



Marcel Duchamp, *Fresh Widow*, 1920



The body of workers, that is, class in its nocturnal detachment, presents an opacity far stronger than the stars.

—Alain Badiou<sup>1</sup>

The modernist drive to transparency—to the material support, to meaning, to the processes of working bodies, and to information—picks up where the assumptions undergirding the mimetic transparency of so-called “illusionistic” representation buckles under the pressure of capitalist modernity.<sup>2</sup> If the tool kit of western representation, from chiaroscuro to perspectival construction, was to generate a convincing picture of dimension on flatness, this picture was in turn “transparent” to historical transition if not metaphysical order, marking the passage from symbolic form to archive of secular contradiction (Velazquez to Manet). That this historicism might inhere across the supposed rupture at the level of form, and that the modernist monochrome—the tautological yet factual painterly surface—might have inherited something of this responsibility of form to history, not despite but because of its putative aesthetic “abstraction” is, for better or worse, something of the thought experiment steering the present text. As one of modernism’s foundational tropes, monochrome painting repeatedly raised one of the Enlightenment’s epistemic fetishes—transparency—as an essential question. The problem of transparency, of legibility and motivation, informs its recursive self-redefinition over the 20th century to generate a sequence of seeming repetition which functions, I argue, as an index of its historicity. And that the present thought experiment should, methodologically, take the form of a schematic (temporal) map, or better, a diagram of repetition and change over the century is its second gambit.

Its third is driven by this: How did the paradigm turn on itself, or better, how does it demonstrate for us the way in which the century turned on itself, as rehearsed through this particular trope? How did a form aligned with productivism and its utopian promise of radical egalitarianism accomplished through (rather than against) labor—labor posited as itself transparent rather than the hinge in new forms of mystification—come to conjugate itself a century later with a turn to (metaphorical) darkness as the way out of the present historical conjuncture? We might accept that the monochrome, as reductive and indeed dull as it is, seems to have carried the burden of historical expectation despite itself. Born of 1917 (1915–1922), from a dream of totality that quickly came to be associated with a model of transparency to industrial process associated with the new mass worker, it is lately mobilized in art to signal a refusal of the very grounds of any form of transparency, ideological, procedural, or otherwise. Hito Steyerl’s work is exemplary in this regard, although by no means exceptional (I will list a number of others).

As I try to explore in my breathless history of the long century of the monochrome, Hito Steyerl’s practice makes clear once and for all that the idealist impulse behind the regime of transparency, foundational to any number of fantasies about democracy, has been to strip the last vestiges of our nonliteral expectations of the medium—that it deliver pleasure, beauty, plenitude, purposive purposelessness, noninstrumental sensuality, illumination, spirituality, or “magic.” This drive to unveil the “myths” constituting the artwork, a will to disenchantment propelling the main currents of Conceptual and Post-Conceptual practices as much as high modernist practice, ultimately substitutes its own democratic expectation with a social condition that traps the subject between the eye of the surveillance state and the equally merciless expectations of consumer transparency. And yet, this very involution of a once-revolutionary form in so many exhausting reiterations seems to have returned it to its historical motivation, as witnessed by the exasperating if marvelous cameos made by the monochrome in the context of anonymous collectives elaborating their autonomous practices in relation to and against contemporary civil war, be it the battle we might denote through reference to the protests against the G8 summit in Genoa in July 2001.

