Reed, and Andres Serrano. Each one uses coordinates of abstraction discussed here to permeate the membranes between art and its social matrix. On a visual if not historical and theoretical plane, it would be productive to consider Jonathan Lasker's signature abstract units as infecting other such bodies. Are these diagrams intrusions into, interruptions of, conventional social relations? Connections of this sort could be multiplied with many other artists, but as usual in this book, I instead look in somewhat more detail at a much more confined set of instances. Serrano's early photographs of liquids are staged to look like neutral abstract art. But of course the potent associations of blood, milk, or urine spill over into social controversy.¹⁶ *Milk, Blood* of 1986 was Serrano's first apparently abstract photograph, though it was followed soon by *Circle of Blood* (1987) and others. Without language and its potent associations (Serrano's additional element, perhaps), these works might retain the aloofness of autonomy, a "proper" distance from society's anxieties about sexuality, motherhood, and other mores. Instead, as bell hooks has noted, "it is precisely Serrano's strategic merging of traditional aesthetic concerns with the social and political that gives his work its particular edge . . . [His photographs] critically interrogate the structure of patriarchal Christianity" (hooks, 1995, n.p.) and, I would add, patriarchal modernism in the form of the monochrome and colour field abstraction. Serrano claims that *Milk, Blood* is "a reference to Mondrian," by which he likely refers to the restricted colour range. "The work is about abstraction," he goes on to say, I "was amazed and pleased that the fluids had a life of their own and I had no control over the final image. Monochromes are a dime a dozen in painting, but you don't often see them in photography" (1993, 120). Blood's new association with AIDS displaces here its sacramental meanings. It portends death via infection, not life. Serrano is also frank about the racial implications of being of "mixed" blood, as he is, a state, more cultural than biological, that Morrison has investigated brilliantly

in its appearances in monochromatic abstraction (2002). Abstraction was thus at the centre of the "culture wars" that began in the 1980s in the United States. There is also a filiation between Serrano and GI in both the theory of bodily and aesthetic transmutation and in its processing through abstraction. More distant but nonetheless resonant connections extend to the blood work of Polataiko in *Cradle* (Fig. 3) and Richter (Plate 4). In all these cases, a medical substrate raises issues in abstraction and its social crucible of disease, infection, and (potentially) a cure.

Fabian Marcaccio's "paintant" works take the sense of art as infected and mutant to the furthest possible extreme, both physically and in their assertiveness of cultural theory. This purposefully and happily tainted form of abstract painting, which he calls meta- or expanded abstraction, he suggests, "values mutation and corruption as producers of links and resonances with our contemporary multiple realities."¹⁷ The "contaminated" spaces of collage are one important starting place. An early exhibition of such works was provocatively titled "The Altered Genetics of Painting" (1993). Formed of factitious materials such as silicone gel that constantly exceed the frame of painting and any aesthetic support yet simultaneously trap modernist elements such as the monochrome in their (genetic) webs, Marcaccio's works take on a life of their own as the rampantly metamorphosing nature of the present or near future (think of Margaret Atwood's chilling vision of "nature" in *Oryx and Crake* [2003]). "Paintant Stories" may join the gallery space with the outside world or, more accurately, escape from the former to the latter. A second exhibition in 1993 was called "Mutual Betrayal," a play on Mondrian's guiding concept of "mutual equivalence."¹⁸ Here and elsewhere in this series, paintant "zones" confuse and merge the space and time of creator, material, and observer. Unwittingly close to Malevich's theory of the additional element, Marcaccio proposes "Bio-Paintant" areas, territories that are at once biographical and biological.¹⁹ Monstrously large biomorphic installations such as *The Predator* (Plate 7, Fig. 45), constructed with Greg Lynn, and his Documenta contribution from 2002 bear comparison with Jessica Stockholder's ultimately more playful and tame abstract environments, as both move abstraction well beyond former limits in space or implication. Marcaccio's paintants inhabit the viewer's space in an aggressive and disturbing fashion. They seem out of control.²⁰ In this they offer an extreme instance of abstraction's break with the autonomy of the frame through infection. His work, he claims, is about "noise and contamination, instead of silence and purity"; it investigates "structures of power in a fluid society" (cited in Carrier, 1994a, 84). Abstract art has, of course, been socially minded in the past. This was the ultimate goal of De Stijl on the one hand and, much more idiosyncratically, of Kurt Schwitters' *Merzbau* spaces on the other. As we have seen, Malevich's Suprematism took to the streets and his theory of the additional element was, tragically, inspired there. It is the insistent protocols of much midcentury abstraction in the United States that are here reversed, but this



45. Fabian Marcaccio and Greg Lynn. *The Predator*, 2001. Vacuformed plastic, silkscreened and painted, dimensions variable. Photo courtesy of F. Marcaccio.

new emphasis is only based in part on the recollection of avant-garde modernist abstraction.

There are many other artists who deploy abstraction as an infectious agent in public contexts as a way to move art beyond the gallery frame and off the wall. Daniel Buren is the master of this sort of conceptual, performative disturbance. Finding and identifying (or denying) his simple stripes as art can occasion reflection on the body politic, its museological side underscored, that provides the protocols of what is and is not art. Abstraction is thus, as Buren claims, not a metaphor (1977, 26). It is an irritant, a microbe in Malevich's frame of reference. Buren reflects on the variations of making and finding what I would call abstraction outside the gallery: "Notions of wall on wall, white on white, painting on painting, poster on poster are evoked in turn, and those notions immediately intertwine to become, as the case may be, painting on wall, poster on painting, painting on poster, poster on wall, white on white on wall, painting on white on white . . ." (59). Recently, David Bachelor has taken up the social and aleatory aspects of such potential abstracts in his series *Found Monochromes of London* (1999–2003), photographs of white rectangles found posted across the city and turned into art references by the activities of visual and linguistic framing and display. Whether or not in reference to Buren's experiments, he explores what Buren calls the "fundamental notion . . . that a work of art before it means anything, is

