

Abstraction¹

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In *Cubism and Abstract Art*, published in 1936, Alfred H. Barr, Jr. distinguishes between *pure-abstraction* and *near-abstraction*. Pure-abstraction is defined by its total renunciation of an external subject matter to the medium at hand, whereas near-abstraction retains allusions to subject matter through a work's title or by a discernible mimetic depiction—even if faint—of an element, figure, or object in the world. For Barr, Cubist artworks fall under the category of near-abstraction. They are first and foremost concerned with formal investigations, with an external subject matter serving as a mere excuse or means through which to carry out these formal investigations.

Barr's writings, along with Clement Greenberg's, were key to the writing of the story of modern art as a story of art concerned with methods of representation—a story of an art gradually withdrawing from a mimetic depiction of the world. Writing in 1940, Greenberg claimed that: "the history of avant-garde painting is that of a progressive surrender to the resistance of its medium."² He would later proceed to draft a straight line running from Impressionism, via Cubism, to the pinnacle of achievement with Abstract Expressionism. To Greenberg, Abstract Expressionism was a movement driving the medium

of painting to its necessary progression, while granting artists the freedom to abandon the world and its forms in favor of subjective expression.³

Although neither Barr nor Greenberg could ignore abstraction's indebtedness to what were commonly referred to as the primitive arts, the European and North American achievement was distinguished from ancient, African, Islamic, tribal, and other non-Western forms by its supposed ability to transcend functional, religious, and communal concerns and thus become truly universal.

Eighty years on from when *Cubism and Abstract Art* was first published—and even as arguments around methods of representation have waned—this distinction laid out by Barr between near- and pure-abstraction arguably continues to have one of the strongest holds on art's discourses. The bundling he introduced together with Greenberg, that of a non-referential, non-instrumental, universal form married to individual creativity and freedom of expression, has survived intact as a formula. It is true that we are operating in a wide spectrum now, but it is one which is still sandwiched between two ends: An engaged art with a discernible subject matter that is specific to a geography and particular social concerns, pitted against a removed art that renounces the world for either transcendental or formal concerns, has a universal language emanating from the Western world, and whose source is always located within the individual subject of the artist.⁴

But might there be other ways to think of so-called abstract forms? Might there also be ways to think of artistic output as something other than forms emanating from, primarily or solely, an artist's inner self—something other than simply the result of his or her perceptual abilities, creative inclinations, or moral compass?

In "Photography by Other Means," Kaja Silverman writes about the work of German artist Gerhard Richter who has produced figurative and abstract paintings as well as photographic works:

In a 1986 conversation with Gerhard Richter, Benjamin Buchloh suggested that there is something contradictory about the fact that Richter produces figurative as well as abstract paintings. The artist responded: 'I don't really know what you mean by the contradiction between figurative and abstract painting.' [...] [Richter goes on to claim] to paint 'like

a camera,' even when no photograph figures in the production of his work. 'I'm not trying to imitate a photograph,' he told an interviewer in 1972. 'I'm trying to make one. And if I disregard the assumption that a photograph is a piece of paper exposed to light, then I am practicing photography by other means. [...] [T]hose of my paintings that have no photographic source (the abstracts, etc.) are also photographs.'⁵

If we take Richter's words precisely, then the choice of the medium of photography is no accident.

Photography is the medium that, even when composed of pure light, is always tied to the world, always pointing outwards. Photography is also the medium in which the agency of its maker is downplayed to the minimum, if not entirely absent. Describing his abstract paintings as photography, Richter positions them at a distance from subjective expressionism, which had been cast as the hallmark of abstraction. Moreover, he posits photography as a technique and not a technology—a stand-in for the practice of art.

Relying on Richter's words and works, Silverman carves out a relationship of "analogy" between artworks and the world (photographs and their referents), a relationship that connects art to the world while rendering both art and world on an equal footing, without either being subordinate to (or representative of) the other:

Richter does more than dismantle the opposition between abstract painting and photographic figuration; he also bridges the gap separating art from the world. He accomplishes both of these undertakings by creating analogies. [...] [A]n analogy is a very different thing from a metaphor. A metaphor entails the substitution of one thing for another. This is a profoundly undemocratic relationship, because the former is a temporary stand-in for the latter and because it has only a provisional reality. In an analogy, on the other hand, both terms are on equal footing, ontologically and semiotically. They also belong to each other at the most profound level of their being.⁶

Richter is not alone in using photography as a stand-in for practicing art. In *The Concept of Non-Photography*, the French philosopher François Laruelle also posits photography as "a thinking" whose relationship to the camera is coincidental at best. He casts photography's relationship to the

world in a similar light to Silverman's concept of analogy—as something separate from, but adjacent to and on an equal footing with, the world:

Photography can be reduced neither to its technological conditions of existence, nor to the experiential complex that associates old images, technical means linked to the medium, perception or aesthetic norms. It is an immanent process that traverses and animates this materiality, a thinking instigated by the artificial simulation of perception. [...] The photo presents not some 'subject' but its identity, with the aid of or on the occasion of the 'subject'; and presents it without transforming it in what it is. [...] Contemplating a photo, we contemplate the real itself—not the object, but an identity. [...] The photo is the first presentation of Identity, a presentation that has never been affected and divided by a representation. [...] [P]hotography is in no way a double, a specular image of the World, obtained by division or decision of the latter; a copy, and a bad one, of an original. [...] The photo is not a degradation of the World, but a process which is 'parallel' to it and which is played out elsewhere than within it.⁷

Laruelle's ideas of what constitutes a photograph and photographic "thinking" might be further elaborated by his writings on little-known Hungarian artist August von Briesen, in particular a series of "abstract" pencil drawings he made of musical compositions. Von Briesen is known to have completed these drawings on the spot while listening to compositions such as Gustav Mahler's Symphony no. 5 and Sergei Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet*. In his book *Laruelle: Against the Digital*, Alexander Galloway points out how, to Laruelle, von Briesen's activities fall within the realm of automatic inscription, but not one privileging the subconscious as in Surrealist practices. This automatic inscription is neither passive nor mechanical. It is, in line with Laruelle's definition of photography, "a thinking" which does not modify the subject at hand but manifests its "Identity":⁸

[A]lthough Laruelle uses the term *automatic*, he does not mean a kind of neosurrealist technique in which the hand and stylus become a conduit for subhuman flows. Rather he evokes the notion of automatic drawing as a way to suspend or collapse the notion, borrowed from phenomenology, of the perceptual distance between artist and object. [...]

‘What is he drawing?’ Laruelle asks of von Briesen—and the answer is simple: ‘Truth itself.’ [...] The key is found in the gesture of drawing itself, or what Laruelle calls the ‘registration’ of a line: ‘To draw is no longer to follow the finite outline of a thing or the infinite curve of an Idea that resists its own manifestation. To draw is merely a *registration*: like a seismograph scratching out its uncountable jolts and undulations [...]. To register means to manifest as a whole, with the expectation that it would be *without remainder*, the real itself, in this case music.’⁹

Proceeding from the view of the artist as a conduit for a manifestation that is not modified by his or her person is an idea that is also central to the writings of the Iraqi-Lebanese thinker Jalal Toufic. In *The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster*, Toufic uses the analogy of photography to posit the following scenario about a fictional Lebanese photographer:¹⁰

Even after he became used to looking at buildings and experiencing events at the rhythm of peace, the photographs of the ruins in Lebanon taken by this Lebanese photographer, who classically composed those of his photographs shot in other countries, still looked like they were taken by a photographer lacking time to aim since in imminent danger, the compositions haphazard and the focus almost always off. He was asked if he was influenced by such works as Vito Acconci’s *Fall* (1969): a series of photographs Acconci produced by clicking his hand-held camera as he reached the ground while repeatedly falling forward; or Michael Snow’s *Venetian Blind* (1970): twenty-four snapshots he took with his eyes closed, each showing a blurred Snow against the accidentally framed background of a section of Venice. [...] The question revealed a misunderstanding, since in his work the out-of-focus and/or the haphazard framings were not a formal strategy but due to the withdrawal and thus unavailability to vision of the material. [...] [D]ue to the withdrawal past a surpassing disaster something in the referent cannot be localized exactly, whether with regards to framing or focus or both [...]. With regard to the surpassing disaster, art acts like the mirror in vampire films: it reveals the withdrawal of what we think is still there. ‘You have seen nothing in Hiroshima’ ([Marguerite] Duras’ *Hiroshima mon*

amour, 1961). Does this entail that one should not record? No. One should record this ‘nothing,’ which only after the resurrection can be available. We have to take photographs even though because of their referents’ withdrawal, and until their referents are resurrected, they are not going to be available as referential, documentary pieces—with the concomitant risk that facets relating to the subject matter might be mistaken for purely formal ones.¹¹

Toufic here provides a scenario in which an artwork lacking an apparent referent is not a result of an act of renunciation of referential practices by an artist for formal or other concerns, but the result of a necessity entailed by the referent itself and its condition in the world.¹² He also makes clear that what he is speaking about is with regards to specific artworks under specific conditions (in this case, artworks made in light of what he terms a “surpassing disaster”). This constitutes a clear example of when artworks lacking an apparent referent benefit from being situated geographically and temporally. They cannot be thought of in the general, even if they lack the markers we commonly associate with specificity. More intriguingly, Toufic implies that these artworks, whose referents are apparently “withdrawn,” might once more become “available as referential documentary pieces” when their referents are “resurrected.”¹³

Art also appears to exist, for Toufic, as for both Silverman and Laruelle, in a space adjacent to but outside our universe. In his book (*Vampires*): *An Uneasy Essay on the Undead in Film*, he writes:

What can resist, and resists the expansion of globalization is not the local of every country, but the universal of artistic works, which present each a universe that is not part of the expanding universe in which humans materially live but borders it.¹⁴