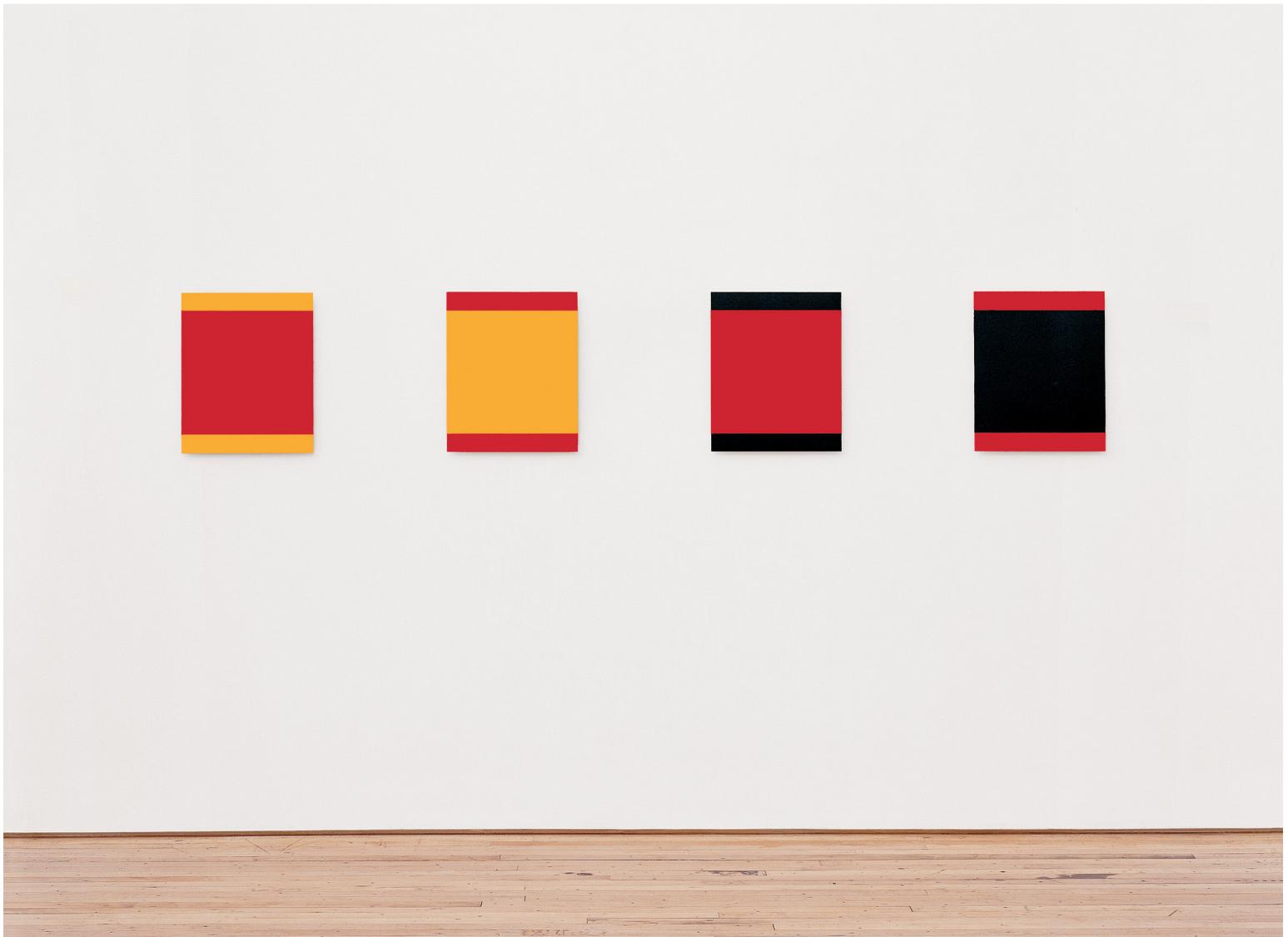
Bookended by Malevich’s **Black Square** and Rodchenko’s triptych, **Pure Red Color, Pure Yellow Color, Pure Blue Color**, the years 1915–22 established the monochrome as a dominant paradigm of radical painting. But if those seven dynamic years saw it vanish in the context of the New Economic Policy (NEP)<sup>3</sup> as dramatically as it emerged, the monochrome would resurface between 1947 and 1963 in many notable Cold War oeuvres—Yves Klein, Alberto Burri,

Robert Rauschenberg, Gerhard Richter, among numerous others—and then again, later, in work by Blinky Palermo, Martin Barré, and Simon Hantaï around 1973–77, this last moment bookended by the oil crisis on the one hand and the turn to a new economy born of a global restructuring of capital on the other. The monochrome has been revisited again lately. Its “recursivity” suggests some unfinished business with the 20th century—unfinished business between ways of presenting limits of mediation between art and “work” (Rodchenko) on the one hand, and historical totalities (Malevich) on the other. In this, it begins to resemble a sine wave registering the rising porousness of work to forms of value, and likewise marking the way in which provisionally autonomous practices are nested within and against a charged horizon, the antagonism between “art” and “life” texturing each return to illuminate the passage of time.