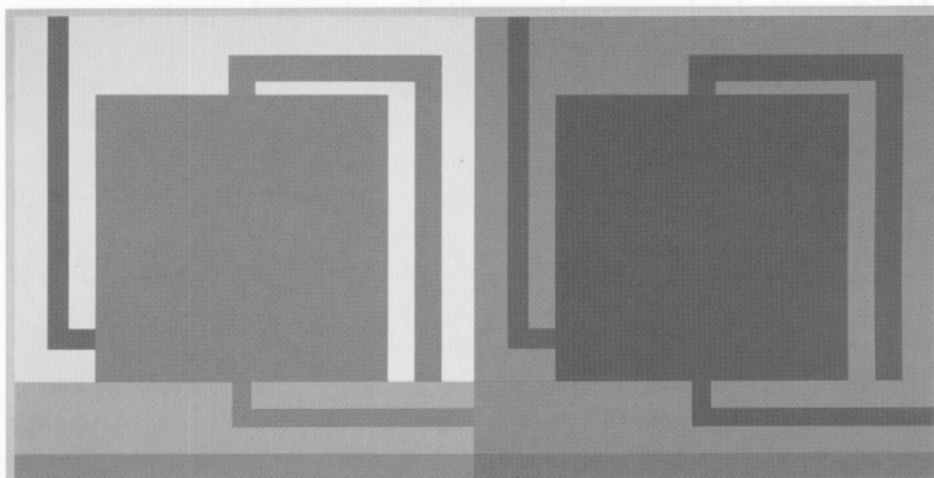
in fact used as a signal somewhere on a wall" (63). Batchelor captures these accidental monochromes; he makes them into what they only might be. Why is this a more specific activity than the widespread questioning of art in the museum typical of art since the 1960s? It isn't inherently different, but when placed in the context of the abstract as infection, as social agent, Batchelor's work resonates more compellingly. Add to this photographic series skateboard-like monochromes with wheels, made from found objects, such as *I Love King's Cross and King's Cross Loves Me*, (1997–1998), and you have not only an art form that gains access to society but also objects that permeate otherwise inaccessible territories, such as youth



46. Lydia Dona, *View and Speeds in the Sites of Abstraction*, 2000. Oil, acrylic, and sign paint on canvas. 84 × 64 in. Private Collection, New York. Photo: Kevin Noble, courtesy of the artist.

culture. And there is humour here, too, as Batchelor mobilizes again Klee's quip about taking a line for a walk by taking a monochrome for a ride.

Lydia Dona's flamboyant yet rigorous and subtle abstract paintings can be seen in many ways, given that her high-pitched colours and referential gestural techniques link to many other abstract practices. Colours and sometimes fleetingly identifiable forms sit on and yet also travel among many spatial dimensions (Fig. 46). She has called herself a conceptual artist who makes abstract paintings (Dona, 1991). Her reflexive but never didactic work presents itself on both a material and conceptual plane. Dona uses titles and critical writing in ways that make language a collaborator in her art; as in this example, there are indeed many "sites of abstraction." She encourages a range of response: "my work is ultimately open to a lot of variable interpretation and projection, and I enjoy that sense of communion that can exist between these variables" (Ryan, 2002, 59). One context that she suggests for the understanding of her typically dense surfaces is that elaborated in this chapter. "A passage might seem to invoke microbiology or a sense of viral infiltration," she declares in conversation with David Ryan (59). Without suggesting for a moment that the infection model is *the* way into her work, it does provide both a rubric through which to comprehend her relationship to the history of abstraction and her imperative to link her paintings with larger social issues. Biomorph change is one of the concepts that animates her work and links it to that of other abstract artists today. Dona typically breaks her surfaces into different zones of articulation. Some are replete with painterly activity, whereas others act as monochromatic voids. Her long titles – analogous to those of Jessica Stockholder – assert the imbrication of written language and painterly gesture. They also make little overt sense and thus mirror the undecidable and unpredictable relationships between the pictorial zones they subtend. Colours and forms mutate across the surface, but she controls these experiments. Drips figure often in her work, "on the one hand," as she suggests, "as an index of Abstract Expressionism and, on the other hand, as a sign system of language and fluidity" (Dona, 1991). Sometimes she lets her running paint dry; at others she blows it around with a fan. Either technique acknowledges yet puts critical pressure on the iconic handwork and mythic immediacy of American abstract expressionism, turning it into a code that she can reference and manipulate. She builds a virtual and a viral reality in abstraction using its own languages mixed with those of her contemporary society. Her reference to "viral infiltration" can be understood in terms of what she allows into her work – the sense and abstract image of mutation and infection that so preoccupy us these days – and as a description of her paintings' relationship to the work of Jackson Pollock in particular. Dona's canvases balance on the edge of being almost expressionist. What they do, however, by compelling us to see a microbelike dimension in the drip and spatter, is to infect this paradigm with doubt as well as celebration.



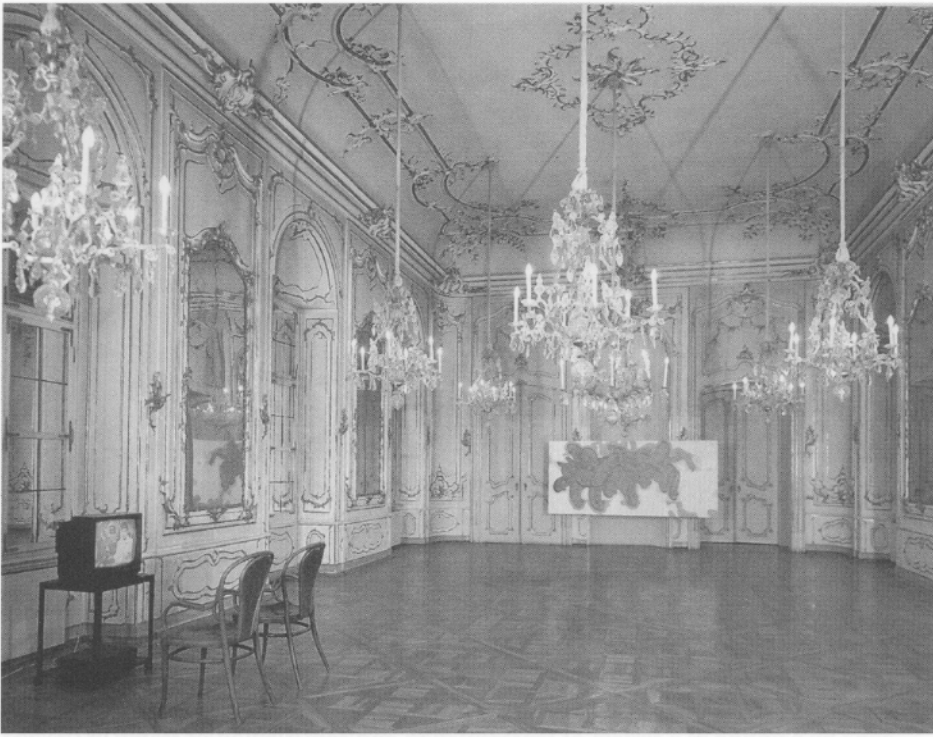
47. Peter Halley, *Rob and Jack*, 1990. Acrylic, day-glo acrylic, and Roll-a-Tex on canvas. 97.5 × 190.25 in. Photo courtesy of the artist.

