

Contemporary Hybrid Painting: The Aesthetics of a Post-Medium Condition.

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The broad history of painting has involved several radical morphological shifts exemplified by the passage from primitive cave painting through medieval church painting to modern easel painting up to contemporary hybrid painting. Through each age the shedding of one aspect of painting, shamanism, spirituality, portability has resulted in a shift from sacred static images towards profane ephemeral events.

This transformation has intensified over the last century where the repeated announcement of the death of painting has seen painting reborn as a mode of self questioning, separating off from itself so as to find new ways of being painting.

The drive to get beyond the image based nature of painting begins in the first decades of the 20th Century when avant-garde artists become as concerned with the form of the work as they are with its contents. Aspects of representation that might have been confined to the flatness of an illusionary surface are detached as general principles and applied to concrete materials and situations resulting in the conceptual deconstruction of painting and a tendency towards installational object based practices.

To show this is part of a drive towards hybrid painting I am going to slice through art history at a different angle, using known events to arrive at a different view, a different outcome.

The Prehistory of Post Painting

The first sign of the shift from easel painting to something else begins with Picasso's cubist work and Duchamp's readymades. Cubist artists became so vigorous in their rejection of Renaissance conventions that 'contrariness' or complete inversion of dominant rules became a hallmark. Thus voids replace solids, opaque objects become transparent, and so on. It was in this kind of mood that the flatness of the surface of painting became solid and the wetness of paint extended to include dry matter such as paper, rope, wallpaper, sand and so on. These physical extensions out from the painted surface became known as collage, *papier colle* and 'cubist construction'.

Consequently works made from cardboard and string like Guitar appear to be a spatialised extension of cubist painting that simply discards any need for canvas, paint, and a 'flat rectangular background'.



Duchamp's readymades appear in the same Parisian avant garde art scene in 1913 as something of a response to Picasso's synthetic cubist works where the traditional materials of painting are replaced by objects of mass production such as newspaper clippings, printed fabric, wallpaper and even rope. In his most famous work from that time "Still life with Chair Caning" (Fig. 2), Picasso bordered the oval painting with thick maritime rope.



Concentrating on these 'extra-mural' objects populating the surface and perimeter of painting, it does not seem an enormous step for Duchamp to go from rope to bicycle wheel (Fig. 3).



While many artists took the innovations of cubism in the direction of pure painting or abstraction, Duchamp opted for an ambiguous abandonment of painting that continued to pose questions for painting.

¹ Picasso, Guitar, 1912-13, cardboard and string

² Picasso, "Still life with Chair Caning" (1912)

³ Duchamp, Bicycle Wheel (1913)

Challenging the presumptions of painting has a long history, whereby generations of artists have abandoned some aspect of painting considered sacred by years of conventional practice. Thierry de Duve lists some of them:

“The abandonment of chiaroscuro by Edouard Manet, of linear perspective by Cezanne, of Euclidean space by the Cubists, of figuration by the first Abstractionists, down to the figure/ground by many generations of monochrome painters.”⁴

Each abandonment serves to question what painting has been, and to install self overcoming as an important aspect of painting itself.

So by abandoning painting Duchamp is not affirming that painting is dead as a discipline, not even that it is dead for him as a personal interest. Whether painting has a future, as something yet to come, something ‘not yet happening’, is the very question incubating somewhere inside the readymade.

The readymade is not a painting because there is nothing of painting in it, no paint, canvas, image, surface, or frame. Yet the readymade might almost have been a painting, a possible painting, since it was conceived by a painter, in the context of avant-garde painting, as a way of saying something about painting.

Some 50 years after Duchamp’s first readymade an entire generation of artists took up a renewed attack on painting. The result in the 1960s was an enormous migration away from the craft of painting into new practices defined negatively in relation to the medium of painting.

In fact all the major artists, Ian Burn, Donald Judd and Robert Smithson who came to prominence in Conceptual Art and Minimal Art followed in the steps of Duchamp in that they trained as painters and then abandoned painting for the sake of establishing new frontiers.