While Malevich referred to his **Black Square** as a “living, royal infant”—perhaps to convey at once the intensity of this *monstration*, its having no representational, “communicative,” much less denotative, function—Rodchenko described his approach to the monochrome in different terms: “This is the end of painting. These are the primary colors. Every plane is a discrete plane and there will be no more representation.”<sup>4</sup> This statement was accompanied by its purported empirical proof. The triptych’s three panels of primary color were a tactical way to demystify a four-hundred-year-old practice of applying oil-based pigments to canvas. By rationalizing painting as a function of basic, universally available qualities—a surface plus the fundamentals of unmixed and thus unskilled color—its creation could be available to all. The full disclosure of painting’s constitutive materials and necessary steps in process doubled as a wishful portrait of *transparent labor*. The Brechtian principle of author-as-worker warded off any excess of material praxis, whether understood as creativity, spirit, magic, genius, or as subjective and expressive interiority. Yet despite its reduction of painting to parameters supposedly free of such excess that might compromise the immediate materialist inclination, Rodchenko’s triptych still evidenced faith in the notion of pure color, which, by 1921, no longer existed given the industrial manufacture of pigment. In other words, despite its aspiration to a transparency of means, which in this instance also meant a transparency of meaning, Rodchenko’s model of revolutionary making masked its own commodity status. If anything, it was equally transparent to the economy of the NEP and the Soviet compromise to Bolshevik or State Communism, which yielded to capitalist economies, deferring communism by moving it from an economic to a political register and placing it under the aegis of the state and party form. Trapped in its own blind spot, the work forfeited both the possibility of sensuous immediacy with which painting had been historically imbued, as well as the revolutionary horizon to which it was to speak.