It might seem odd to place Peter Halley's conduit images into a discourse about infection, given that he explicitly contrasts and opposes the geometrical imperatives of our architectural and digital surroundings to nature and its processes. But several factors make at least a comparison between Halley's works and these impure discourses instructive. One is the crossover between natural and synthetic infection that I have mentioned. Although Halley's focus has been the power structures of the grid, which show how our lives are increasingly "abstract," he is clearly influenced by Michel Foucault's work on medicine as well as incarceration (Fig. 47). "Physics and biology," Halley writes, "are also governed by a highly codified concept of the combination and breakdown of neutral abstract units (be they subatomic particles or strands of DNA)" (Halley, 1997a, 29). Halley is a prominent spokesperson for and practitioner of the interface between a new form of abstraction and society. He asserts that in the wake of resistance to Greenberg's formalism, we wrongly but frequently "deny that abstraction is a reflection of larger historical and cultural forces" (25). Preferring the description "diagrammatic" to abstract, his famous conduit and cell paintings are reflections of a social reality dominated by geometric relations. What Halley's work shows – and this is its link to the discourse of infection – is how these unequal flows of information and Foucauldian power move and change. They map contamination, not by accident the title of a recent book using Halley's work (Griffin, 2002).²¹ Contamination does not have to be biological, but in the popular imagination that drives Halley's work, it frequently has medical associations.²² Although Halley believes in dialogue and in teaching, and doesn't exactly see this sort of crossing and mixing as curative, he is highly critical of moves in art and outside it that seek purity. Thinking perhaps of purified abstraction from the past but using the surprising example

of Jeff Koons' isolated vacuum cleaners, Halley points to this work as an example of Baudrillard's reflection on NASA. Koons has "created a universe 'purged of every threat to the senses, in a state of asepsis and weightlessness'" (1997b, 102). Separation, purification, aesthetic cleansing: Halley's imagelike abstractions work against these tendencies because they are indeed infected by "outside" forces and, in turn, release these putative pathogens back into the body of abstract art.

David Reed's ravishing paintings and challenging installations may also be seconded to many different art-historical narratives. They are in part meditations on his own conversations with earlier artists, particularly those of the Baroque.²³ They are technically arresting and thus lead to reflection on painting "itself." They move out into the realms of film, video, and installation and so generally counter the former desire for autonomy in abstraction. Neither Reed nor his many commentators employ the medical discourses of infection I have been establishing here to examine the effect of his work. To a limited but significant extent, however, Reed purposefully uses abstraction in a viral manner. It ends up where it "should" be – in bedroom video installations such as *Scottie's Bedroom* (1994). The "should" here is recovered from the popular, though not avant-garde, belief that abstraction is merely decoration, something important to a domestic context but not really seen (or heard). The two Reed abstracts in this work, however – one on the wall and another in the video loop that is part of the work – are jarringly out of place because we have to focus on them. They offer opportunities for reverie but not in the usual institution established for this purpose, the museum (though of course the installation is itself in a gallery). The video suggests this interpretation by showing Reed's work in Scottie's bedroom in an anachronistic and medium-crossing insert by Reed into Alfred Hitchcock's 1958 thriller *Vertigo*. A painting from the 1990s couldn't and shouldn't be there.²⁴ Stephen Berg has tellingly suggested that Reed has since at least the 1980s been concerned to reveal the "experience of a pre-existing secondary reality . . . deeply embedded" in his (and other) paintings (Berg, 2001, 60).²⁵ Two thoughts follow. There is a strong connection between his technique in paintings of the 1980s and 1990s to introduce an often-monochromatic element as a commentator, visual stoppage, or, I would say, infection, and his retroactive presence in Hitchcock's film and Scottie's bedroom. Perhaps Reed's (and abstraction's) surprising and even offensive presence where it shouldn't be therefore bears comparison with the relationship between Klein and Malevich discussed in Chapter 2. Reed and abstraction fictively predate Hitchcock and his film because the latter of course had to use an abstract painting, Reed's, on the set of *Vertigo*. Like Klein in my reading on the Malevich cartoon (Fig. 9), Reed knows this isn't the way things were but sees value in floating the possibility.

Another installation by Reed leads us to the context for infection and dissemination presented in Chapter 3, the mirror and its uncontrollability. His 1996



48. David Reed, *Mirror Room for Vampires*, installation shot of 1996 exhibition, Graz, Austria, Mirror Room of the Neue Galerie am Landesmuseum Joanneum. Photo © Neue Galerie am Landesmuseum Joanneum.

installation of the painting #350 in the mirror room of the Rococo interior of the Neue Galerie am Landesmuseum in Graz, Austria, was part of his *Mirror Room for Vampires* project of that year (Fig. 48). Though Reed was not thinking in this direction and did not pick up on the infectious qualities of green that I have thematized, it is salutary to recall Robert Smithson's comments in 1969 on the effects of his Yucatán *Mirror Displacements* (Plate 5, Fig. 20), reflections in which he duplicates in language the refractive qualities of the mirror he describes:

In the jungle all light is paralyzed. Particles of color infected the molten reflections of the twelve mirrors, and in so doing, engendered mixtures of darkness and light. Color as an agent of matter filled the reflected illuminations with shadowy tones, pressing the light into dusty material opacity. Flames of light were imprisoned in a jumbled spectrum of greens. Refracting sparks of sunshine seemed smothered under the weight of clouded mixtures – yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet. The word 'color' means at its origin to 'cover' or 'hide.' (Smithson, 1996, 124–5)