However in all their work some trace of painting remained, some indeterminacy between painting and not painting. For Burn and Judd it was an unbroken interest in colour and the continuing presence of quadrilateral easel like forms. For Smithson it was liquified forms and the ambiguous reflected images provided by mirrors that was reminiscent of painted illusions on canvas.

By the late 1970s painting was long forgotten and it was sculpture’s turn to be measured against the historical requirements of the day. Ironically it is out of the demise of sculpture and its rebirth as expanded sculpture that a new practice and discourse for painting is possible.

The Genesis of Expansion

Writing in 1979 in her seminal essay, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field”, Rosalind Krauss noted that,

“rather surprising things have come to be called sculpture: narrow corridors with TV monitors at the ends; large photographs documenting country hikes; mirrors placed at strange angles in ordinary rooms; temporary lines cut into the floor of the desert.”⁵

In the 1960s with the development of conceptual and minimal practices of land art, marked sites and axiomatic structures, artists, none of them really sculptors, were beginning to

⁴ Pictorial Nominalism, p 151

⁵ Rosalind Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field”, reprinted in “The Originality of the Avant-garde and other Modernist Myths”, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1985, p 277

explore the boundaries of sculpture's negatively defined condition, as Krauss put it, sculpture = not landscape, not architecture.

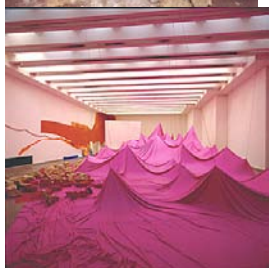
By problematising negativity they incorporated the positive terms, landscape and architecture into new permutations of practice. Krauss characterised this as a movement out of the purity of modernism into the plurality of postmodernism.

“ For within the situation of postmodernism, practice is not defined in relation to a given medium – sculpture – but rather in relation to a set of cultural terms, for which any medium – photography, books, lines on walls, mirrors, or sculpture itself – might be used.”⁶

This condition is epitomised by ‘the expanded field’ that replaces any literal notion of matter or material. Thus sculpture is not to be essentialised in terms of marble or steel, and impliedly neither could painting be essentialised in terms of paint or flatness. Krauss was able to say sculpture advanced by incorporating ‘not-sculpture’, that is landscape and architecture. It was this almost perverse combination of sculpture and not-sculpture that defined the important sculptural work of the 1970s. Similarly since that time it has been the almost perverse combination of painting and its opposite, not-painting that has seen the discipline test its own limits, becoming infinitely malleable, to be self differing, and separate off from itself in search of other ways of being itself.

In the 1980s painters once again withdrew from their craft training for the sake of a new kind of practice, initially known as Neo Conceptualism but eventually dubbed installation art. Site specificity was an essential element of installation art since it revealed the physical and political aspects of the place of exhibition. This was contrasted to traditional easel painting which could be hung in any ‘white cube’ gallery regardless of its geo-political situation. Site specificity was a form of institutional critique that exposed an apparent bias of galleries and museums in favour of portable quietistic works. Site poses the concrete materiality of place against the ephemeral virtuality of the painted image.

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⁶ ibid p 288

⁷ Ilya Kabakov, *The Man Who Flew Into Space From His Apartment*, 1968-96

By the early 1990s artists such as Guillaume Bijl, **Ilya Kabakov**, Jannis Kounellis, Wolfgang Laib, Meg Cranston, Jenny Holzer, Damien Hirst, Ange Leccia, Sherrie Levine, Mike Kelley, Cady Noland, **Jessica Stockholder** and Hany Armanious were producing work that was object based, environmental, time based, multimedia, interactive, and participatory. All of these elements, that are not yet a definition of installation art, are posed negatively in relation to the formal aspects of painting, namely static, flat, image based, timeless, silent and a one way form of communication.