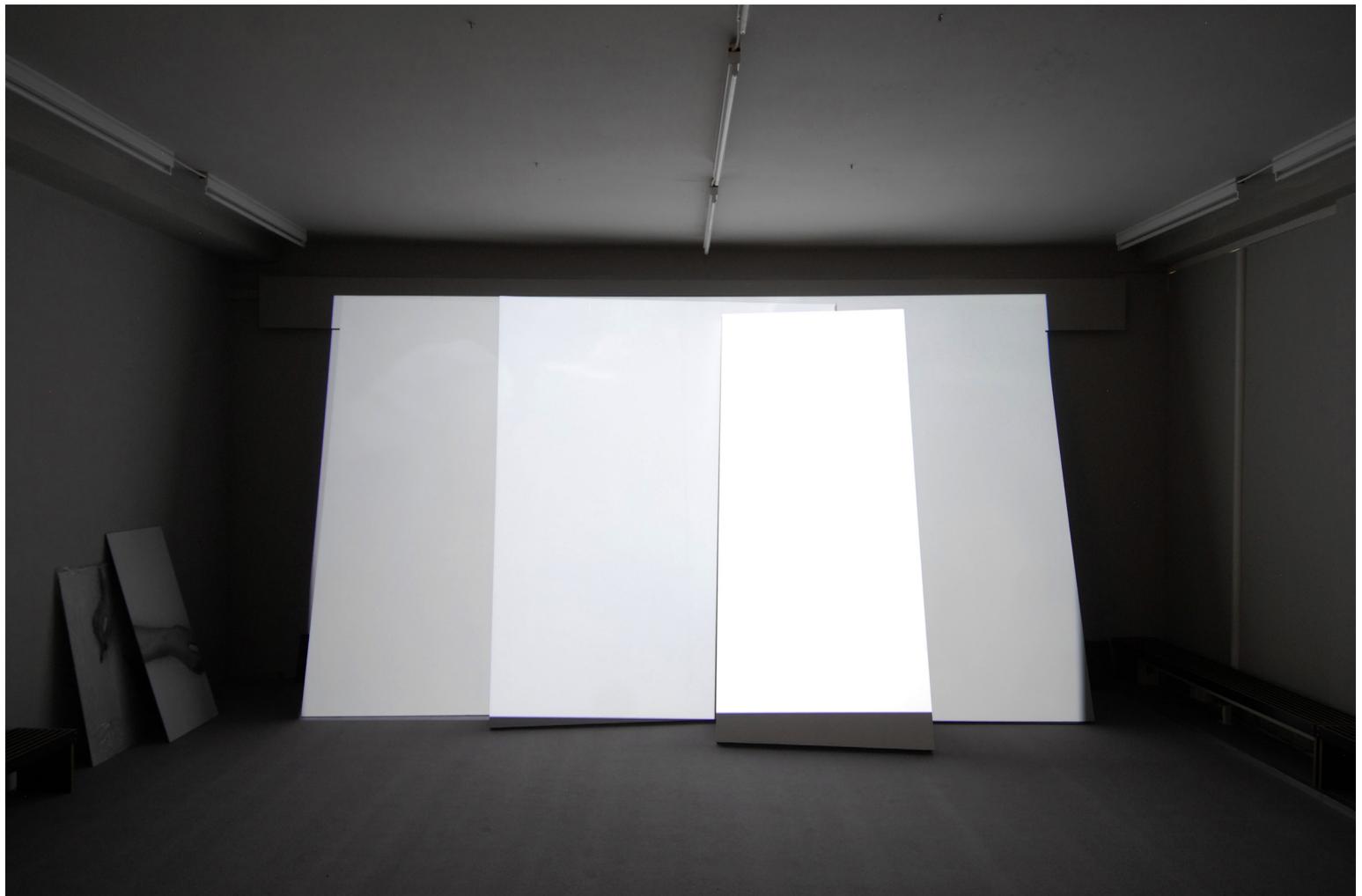
In this sense, the model of transparency structured into Rodchenko’s triptych reflects at the same time a changing class composition founded on the emergence of the new mass laborer produced by rapid industrialization in order to manufacture commodities (including pure color) on the factory floor, an economic history inscribed in the transition from Constructivism to Productivism.<sup>5</sup> We might situate Rodchenko’s paradigmatic monochrome as an idealized image of manufacturing, in which the estrangement of labor might be overcome and self-recognition realized through the demystification of the components of manufacture, a demystification paradoxically predicated on the acceleration of forms of reification (separation, analytic division, specialization). Insofar as the work describes the emergence of a new model of the subject-worker, its contradictions function less as an analog of contradictions in the socio-political and symbolic field (such as the integration of the worker-subject into the scene of production, as in Lissitzky’s agit prop) but rather more as a repository of symptoms of contradiction in techniques and processes of production. In other words, if Lissitzky’s **The Factory Work Benches Await You** (1919), a textual supplement to an abstract graphic, what he called a Proun, betrays the weak links between labor pools and sites of production, Rodchenko’s monochrome conveys a transitional moment in which production techniques were transitional enough to suggest a utopian place for a worker, a utopian conception of “labor” in which “deskilling” (a rationalization of labor) might open onto self-recognition and the overcoming of self-estrangement endemic to





above:  
Blinky Palermo, **To the People of New York City (Part IX)**, 1976

below:  
Hito Steyerl, **Adorno's Grey**, 2012



a surplus value generating mode of production, aka capitalism.<sup>6</sup> The emergence and containment of the proletariat posed a problem for capitalism, the soon-to-be dominant form of organization, as much as a problem for communism, the dominant ideology. That the two should be entwined in a disastrous conjugal bind, or “contradiction,” across the bodies of laborers seems not only to play out across the monochrome but also to guarantee its periodic return.

Yet Rodchenko’s transparency was a high price to pay if only because it too was founded on a kind of short-circuited understanding of the medium. It collapsed painting into an apotheosis of positivism that effectively betrayed in advance any potential for addressing, much less imagining, a new totality, however negatively. But above all it was a high price to pay because the promise of beauty, or the promise that vision would open onto a sensuous articulation of a world set apart from the separation, division, and integration of consciousness revolving around quantitative equivalence, was never recoverable, even (especially) in the return to mimesis to which Malevich (like Picasso) clung in the ’20s, participating in an aesthetic restoration founded on disavowing the insights he had precipitated.