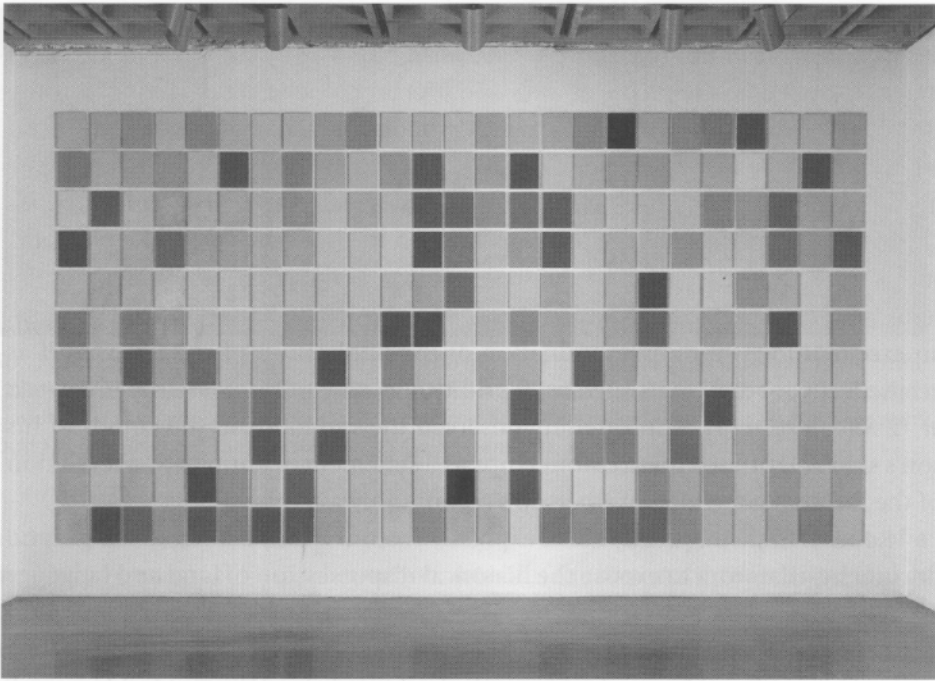
Reed was here fascinated not only by the vagrant and abstract colour and light reflections rampant in this space but also by the lore around vampires, that they have no reflection in a mirror. What he established in this installation was his own immediate and meta-consideration of the sources of both vision and art, a thinking through that we can compare to that of the Narcissus theme discussed

at length in Chapter 3. Dracula and Narcissus certainly make an odd pair, but the mythology around both gets to the heart of painting's reliance on both mimesis and invisibility through erasure.²⁶ Peter Weibel's masterly reading of this work's implications deserves to be cited at length:

The doppelgänger and vampire motifs are metaphors for the crisis of both the social and the cultural orders, both of which were transformed by the industrial revolution. So when David Reed reflects upon the vampire motif in his painting, he is not concerned with the picturesque superficial elements of vampire stories. Rather he is involved with fundamental reflections on painting as a construction of representation and reality in the age of the machine, the media and the post-industrial revolution. Reed is reacting to the phantomization of painting by art requiring technical equipment, from photography, film and video, to computers. Reed reflects methodically on all the possibilities of modern-day technical machine image systems that replaced the historical systems. He uses them to visualize the status of painting as a phantom on the one hand, and, on the other hand, to overcome this status with new painterly methods. He is trying to make painting its own vampire and double. Reed's preoccupation with the vampire motif and his investigations into painting as a doppelgänger of video, computer and film (for example, the artificial, synthetic incorporation of his paintings into Hitchcock's film scenes – veritable metaphors of vampiric blood transfer), are a fundamental reflection of the changes undergone by painting in the age of the industrial and post-industrial revolution, the fundamental changes undergone by painting as a system of representation and construction of reality in the age of the machine. Precisely in this way, painting finds its way out of its condition of phantomization. (Weibel, 1996)

Talk of blood transfers and mirrors returns us to Polataiko's Narcissus-like *Cradle* (Fig. 3) and to Richter's blood red monochrome (Plate 4). And in another related though serendipitous connection, we can think too of Eliasson's projection of the monochrome in *Five-Fold Tunnel* (Fig. 16), which was presented in the same museum space. In general terms, these associations take us to the mixing of the social, abstract, and pictorial in discourses of infection and transmutation. Important, too, for Reed (as for Smithson, if one wants to draw the analogy) is the movement of abstraction beyond museological expectations. Here, however, the laudability of the attempt is purposefully allied to its difficulty: Reed's vampire installation appropriately takes place in a palace's mirror room, yet this space has been ingested by the institution of the museum in the form of the Neue Galerie am Landesmuseum Joanneum.

The work I have been considering to this point is part of an elaborate and increasingly complex Western discourse on the abstract. Even Lucy Lippard's celebrated 1966 exhibition "Eccentric Abstraction" – recently reinstalled in part at the Tate Modern in London – could be seen to acknowledge, while working against, the premises of formalist abstraction and the alternative offered by Pop Art. As Lippard wrote about the unusual work exhibited, however, "abstraction is a far more potent vehicle of the unfamiliar than figuration, and erotic sensation thrives



49. Byron Kim, *Synecdoche*, 1991–1992. Oil and wax on panel, 275 panels, 10 × 8 in. each. Photo courtesy of Max Protetch Gallery, New York.