Since most of the antecedents of installation art were based on the dialectical tension between the image and object nature of painting, and since most of the practitioners of installation art have been painters facing the impossibility of painting, the term 'installation art' simply functions as a red herring or misnomer.

Installation art, like conceptual art and the readymade, are constructed out of a negative relation with painting, opposing physical form, flatness, pictoriality, with what Krauss terms a "post medium condition"⁹ where art is no longer confined by

"the material properties of a merely physical object like support"¹⁰

Installation art attains a post medium condition as an inverse logic structured on the ontological absence of painting.

In the current decade artists enter the professional field of painting where 'not painting' is their starting point. Whatever is done from there is determined by relational movements away from painting. Consequently artists who abandon painting for a rainbow alliance of media and skills, ultimately move along the same path, away from concerns for a flat image towards object and time based practices.

In this way expanded painting could just keep expanding and become a kind of total painting, an absorption and "synthesis of all the arts under painting"¹¹. This kind of total painting, seems to go beyond our understanding of medium, to require either a new definition of medium or a new discourse around the 'post medium condition'.

φύσις

Certain Greek terms and their etymology are useful in negotiating this situation particularly through the precedent of Martin Heidegger and his writings on aesthetics that I will call a post aesthetics. *Phusis*, the term Heidegger uses quite extensively, is primordial in relation to form, change, presence, coming into being. Quoting Heidegger,

"The Greeks had grasped under the name *phusis* both the initial appearing of things as well as the basis of all things, the universal support which remains in reserve throughout and beneath all forms Thought as the most general trait which embraces and penetrates reality ... a cause of all particular things."¹²

By re-interpreting *phusis* in relation to 'original aesthetics', Greek thinking on painting and sculpture, historical differences in ontological paradigms are revealed, particularly the transformation of intelligibility carried out by contemporary art in its 'post medium

⁸ Jessica Stockholder, Growing Rock Candy Mountain Grasses in Canned Sand; 1992; Installation view, Westfälischer Kunstverein, Munster, Germany; 23 x 12 m piece of violet bathing suit material, sandstone native to Munster, gaseous concrete building blocks, plaster, basket material, electrical wiring, 3 very small lights, newspaper glued to the wall, acrylic paint, metal cables and Styrofoam

⁹ Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea, Thames and Hudson*, London, 1999, p 22

¹⁰ *ibid*, p 27

¹¹ Steven Melville, "Philosophy Beside Itself: On Deconstruction and Modernism", Minneapolis, Uni of Minnesota Press, 1986, p10

¹² Michel Harr, *The Song of the Earth : Heidegger and the Grounds of the History of Being*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1993,p 48

condition'. This involves an overcoming of the subjective bias of modern philosophical aesthetics and a return to the material understanding of the work of art itself by way of a 'post aesthetics', something after and beyond aesthetics. Post aesthetics involves taking a future-primitive position on art whereby the material understanding of original aesthetics is used to overcome the subjective bias of modern aesthetics, granting a new understanding of our primary relationship to things and their mode of presence in the world.

If modern aesthetics is a way of feeling presence, of sensing that something is there and that because of my feelings and judgements I am there as well, then art will be validated as a form of affective presence. If I ask: what is art doing if it is not guaranteeing my subjectivity, not pleasing me with beautiful affects, not presenting a literal presence? Heidegger answers with the word, revelation. As he ponders in the Question concerning Technology,

"could it be that revealing lays claim to the arts most primally?"¹³

What is revealed in art, according to Heidegger, can be discussed in terms of two ontological dimensions, earth and world.

World

World is initially characterised in *Being and Time* as a context of useful items and interpersonal relations, as a starting point for developing a deeper understanding of how human beings are as beings-in-the-world, beings whose world is a matrix of meaningfulness. World is not to be considered a thing or collection of things, it is an all encompassing environment that has two aspects, static and dynamic, where world is both a place and a giver of meaning.