But already by 1920 there was another way of negotiating the relationship between abstraction in painting (and sculpture) and abstraction in the realm of production, one that acknowledges the extent to which the enmeshment of opacity and transparency was not only the commodity’s strange property, its one stable quality, but that it was also part of any art object’s utopian boasting of truth to materials and truth to (industrial) process after the advent of the commodity. Put another way, the whole problem of medium transparency seemed pointless by 1920, in the wake of the shop window’s supremacy over the metaphorical and transcendental window as figure for coherence and redemption. Duchamp drew attention to this epistemic shifting early on.

With **Fresh Widow** (1920), Duchamp demonstrated the penetration of the commodity fetish, explicitly situated as a phenomenon qualified by opacity, into the transparency of glass when he replaced the glass panes of a miniature French window with panels of leather, ostensibly the preferred material of the hobby fetishist. The tricked-out prefabricated miniature French window came with special instructions to the collector to polish the leather with black polish daily. The last vestige of a transcendental world picture (a window, any window) becomes the vehicle for fetishistic desire in a form of onanistic tactility. The joke is on the window’s capacity to open onto metaphysical values in an era of quick interchangeable parts. The prefab window owes much to the standardization of French apartment interiors, a development accompanying the reorganization of the city between 1853 and 1870, the period known as Haussmannization, when the larger part of medieval Paris was razed to make way for the new insurrection-proof city, its broad thoroughfares too difficult to occupy and barricade. By 1920, Duchamp would have been playing the romantic symbolism of the window, and the Parisian window no less (with its special place in the mind of the American tourist at the turn of the century), against its role as a symbol of Paris’s accelerated and painful lurch toward modernity. **Fresh Widow** casts a shadow over the previous decade of Duchamp’s “abstraction,” over **Nude Descending a Staircase** and **Passage from Virgin to Bride** (both 1912), to retroactively situate that work not so much as a severance with the mimetic relation between painterly representation and the phenomenal world than as a description of abstracted social relations mediated not only by objects but by forms of production and circulation deracinating the certitudes of perception and cognition, inclusive of what Molly Nesbit has called “the tyranny of the shop window,”<sup>7</sup> in order to describe the commodity and the visual economy it would initiate (the opacity of the window), as well as its new affective and erotic regime.

This dissonance between transparency and opacity fundamentally structures any number of post-WWII bids for the meaning of painterly abstraction after WWII and during reconstruction. While Duchamp may have demonstrated the practical impossibility of material or ideological transparency as early as 1920, in advance of Rodchenko’s monochrome, it took most painters until the post-WWII era, during the golden age of capitalist subsumption in Europe and America, to acknowledge the extent to which the historical practice of painting, the market, and the unconscious were all entwined.

That this entwinement should have little to do with discursive or interpretive models with which to think about art (Is it critical? Does it resist? Is it reflective? Do we care?) and more to do with the actual matrices of production (subsumption) and labor enabling it is born out by an uncanny synchronicity between capitalism’s golden era, the post-war boom, and the “golden era” of the monochrome. The tenacity and force with which the monochrome resurfaced across geopolitical divides is evident at the moment when American and European markets were restructuring through mutual interdependence. This is the era of Bretton Woods and the reticulation of global finance pegged to the US dollar, which then becomes a universal measure of value, a development that would ramify differently in specific contexts, shaping the labor-to-capitalist relation in particular ways.<sup>8</sup> Yves Klein in Milan and Paris, Robert Rauschenberg and Alberto Burri in Rome, Jasper Johns and Ellsworth Kelly in New York, and Gerhard Richter in Berlin all revivify the monochrome, making it a reconventionalized format that is, at the same time, newly invested with potential, enacting the contradictions specific to the Cold War and the rabid consolidation of market capitalism.