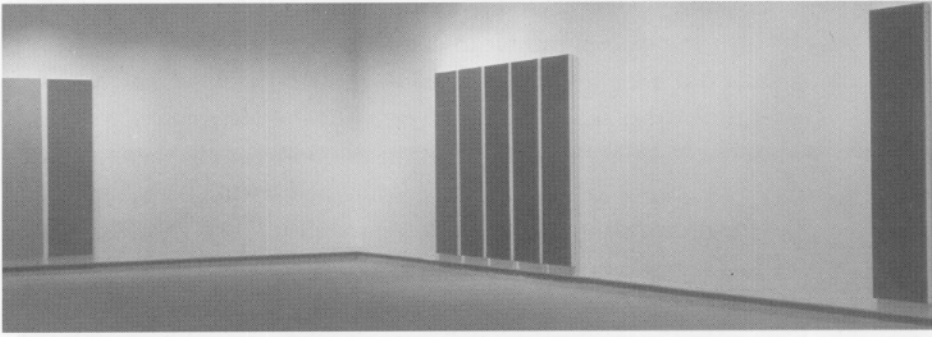
on the unfamiliar" (1966, 40). Her comment applies particularly to Louise Bourgeois and Eva Hesse's pieces in this show.²⁷ Abstraction has also been deployed to move beyond what we could think of for the sake of argument as a monoculture, a North American and European tradition of abstraction. It is unfamiliar abstraction in two senses, both in being relatively unknown and challengingly different in terms of the cultural and racial vantage points of its producers. It can best be described as "discrepant."²⁸ In the late 1980s with *Green Painting II*, Rasheed Araeen, for example, working initially out of minimalism, presented an apparently neutral abstract composition that in fact, again using green, proved to be "infected" by social conflict. We see a grid forming a cross; the cross is made of photographic panels that look like gestural brushstrokes but are in fact close-ups of bloodstains from a goat slaughtered in a traditional Muslim ceremony. The flanking green "monochromes" suggest the Pakistani flag and are accompanied on the photo panels by lines of Urdu script, another intrusion into the calm of abstraction. Although the strategic and disruptive use of the monochrome may be comparable, the cultural specifics of the infected abstraction in view vary.

Byron Kim is more overtly critical of high modernist abstraction. He asserts that "purity in abstraction is an anachronism" (Kim) and makes reference to the purity of the monochrome and its potentially troubling social effects only to offer a critique. In *Synecdoche*, begun in 1991 (Fig. 49), a work exhibited in the Whitney Biennial in 1993 and for which he has become widely known, Kim

plotted hundreds of small monochrome panels in what might appear to be yet another version of the typical *Most Unwanted* painting by Komar and Melamid that I discussed in Chapter 1 or a revised Richter colour chart painting. But the closely modulated hues were chosen to reproduce the skin colours of friends and relatives. Here issues of both spectral and racial "purity" are explored through the monochrome as a social vehicle: colour is both specific and always meaningful. Though we don't think of the term this way, in its root meaning, "complexion," suggests a braiding together of skin colours akin to the combining of the bodily humours. There isn't just one final skin colour, as Kim shows. His work is thus an excellent locus for any examination of the implication of racially as well as aesthetically loaded terms such as hybridity and syncretism. Similarly in *Emmett at 12 Months* (1994), Kim carefully observed the variations in the colour of his son's skin and offered these colour chips as a statement of antipurity, a revelation of the fact that generalizing a person's colour is always misleading.

Robert Houle frequently abuts expressive colour field painting to images and documents that work to expose the historical dispossession of land and language experienced by First Nations peoples. Because he acknowledges his inspiration from Newman and Mondrian particularly, we must grapple with the startling propinquity of First Nations history and a form of abstraction that holds universalist aspirations. Discrepancies abound. There is no purity here in the sense of an unadulterated version of history, the painterly, or peoples' colour. Indeed the three bleed together in the resonant *Aboriginal Title* from 1989 to 1990 (Plate 8). Here we can discern the racial stereotyping of the "red man" and see the saturated field of colour, but dates standing for troubling historical moments in the interaction of the Canadian government and its aboriginal peoples cannot be erased (1763, The Royal Proclamation Act, which made most of North America officially British; 1867, when Canada became a federation under international law; 1876, the so-called Indian Act, a colonial document if there ever was one; 1982, the Constitution Act, when Canada took complete control of its own constitution and put in place a charter of rights). Houle records these dates again in a series called *Premises for Self Rule* (1994), in which each document supports arguments for aboriginal government.

How do the prominent abstract panels function? Possibly they convey emotion, even unspeakable emotion. In many cases Houle uses traditional colour symbolism but exploits the dissonances in colours' associations for the dominant and colonized peoples. In *Kanehsatake X* (2000), he recalls the incendiary standoff between Canadian troops and native protesters over land rights that took place at this spot in 1990. He uses "a mnemonic code, *me uhp* (an Ojibway phrase), to express anxiety and delirium, but particularly to experience an event which resonates . . . The blue panels recognize the cardinal directions, the greens evoke 'The Pines' of Oka [a nearby site] and the arrowhead pays homage to the endless endurance and remarkable patience of the Mohawk people in preserving



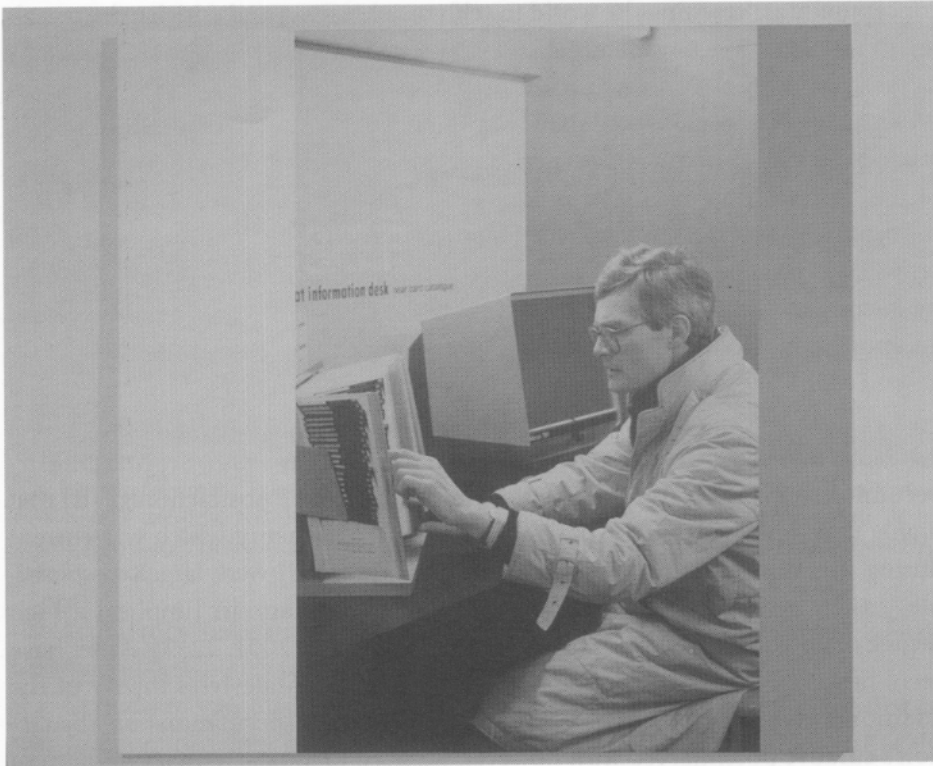
50. Robert Houle, *Palisade*, 1999. Oil on canvas, watercolour on paper, lithographic print. Collection of the MacKenzie Art Gallery, purchased with the financial support of the Canada Council for the Arts Acquisition Assistance Program. Photo Credit: Installation Photography Don Hall, courtesy of the MacKenzie Art Gallery and the artist.