Earth

The other ontological dimension of revelation is earth. Earth is not the planet or soil but it includes them. Earth is closer to the idea of nature but in a more original sense. Original in the sense of being new to us and original as going back to ancient origins. Earth is very close to *phusis*, which gives us the modern words, physics and nature. However a more original understanding of *phusis* goes beyond the merely physical and beyond nature as a category of being.

Phusis in its fullness is a bursting forth and a decaying return, an interplay of presence and absence, of showing and concealing,

"a latent thrust, a subterranean growth, a mute, concealed, nocturnal thickness"¹⁴

Heidegger takes much of *phusis* into the idea of earth as a way of thinking presence and absence, to glimpse this special binary, so as not to be blinded by the sheer overtness of presence. Heidegger finds a new understanding of the term earth by beginning with nature, taking an etymological journey back to *phusis* and then returning with a dynamic notion of earth that includes nature, an obscure almost impenetrable ground of understanding, a terrestrial homeland and finally the material form of the work of art.

Post Aesthetics

When painting breaks its own boundaries it also leaves behind established modes of practice and terms of discourse. It demands a new talk to match its walk, something beyond aesthetics, beyond our usual understanding of subjects and objects, that I have called a 'post aesthetics'.

¹³ Martin Heidegger, "The Question concerning Technology" in *The Question concerning Technology* Harper, NYC, 1977, p 35

¹⁴ Michel Harr, *The Song of the Earth : Heidegger and the Grounds of the History of Being*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1993, p 114

The discipline of aesthetics often includes discussions of reality, knowledge, experience and being. If reality is to be defined by a subject who captures a world in their sensual experience then aesthetics provides the language for dealing with it in terms of beauty, taste and pleasure. Ultimately

“Any object can be experienced aesthetically, no object is inherently unaesthetic.”¹⁵

Thus modern aesthetics is a lens through which all experience is sensed and judged. Every thing, every experience exists on an aesthetic scale. Aesthetics is no longer a theory of art but a model of how an experiencing subject engages with a world and gives it meaning and value.

New disciplines like art theory and cultural theory spring from a desire to overcome this kind of sheer aesthetic mindedness and get closer to cultural constructions and concrete events. In previous ages art had defined a world by setting the limits between people, communities, nature and the Gods. Modern Aesthetics lessened the potentiality of art by reducing it to a private sensory experience. In post aesthetics, subjectivity and beauty are no longer dominant terms since the subjective aestheticisation of experience is shifted in favour of the poetic revelation of material being. Post aesthetics is an aesthetic discourse appropriate to a new kind of work that generates an ontological question about how something is in ‘being’.

This ‘new work’ or painting in a post medium condition is painting interfaced with sculpture, installation, video, performance, new media and so on. It asks what painting is, how it has been historically, what is secondary and what is essential about painting and then proceeds to its limits. While Rosalind Krauss coined the term post medium condition she considers it to be a

“monstrous myth.”¹⁶, and that “the abandonment of the specific medium spells the death of serious art”¹⁷.

In the face of this her current project as outlined as

“to wrestl(ing) new media to the mat of specificity.”¹⁸

I would like to do a similar kind of wrestling match by looking at an example of recent expanded painting, and consider it in terms of post aesthetics.

Jim Lambie makes his “Zobop” installations by applying brightly coloured vinyl tape in geometric patterns on the floor. In doing so he transforms the neutral zone of the gallery floor into a visually activated space. The tape maps the floor so as to reveal the architectural shaping of space, while at the same time jamming the space by overwriting it with hyperactive linework and maximal sensual intensities. The colour is so strong in brightness and contrast, and the linework so hypnotic in its rhythmic differentiation that it induces a kind of vertigo.