Between 1947 and 1966, artists involved with the revival of the monochrome as a form of mediation of the social, historical, and political fields understood that it would have to be explicitly conjugated with the commodity. In other words, after Duchamp, the monochrome could never be “transparent” if it had to compete with the commodity form. Kelly’s **Colors for a Large Wall** (1951), Klein’s **Yves Peintures** (1954), Richter’s **Six Colors** (1966), Burri’s **Plastiche** (1963), and numerous other projects demonstrated the degree to which the chromatic aspect of the monochrome was itself readymade. For example, the red of Burri’s **Plastiche** derives from the industrial manufacture of the plastic rather than from the artistic application of color. The material is purchased, rather than handcrafted or composed. **Plastiche** is but one example of a work that makes color “transparent” to the commodity and therefore all the more opaque. **Plastiche** plays perverse homage to the readymade as much as to modernist painting. That **Plastiche** constructs this complicity between chroma and readymade (and the new chemical and plastic factories dotting the Italian North) as an obstacle to be overcome with some degree of passionate urgency is evidenced in the lacerations, burns, and scars that constitute the “artistic gesture.” The work is actualized as a work once the plastic *mise-en-scène* is subjected to explosions and burns, an arsenal of gestural violence also characteristic of abstraction in Italy at the time. Suffice it to say that the commodity fetish, aspiring in Burri’s practice to its own auto-destruction, is part of the logic and language of an emergent anti-capitalist arsenal of strategies and tactics that would first make their way onto the factory floor (by 1959, and throughout the ’60s, Fiat was synonymous with violent strikes, which gained momentum during the hot autumn of 1969) and then into the street (Italy’s “Creeping May,” 1970s).

By the 1970s, artists engaging the monochrome in the wake of Minimalism acknowledged the necessarily dispersed, distributive quality of the pictorial field, described by Michael Fried in his 1967 essay “Art and Objecthood.” The essay in **Artforum** laments the way in which the highway, its entropic de-differentiating “architecture,” comes to stand for the kind of consciousness and “theatricality” characteristic, for Fried, of Minimalism’s seriality, this “one thing after another” of “deductive structure” spilling over the frame and into space without either engaging the viewer or the space in any particular purposive way. This dispersed, distributive logic sets itself into relation with other economically motivated forms of dispersal, suggesting the monochrome as a singularly sensitive form of mediation articulating “real” change in advance of its theorization in fields such as political theory (restructuring, crisis).

Some painters seem to have enjoyed the contradiction, the new paradigm set by seriality in relation to the sense of totality of consciousness demanded of the viewer by the foundational historical monochrome: Malevich’s **Black** (and **Red**) **Square**. Blinky Palermo’s use of the monochrome, for instance, negotiates the same contradictory sources—Malevich, Rodchenko, and Duchamp—this time articulated through a dialectical engagement with American Minimalism and its opposite, the reactionary anti-modernism of Joseph Beuys. Palermo was Beuys’s student at the Kunstakademie



Düsseldorf. He balanced this tutelage along with his psychic apprenticeship to the Soviet avant-garde in his **To The People of New York City** (1976). Comprised in 15 parts on 40 aluminum panels painted red, yellow, and black (the colors of the German flag), Palermo's monochromatic dispersion eschews serial repetition in favor of a seeming, and paradoxical, return to composition. This time, compositional arrangement is not internal to the frame but rather located in the relations between and among the panels, drawing the wall—the entire architectural envelope—into a kind of involvement that the “ground” would have had in modernist painting, far from the “real” (versus virtual) space of the gallery “actualized” by Minimalism. Seriality emerged from the notion of deductive structure, the extrapolation of surface from frame, and the mapping of this extrapolated frame over the picture repeatedly, first within painting (Stella) and then crossing over into sculpture to fill the room (Judd, Andre). This attempt at locating painting's meaning in its empirical limits, the apotheosis of positivism, proposes another kind of transparency, borrowed from Rodchenko's honesty to materials and construction, but neutralized of any political hope. This transparency may not espouse any particular goal in the historical field, but it channels some fairly hegemonic ideology: the assumption of a relationship between a clear and universally available logic (universally available because inferred from the object, and nothing outside the object, at the most bare and obvious level of its immediate physical aspect) and a liberated viewership, liberated from the historical shackles of “art” itself. Palermo's spacing refuses this pretense to self-evidence. Here, modernist abstraction founded on the dissolution of myth and metaphor is set into tension with the Beuysian interest in narrative to provide a conceptual contradiction of no less force and tension than that between the monochrome and the readymade in the period of 1949–63. With Palermo, the panels prove relevant to a moment when painterly abstraction could not have been more pointless or seemingly empty and repetitive.