and protecting their land" (Houle, 2000).²⁹ Houle's strategic deployment of a uniquely Western art form, abstraction, troubles the history he reveals and makes his point that in art as in society, aboriginal peoples cannot go back in time to a form or life free of colonization. And this troubling goes the other way, culturally and historically. There is justification for interpreting abstraction in Houle's work more radically as an infection, as both infected by a specific history and in turn plaguing our too easy assumption that the visual involves seeing alone. His *Palisade* series from 1999 (Fig. 50) makes direct visual reference to Newman's three-part abstractions, perhaps especially to the narrative effect of the cumulative and interreferential *Stations of the Cross*, and thus secures a place for these recent paintings within a high art context. What is released into this sometimes antiseptic progression of great Western artists and works, however, is an art virus, one that keeps an appalling history in view. The green and white vertical bands in these works index the typical formal structure and memorial function of Amerindian wampum belts. On one level, the eight paintings in this series are analogous hand made semiotic records of British garrisons captured in the conflicts of the mid-18th century by First Nations warriors in the Great Lakes region. Without, or maybe precisely as "texts," these abstracts (as well as his collage titled *Postscript*) also recall the tactics of General Jeffrey Amherst – commander of the British military in North America in the Seven Years' War (1756–1763) – specifically his diabolical presentation of purposefully tainted blankets and a snuff box containing smallpox-infected cloth to First Nations delegations. Amherst instructed his interlocutors not to open the boxed gift until they returned to their villages. Whether or not such "fomites," conveyors of infectious agents, worked effectively to the ends prescribed remains a matter of debate. The intention is not (Anderson, 2000, 542). Documentation from 1763 suggests that during Pontiac's resistance to the British, the "Confederacy" that sacked the eight forts, a specifically green-and-white wampum belt was used by the Chief to signify First Nations' military

strategy. "Pontiac's intended signal to his warriors to attack the occupants of Fort Detroit was to turn the wampum belt to show its green side" (Bell, 2001, 8). Pontiac apparently did not show the green side, but Houle's installation moves toward a darker and darker hue. What we have with the Newman-like *Palisade* is, first, a reminder of atrocity inscribed within the body of abstraction. There might at first be something unsavory in regarding abstraction as more than a mere metaphor for these historical travesties. Yet for Houle, and more generally, I am claiming, this mnemonic effect is real in important ways. Because there is a synecdochic relationship between the painting and virus, abstraction is both infected by history and in turn a potentially curative, homeopathic agent in our culture.³⁰

The uneasy marriage of monochrome abstraction and photography to affect political commentary should be understood in its cultural specificity outside the Western tradition. At the same time, part of the arresting power of Houle's work comes from the mixed messages sent. Abstraction needs to be acknowledged as a Western language. More exactly, the monochrome/photograph dyad has a history in this tradition. Ian Wallace's work offers an excellent vantage point. As Jeff Wall shows, in the mid-1960s Wallace produced thin, vertically rectangular monochrome paintings (Wall, 1988). It was also at this time that Wallace completed a master's thesis on Mondrian's Neo-plasticism. But Wallace is known as a political artist profoundly committed to art's role in social critique. Wall sets out the apparent tension in Wallace's interests: "Wallace's pictorial art displays a long historical relationship to two apparently antithetical forms of the radical art of the early 1970s. The polemical, photographic, documentarist practice of . . . Hans Haacke, Victor Burgin, Steve Willats or Allan Sekula, and the monochromatic and reductivist painting of Robert Ryman, Neile Toroni, or Brice Marden were recognized at that time as the antipodes of radicality" (1988, 63). Wallace's strategy, looking back from 1990 but ongoing today, was to abut these apparent opposites, combining photography and the epitome of painting, the political and the apparently neutral: "through photography I could intersect everyday reality and the 'speech of the world' with the formal structures of abstract art, and open up a critical reading of 'nature' from the point of view of 'culture'" (Wallace, 1990, 30).³¹ Well aware of and active in the critique of painting's authority, Wallace didn't want to jettison its history. Wall offers a meticulous and persuasive context for Wallace's mixed messages. "For Wallace, the 'mute ideal' of the blank surface . . . expresses the sublime refusal of the unwinnable struggle, a strategy essential for survival. Art is to be preserved as inwardness for the foreseeable future, and this future stretches back to the fin-de-siècle" (1988, 72-3). Wallace's is not a defeatist aesthetic. On the contrary, he sees art generally and his visual gesture to the double radicality of midcentury modernism as redemptive.

An excellent series in which to see both Wallace's technique and his belief that art is "philosophy embodied" (Wallace, 1990, 28) is *The Idea of the*

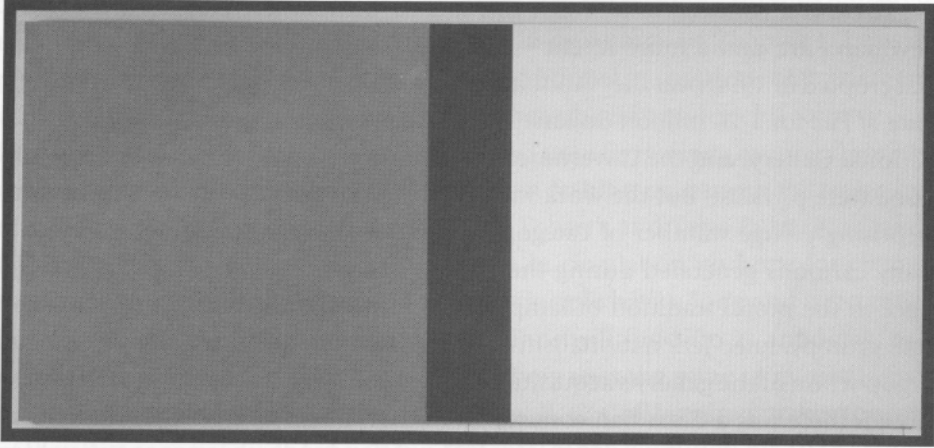


51. Ian Wallace, *The Idea of the University XIV (Searching the library listings)*, 1990. Acrylic and photolaminate on canvas. 152 × 152 cm. Photo courtesy of Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver and the artist.