Similar to the operation of photography that has little to do with a camera, under Toufic’s logic one can imagine an artwork offering knowledge about the state of its referent that relates little to an artist’s emotional state or subjective inclinations—an artwork that lays a claim to the world no less substantial than a scientific claim to the world. It is an art that, although not science, similarly to science refuses to reside merely in the “I” of its maker, even if this “I” is who partly brought it about. Relying on these thinkers, it is possible to write a different story of the

field of art that is distant from the road to abstraction spoken about by Barr and Greenberg, even if it might share some of the forms they identified as key to it. A story that doesn't strive for proof of formal innovation, a shell for the universal, or a timeline of historical progression, but casts a generative light, while leaving open a window to thinking of different occurrences in manners specific to them. Reading

and thinking with these thinkers makes it possible to see and think about art as not something removed from our world but, to use Laruelle's term, as "parallel" to it or, to use Toufic's definition, as universes "bordering" it. It makes it possible to think of an art that is not exactly part of the world but is certainly tied to it, revealing of it, and not just because it looks or sounds like it.

1 This essay is concerned with discourses around so-called abstract artworks, and not with artworks themselves.

2 See Clement Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoön," *Partisan Review*, vol. 7, no. 4 (1940), pp. 296–310 <<https://west.slcschools.org/academics/visual-arts/documents/Laocooon.pdf>> last accessed July 16, 2018.

3 See Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1961. See in particular his 1955 essay "American-Type Painting," pp. 208–30.

4 Distinctions held art historically between categories such as Minimalism, Geometric abstraction, Conceptual art, and Abstract Expressionism seem to have, in contemporary art parlance, coalesced into the more simplified term "abstraction," which is used to denote any work in which the subject matter is not clearly spelled out in a sensually recognizable form, regardless of its relationship to matters of representation.

5 Kaja Silverman, "Photography by Other Means," in *Flesh of My Flesh*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009, pp. 168–223, here pp. 168, 173.

6 Ibid., p. 173.

7 François Laruelle, *The Concept of Non-Photography*, trans. Robin MacKay. Falmouth: Urbanomic/Sequence Press, 2001, pp. 39, 44, 24.

8 Laruelle's writings on photography benefit from being situated within his larger writings about the non-standard method in

philosophy. Alexander Galloway's book *Laruelle: Against the Digital* has been indispensable in carrying out closer readings of Laruelle. In addition to Galloway's chapter "Art and Utopia," see "The Black Universe" and "The Generic," in Alexander R. Galloway, *Laruelle: Against the Digital*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014.

9 Ibid., pp. 162, 170, 163.

10 This reading of Jalal Toufic's relationship to abstraction has benefited from artist Walid Raad's readings of him. See Raad's 2007 lecture on Toufic at the United Nations Plaza: Walid Raad, "Seminar 3 – Day 1: Walid Raad & Jalal Toufic: The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Desire" (video lecture). Berlin: United Nations Plaza Archive (February 2007) <<http://www.unitednationsplaza.org/video/7/>> last accessed July 27, 2018.

11 Jalal Toufic, *The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster* (e-book): Forthcoming Books, 2009, pp. 65, 66, 57–58 <http://www.jalaltoufic.com/downloads/Jalal_Toufic,_The_Withdrawal_of_Tradition_Past_a_Surpassing_Disaster.pdf>.

12 Art acts like a mirror, according to Toufic. A mirror can be taken to merely offer a reflection, but for him it is probably a much more complex entity. In his book (*Vampires*): *An Uneasy Essay on the Undead in Film*, mirrors make multiple appearances; in a section about Francis Bacon (an artist

he frequently references), Toufic writes: "In Francis Bacon's work, the mirror seldom functions as the familiar reflecting surface. It rather frequently acts as a pinning or absorbing medium, so that part of the materiality and life of the person in front of it is transferred to it." See Jalal Toufic, (*Vampires*): *An Uneasy Essay on the Undead in Film*, revised and expanded edition. Sausalito, CA: Post-Apollo Press, 2003.

13 The equivalence between a reflection in the mirror and its referent might be discerned in the following passage from *The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster*, where Toufic posits two events in history, one as the reflection of the other, labeling them both as "two images of a parallel montage": "The trampling of the *maṣāḥif* around the Ka'ba itself in 930 by Abū Tāhir Sulaymān al-Jannābī's Qarmaṭīs. The Qarmaṭīs' trampling of the Qur'ān, an action that orthodox Sunni theologians and writers prefer to attribute solely to attempts by Persian, Hellenic, and other non-Arab elements in the land of Islam to subvert the conquering religion, is the reflection, in the distorted mirror of the surpassing disaster, of the placement of the Qur'ān on the lances by the Umayyads in 656. These are two images of a parallel montage across about three centuries." See Toufic, *The Withdrawal of Tradition*, pp. 38–39.

14 Toufic, (*Vampires*), p. 98.