While the work seems to deflect any generic description, the discipline of painting is invoked since the conventions of painting are both present and absent. Painting is conspicuously absent since there is no painted canvas hanging on the wall. Yet the colour of painting is all around us, unexpectedly under our feet, threatening to tip us headlong into an infinite visual sensuousness. The disappearance of painting in its traditional form is

¹⁵ Jerome Stolnitz, “The Aesthetic Attitude” in Carolyn Korsmeyer (Ed), *Aesthetics : The Big Questions*, Malden, Blackwell, 1998, p 83

¹⁶ Rosalind Krauss, *Perpetual Inventory*, MIT Press, London, 2010, p xiv

¹⁷ *ibid*, p xiii

¹⁸ *ibid*

concealed by the sensationalism of colour itself. Colour is not carried by liquids exuded from a tube and applied by a brush, but by industrially manufactured vinyl strips cut into shape and affixed to the floor.

Lambie's "Zobop" series, executed in various venues over several years, are all floor works. Floors are the cultural, architectural extension of the surface of the earth. As we stand on the earth everyday, it withdraws into the background of our awareness, completely taken for granted. It is the ground on which we contemplate the action taking place at a thoughtful level somewhere at eye level.

"Zobop" reveals the floor as the basis of an architectural space that presumes a vertical conceptual orientation. By refusing the verticality of the painted canvas, Lambie liberates colour and almost literally tips it at our feet. By colouring the floor, making it the surface of painting, the floor itself is invited out of its background presence, out of neutrality into an uncanny presence. Unexpectedly the work throws a light on how much work the floor does, how it holds me up, guides me through space, facilitates movement through a world. The artwork reveals that the floor functions by its very withdrawal, by resting outside of everyday awareness.

Ontological Aesthetics

Expanded painting like Lambie's undoes the framework by which we have understood painting so that another painting can take place. Post aesthetics reconfigures the framework of aesthetics so that a new thinking about art can take place. If aesthetics once provided a method of judging good and bad art, can we ask post aesthetics as a kind of ontological aesthetics to make a judgement about the kind of presence an artwork establishes or reveals? A work of art could be said to be ontologically good if it makes a full disclosure, that is, that there is revealing *and* concealing. So, despite the tendency for presence to overcome absence, absence has been allowed to be, revealing the secret partiality of presence.

A bad ontology results in the injurious neglect of things, the disappearance of things, literally the disappearance of the earth in its fullness. Art does good work when it becomes the practice that maintains things as things, in their uncanny presence, in their pres-absentiality

To talk the ontological aesthetics of expanded painting I have evoked the terms earth and world to indicate the uncanny presence of something that is paradoxically painting and not painting.

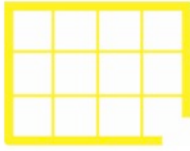
If ontological aesthetics gets beyond mere presence and thinks into absence as well, then it will have an entirely different question to ask beyond guaranteeing my subjectivity, pleasing me with beautiful affects, presenting an obvious presence. The task for ontological aesthetics and art in a post medium condition is to reveal 'what is' and 'what matters' in a contemporary techno-scientific age.

THE FIRST INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON TRANSDISCIPLINARY IMAGING AT THE
INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN ART, SCIENCE AND CULTURE

New Imaging: Transdisciplinary strategies for art
beyond the new media

Conference Proceedings

Edited by: Associate Professor Su Baker and
Associate Professor Paul Thomas



The first International Conference on
Transdisciplinary Imaging at the Intersections
between Art, Science and Culture.

Edited by

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Paul Thomas University of New South Wales

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Ross Harley, Julian Staddon, Brogan Bunt, Leon Marvel, Ted Colless, Mark Titmarsh, Brad Buckley, Daniel Mafe, Brogan Bunt, Kathy Cleland, Justin Clemens, Lloyd Barret, Erica Seccombe, Ernest Edmonds, Martyn Jolly, Julian Goddard, Petra Gemeinboek, David Thomas

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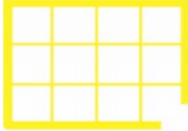
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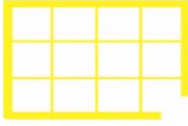
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INTRODUCTION