It might be interjected that art since 1965 had already addressed this dissolution of the plane of representation and its dispersion into an expanded field, that 1976, the year in which **To The People** was completed, is a decade late. In 1965 Donald Judd produced his influential “Specific Objects,” which suggested a kind of democratization in equivalence outside the rarefied space of frame and pedestal. Judd insisted that objects be transparent to the material of their manufacture, at least at the level of color, a principle Palermo breaks with his “arbitrarily” colored panels (arbitrary because referencing something outside the autonomous space of the work, unmotivated by its immanent terms, and a flag no less). Again, in the States, the privileged objects issuing from the dissolution of painting pushed for an update of a kind of transparency to materials, effectively updating Rodchenko for the cybernetic era. In 1959–60, Frank Stella's **Black Paintings** had pressed for the transparency of surface to structure, testing the limits of the medium by extracting line from the canvas edge and repeating it *mise en abyme* over the surface, thereby pushing surface to structure and exposing the thing-ness of painting. This begs the question of what all the dismantling, exposing, and unveiling was—or is—inclined toward. An echo chamber? Doesn't seriality (common to both Pop and Minimalism, movements thought to be diametrically opposed, declared incompatible by their practitioners, yet so similar in historical hindsight) insinuate itself as a logic of empty echo finding its way into the repetitive tasks of early performance and the repetitive propositions of some forms of conceptualism? Palermo's 1976 response incorporates this only in order to reject it—in the name of the people, no less.

Palermo rejected this with his own bid for opacity: of surface, of compositional imperative that would be neither aleatory nor motivated, if by “motivated” we mean any reference to a world itself unmediated by abstraction.<sup>9</sup> Above all, the dispersal of the format begins to prefigure the shattering and reconfiguring of space itself under the dictates of what would come to be called “globalization,” here within a work addressing anew what “a people,” what democracy as a model of political transparency and self-reflexivity might mean in 1973.<sup>10</sup>

In recent years the monochrome seems to have surfaced yet again to index the contradictions of this, our time, appearing once more as a way to negotiate the strange involution between the ideal-

ization of transparency and its supposed opposite. I might mention here any number of painters interested in concrete abstraction, drawing it through the modernist trope of monochromy. Cheyney Thompson addresses this in his **Chromachromes** (2008–present); Cory Arcangel quotes the modernist preoccupation with the primary-colored monochrome in **Photoshop CS: 84 by 66 inches, 300 DPI, RGB, square pixels, default gradient “spectrum”, mousedown, y=8900 x=15,600, mouse up y=13,800 x=0** (2009); Steven Parrino (**Untitled**, 2004) and Jutta Koether (**Very Lost Highway**, 2005) have made it central to their practice; Eileen Quinlan (**Sophia**, 2012) has also absorbed its problem set in her work, which uses analog photography (concrete photography) to think about real abstraction, which is to say abstraction beyond the frame in the seeming abstraction of the picture, which in turn is the most concrete term in the equation (analog). I will only focus on one instantiation here. In a recent mobilization of the trope, Hito Steyerl has once again posed the impossibility of any facile paradigm of transparency in an era of surveillance and accelerated capital.

In Steyerl's **Adorno's Grey** (2012), a constellation of staggered vertical panels is used as a surface over which a film about Theodor Adorno's infamous recalcitrance in the face of women students who, in 1969, in what would become his last lecture, approached him bare breasted as an intervention against his occlusion of gender in the elaboration of his politics, part of a greater challenge to his ambivalence against direct action in the face of the Red Army Faction. The color of the lecture hall in which “the breast incident” occurred, “Adorno's grey,” is in Steyerl's project both surface and structure, both flat and embodied, both sculpture and projection. **Adorno's Grey** traces a historical passage inscribed in art making without exposing each and every step in that process of fabrication, without becoming transparent to its own manufacture. In short, it is the anti-Rodchenko without ceding to the readymade.