University (1990, Fig. 51). Reflecting on the invitation from the University of British Columbia's Art Gallery to exhibit creations of his choosing, Wallace recognized that although the idea of the university is an abstraction, it must play out in specific circumstances in interactions among specific people and places. He draws a parallel with the notion of art: these institutions must promise "truth," even though they cannot fully deliver. All of Wallace's work accepts the challenge to be present in the face of partial inadequacy. He photographs people in social situations, in this case those appropriate to the university. These work as images of "discourse (in the Habermasian sense)" (1990, 27). Bordering these subjects but not functioning as backgrounds are monochromatic panels in various colours. These can be seen as ciphers of the ideals of essentialist abstraction. They are perfect, still, untroubled, and as such witness the "unwinnable struggle" of the aesthetic. For Wallace, neither the photo nor the monochrome can stand effectively alone. It is "in the attempted realization of our idealizations that the possibility of redemptive knowledge can be even visualized. For me the search for redemptive knowledge is within the terms of the problematic of art" (1990, 28). That problematic, I would suggest, is art's necessary material incarnation and its goal, for Wallace and many others, to present itself theoretically and

conceptually as "opening the world to self-consciousness and criticism by revealing its ideological determinations" (26). The monochrome is a necessary player in social critique, not only because of its associations but also because it remains present and functional. More than as a memory, I submit that the monochromatic panels in Wallace's images perform again as "infections," putting the ideals of the monochrome into new situations and encouraging viewers to work out the syntax. Wall claims that by recalling the monochrome, Wallace predicts that art will be "preserved as inwardness for the foreseeable future." Perhaps. But the interaction of photographs and monochromes in his work leads instead to social and potentially political commentary, not to inwardness. His monochromes are abroad in the university community in this series, and "in the street," as he titled a series from 1989. Wall's version of redemption is, if I read him correctly, close to the thesis that art, especially abstraction, can cure society's ills by regrouping, by becoming strategically inward. Charles Harrison writes: "'Abstractionist' [is] that highly developed version of 'mainstream' Modernist theory which was current during the 1960s and for which [Greenberg and Fried] were largely responsible... their notion of 'self-containment' in contemporary art [implies] a high degree of abstractness in both painting and sculpture" (2001, 32-3). As we have seen, however, this is but one option for abstraction. Malevich's theory of the additional element is another. Before concluding with speculations on abstraction's curative potential recently, however, we need to look at a final symptom of its "sickness."

The plague of iconoclastic vandalism often aimed at abstraction in today's art world can productively be thought of as another dimension of the "social" aspect of this form today. This is not to condone such destructiveness. As Charles Harrison puts it with his usual verve, "an act of iconoclasm is after all the consequence of a kind of 'reading', and it implies a form of idolatry" (2001, 191). Art galleries do not reveal records of vandalism against work in their collections. To prevent the spread of such destructive actions, they try to keep such attacks quiet (Gamboni, 1997, 193). But the press cooperate. If large abstract works are not attacked with greater frequency than other paintings, reporting makes it seem that way. And paintings are not the only target, as the notorious removal of Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* from its commissioned site illustrates.³² Of the nineteen major assaults since 1982 recorded by the Artcrimes monitoring network, four have been on abstract works (Fineman, 2004). There is no question that Barnett Newman's sublime colour fields have suffered a disproportionate frequency and level of abuse. Is it the taunting title *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow, and Blue*³³ that presents a red flag to the public? Perhaps it is the dangerous combination of size, apparent simplicity (which translates for many as a low skill factor), and high monetary value. For the arguments developed here, the question of motivation has to be limited to determining whether the attacks on abstract art are meaningful to the



52. Barnett Newman, *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow, and Blue IV*, 1969–1970. Oil on canvas. 274 × 603 cm. Inv. NG 5/82, FNG 40/82. Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Berlin, Germany. Photo: Joerg P. Anders. Photo Credit: Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz/Art Resource, NY.

extent that they make a statement about this type of art specifically. For the famous assaults on Newman's works the answer would seem to be yes.

Gerard Jan van Bladeren, the self-described frustrated artist, knew what he was looking for when he ruined *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow, and Blue III* at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 1986. He brazenly sought out the same work again in 1997, with malicious intent. Unable to find it in the Stedelijk, he slashed *Cathedra*. Without giving his paranoid and troubling anti-Semitic ravings any air time, suffice it to say that these prejudices seemed to him to attach naturally to Newman and to abstraction. In 1989, a veterinary student named Josef Nikolaus Kleer attacked Newman's *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow, and Blue IV* in the Berlin Nationalgalerie (Fig. 52). The assailant went to great trouble to make statements about the work, however incoherent. As Dario Gamboni reports in his recent book on modern iconoclasm, Kleer

"began by hitting the painting with one of the plastic bars used to keep visitors at a distance. He then placed several documents on and around the damaged work: on its blue part, a slip of paper inscribed 'Whoever does not yet understand it must pay for it! A small contribution to cleanness. Author: Josef Nikolaus Kleer. Price: on arrangement' and 'Action artist'; on the ground in front of it, a copy of the last issue of the magazine *Der Spiegel*, with a caricature of the then British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher on the cover, appearing as a holy knight on a dark-blue background in a reference to the Falklands War; in front of the red part, a copy of the 'Red List,' an official catalogue of remedies published by the German pharmaceutical industry; in front of the yellow part, a yellow housekeeping book with a second slip of paper carrying the inscription 'Title: Housekeeping book. A work of art of the commune Tietzenweg, attic on the right. Not to be sold'; finally, lying somewhere on the ground, a red chequebook. These items enabled the police to find the culprit quickly." (207–8)