A profound shift is occurring in our understanding of postmodern media culture. Since the turn of the millennium the emphasis on mediation as technology and as aesthetic idiom, as opportunity for creative initiatives and for critique, has become increasingly normative and doctrinaire. Mediation and the new media arts have in fact become the new medium of critical and pedagogical discourse: like water is for fish, like culture is for cultural studies, mediation is a concept that is taken for granted now because it is itself the medium in which we think and act, in which we swim. We need a concept that is amphibian, and that can leave its medium. The concept we propose is a remediated apprehension of the image: an active image and activity of imaging beyond the boundaries of disciplinary definition, but also altering the relations of intermedia aesthetics and interdisciplinary pedagogy. This concept will need to incorporate a vibrant materialism of the image's sensory and cognitive strata and an evanescent immaterialism of its affective qualities. Rather than locate our conference in the space of negotiation between disciplines or media (the "inter-"), we propose the opposition, transit and surpassing of the interdisciplinary by a "transdisciplinary aesthetics", and its conceptual and physical practice of a "transdisciplinary imaging."

The aim of the conference is to bring together artists, scholars, scientists historians and curators.

The conference will explore areas related to: Painting, Drawing, Film, Video, Photography, Computer visualization, Real-time imaging, Intelligent systems, Image Science.

Participants were asked to address at least one the following areas in their abstract:

- remediated image
- hypermediacy and the iconic character of the image
- politics of the image and/or image making in a transdisciplinary context
- life sciences and bioart in relation to the living image
- distributed and networked image
- table top scale to nano
- machines and computer vision
- perspectival image
- image as speculative research and critique
- illusion, process and immediacy
- aesthetics and the proliferation of imaging

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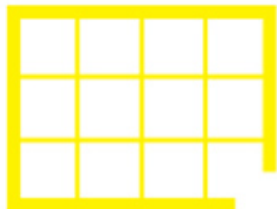
Roy Ascott, Jens Hauser and Anne Ring Petersen

The Speakers Chosen Were:

Andrew Frost, Daniel Mafe, Darryn Ansted, Douglas Kahn, Edward Colless, Erica Seccombe, Harry Nankin, Gavin Perin, Ian Gwilt, Justin Clemens, Adam Nash, Kathy Cleland, Leon Marvell, Linda Matthews, Lloyd Barrett, Lucia Ayala, Mark Titmarsh, Mitchell Whitelaw, Oron Catts, Petra Gemeinboeck, Stephen Little, Jaime E. Forero-Romero, Gavin Perin, Rob Saunders.

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Transdisciplinary Research
at the Intersections between Art, Science and Culture.

Transdisciplinary Imaging Call for papers

Posted by [admin](#) on Monday, April 19th 2010

The first International Conference on Transdisciplinary Imaging at the Intersections between Art, Science and Culture.

“New Imaging: transdisciplinary strategies for art beyond the new media”.

Takes place on 5 - 6 November at Artspace, 43/51 Cowper Wharf Rd, Sydney, NSW 2011.

Deadline for Abstracts: June 25, 2010

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- distributed and networked image
- table top scale to nano
- machines and computer vision
- perspectival image
- image as speculative research and critique
- illusion, process and immediacy
- aesthetics and the proliferation of imaging

Proposals

You are invited to submit an abstract for an individual paper relevant to a conference theme as described above. The deadline for abstracts is June 25, 2010. Abstracts for individual papers should be no longer than 250 words. Please provide full contact details with your abstract.

Refereeing of papers will be done by members of an expert review panel (to Australian DEST refereed conference paper standards). All selected peer reviewed papers will be published in the online conference proceedings.

Please submit by email to conference organizer Julian Staddon transimageconf@gmail.com

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Timeline

March 31 call for abstracts; June 30 deadline for call; July 31 peer reviewed abstracts notified;
November 5 - 6 Final papers for conference 3000 words; January 6 Final Papers for refereeing;
1 March refereed papers returned to be published.

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