There is a connection between this attack, with its reference to the cost of Newman's art, and a more recent – and thankfully, more humorous – scandal that erupted in 1990 over the National Gallery of Canada's purchase of Newman's *Voice of Fire* for 1.76 million dollars. The affronts to this painting, its author, the National Gallery, and the Government of the day were numerous and sustained. None were physical, but the work was carefully guarded. Complaints fell into a surprisingly large number of categories, most of which are represented by the many cartoons generated during the controversy (and which merely take their place in the proud tradition of lampooning contemporary art). To summarize: first, grumpy, knee-jerk nationalism – many Canadian artists objected to such a large portion of the gallery's acquisition budget going for an American work, even though there was a Canadian context, given that the piece graced the American pavilion at Montréal's Expo '67. Second, The Offended Consumer – predictably, many people thought that they, or more likely their children, could accomplish as much for a better price. Canada was in a recession at the time and sensitivities to government spending ran high. Third, government watchdogs – most importantly, calls for the government to intervene to block the purchase were met with proclamations of the importance of the "arm's length" relationship legally binding on national institutions. The gallery's attendance went up twenty percent the year after the work was displayed. Fifty thousand copies of a free pamphlet about the picture were printed, but the high circulation only multiplied the gallery's public relations gaffes when it was noticed, by a seventeen-year old in Edmonton, Alberta, that the photo on the brochure was backwards. An exemplary teen, he realized that the "Levi's" label on one of the onlookers jeans in the photo was on the wrong side. How much of this public debate and public acrimony was about abstraction? There is evidence that this was a significant, perhaps deciding, motivation. When the same institution purchased Mark Rothko's *No. 16* in July 1993 for 1.8 million dollars, there was a brief public outcry.³⁴ Although there was another nasty debate over the acquisition in 1991 of Jana Sterbak's *Flesh Dress*, the most telling detail is that the purchase of *Europa & Jupiter* by the 17th-century Italian master Guido Reni in June 1992 went unremarked, even though the 3.45 million dollars it cost was the highest ever spent by the gallery on one work.

Thomas McEvilley has written that Clement Greenberg, accompanied by his hero, Immanuel Kant, keeps turning up in our discussions like a "zombie" (1996). I hesitate to invoke him again at the conclusion of this study, yet given the chronological frame in which our discussions of abstraction figures, his position as a touchstone is secure. Greenberg was a historical thinker, a "world historical" thinker in the Hegelian sense. He saw purified abstraction as an antidote – his term, as we have seen – to kitsch. To strengthen itself for this curative role, it seems that abstraction as the epitome of all high art required isolation. Abstract art was a defensive position, a retrenchment. What we see in many examples of recent and contemporary abstraction is purposeful immersion in, rather than

autonomy from, society and its ills. Contemporary abstraction's curative potential today depends on this profound circulation in its culture. In Chapter 1, I was at pains to show how Malevich's theory of the additional or supplementary element was, in spite of its origins in the realities of tuberculosis in Malevich's country and home, a positive discourse in its ability to affect transformations in art and society without transcending either realm in Hegelian fashion or, conversely, retreating to autonomy. Work as different as Christain Eckart's and Taras Polataiko's takes up Malevich's challenge to keep abstraction in circulation, to hope for change by participating in society. Versions of this principle have a long and substantial lineage. Sherri Levine hopes her appropriations will function as antidotes, as I note at the beginning of this chapter. Greenberg uses the same term, forging an odd linkage with figures after and before him. R. G. Collingwood makes the role of the artist as social diagnostician fundamental to the definition his 1938 art and artist: "As spokesman of his community, the secrets he must utter are theirs . . . For the evils which come from [society's] ignorance of the poet as prophet suggests no remedy, because he has already given one. The remedy is the poem itself. Art is the community's medicine for the worst disease of mind, the corruption of consciousness" (1974, 336). The Hegelian sense of consciousness to which Collingwood ultimately appeals was moved along its path to self-realization by art as an "infection."

Plato continues to cast a shadow over recent abstract art considered as infection and cure. He performs what we can call a "curatorial" function in art theory and practice still, despite the common knowledge that he banished artists from his republic. Many art historians who focus on contemporary art are themselves, or are in touch with, curators. So familiar is this role that I think we overlook not only the extraordinary contributions of these people to our understanding of the work we analyze but also that we forget the medical and managerial overtones of the designation "curator". A curator is one who takes care of others in the sense of assuming legal responsibility. A related connotation is the care of souls, hence a "curate" in a religious order. "Cure" in the medical sense is always in attendance (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Thus a curator in a museum today is not only in charge of a collection but is charged with the display of art to ameliorate public ills and instruct the soul. Plato can be said to have inaugurated this tradition with his notion of the "good physician" in the *Gorgias* (521A). Looking to statecraft in ways analogous how to the artists considered in this chapter use their abstractions, Socrates administers the "pharmakon," the medicine/poison to the Athenians, not for their pleasure but for their edification and betterment. Plato's "poison" was to seek an art form that transcended art and to banish practitioners. A precedent if not a model for Malevich's additional element, the formula for this ancient prescription was rewritten by Malevich the art doctor. Both Smithson and Turrell, as we have seen, play with and transform Plato's cave into a positive site for art. Abstraction stays in the state as a beneficial, transformative agent. So too

for Polataiko, whose glares and then cuts take up the role of antidote. Positive as the "curatorial" role of recent abstraction is, however, it resists Plato's banishment from society only by remaining present as an irritant, not by curing ills in any final sense. The masters of tainted circulation, GI, make this all too clear: "We designed prototypical viral-like vehicles to course the globe, intravenously, like plasma in the body. These germs of art discourse were made to be word-wise and parasitic, logo-logical, programmed to piggy-back on highly mobile continually mutating found-formats + available contexts + sympathetic susceptible carriers." But, they lament, "does art have a use-value? Puritanically we tried to separate this elusive germ from any of art's well-known pleasurable side-effects. But we could not. We could not document one single case of art as the direct cause of the remission of societal ills" (1992, 58-9). A discouraging conclusion? No, a realistic one that recognizes both abstraction's potency and impotence but refuses to banish it.