Refusing transparency of any kind: conceptual, material, linguistic, or artisanal at the level of its medium, the work is nonetheless oddly transparent to the mythology of transparency in the democratic public sphere after Julian Assange, Chelsea Manning, and Edward Snowden made transparent the lie of transparency. Transparency having failed, it becomes clear that repetition is also of an altogether different order. The screen on which **Adorno's Grey** is projected is a series of vertical panels. By breaking up the surface of projection, the information it delivers is discontinuous, showing its clarity to be dependent less on the coherence of the information being projected, and more on the ground. Once the projection's literal reliance on transparency as a function of light is interrupted, data becomes so much frustrating noise—noisy and grey because disjointed, no element necessary to any other. Failing to deliver on the demands of mediation, the panels demonstrate the discontinuity of the material support, a heterogeneous terrain beneath code, which lends it a false coherence only retroactively. Steyerl demonstrates, via the grey monochromatic panels, the degree to which transparency delivered us to a circuit moving between data and value in which desires, impulses, and fears get leveled in a dystopian form of one-dimensionality.

The genealogy of the monochrome that I've traced here is as much about the material conditions of art making as it is about the inability to translate that process into a finite purpose, an end. The rush to ends amidst so many fragments, so much anomie, characterizes our present moment. This condition, which the modernists may have called alienation, is itself a function of expectation that transparency of data, of information, of objects, of people, will somehow deliver all that modernity had promised: formal equality under the law, the fighting chance at economic parity. Transparency itself unveiled, finally transparent to its own vacuity, on the one hand, and on the other the confusion of spiraling repetition, as though we had been here not once, twice, but three and more times before; history as tragedy, then as farce, then as? But this, I'd suggest, is what's interesting, not what's to be mourned and/or castigated as “having already been there.” At least on a cultural stage, the multiplied revival presents itself as a symptom of this textured history. The revival has been revived so many times itself that its relative earnestness, or by turn its playful and anxious tenor, are by now barely distinguishable. Yet cutting strikingly across this repetition, we have nothing less than a diachronic map (if such be possible), an etiology of historical *transformation*.



1

Alain Badiou, **Theory of the Subject**, trans. Bruno Bosteels (London: Continuum, 2009), 99.

2

For a lovely meditation on “transparency” as one of modernism’s special preoccupations, see Walter Benjamin’s “Surrealism,” in **Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings Vol. 2, Part 1 (1927–1930)**. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, eds. (Cambridge and London: Belknap Press, 1999). Benjamin muses on the utopianism of glass architecture, noting how ideal it would be to be able to live in the full view of others, with nothing to hide, only to then note that such a project is precluded by the fact that we all have an unconscious, clouding the lucidity of political intention with the opacity of drives.

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[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New\\_Economic\\_Policy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Economic_Policy)

4

Alexander Rodchenko, “Working with Majakowsky,” in **From Painting to Design: Russian Constructivist Art of the Twenties**, exhibition catalogue (Cologne: Galerie Gmurzynska, 1981), 191.

5

Christina Lodder, **Russian Constructivism** (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

6

Karl Marx, “Estranged Labor,” in **Philosophic and Economic Manuscripts of 1844**, Manuscript 1. <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/preface.htm>

7

Molly Nesbit, “Ready Made Originals,” **October** 37 (Summer 1986).

8

For a short and clear discussion of the ramifications of the Bretton Woods monetary policy, the model for what would become The Marshall Plan, see Giovanni Arrighi’s **The Geometry of Imperialism** (London: Verso, 1978). See also **The Long Twentieth Century** (London: Verso, 1994). For a discussion of how the Marshall Plan impacted Italy’s late and accelerated arrival to industrial capitalism, drawing surplus labor pools to the rapidly growing (US investments) North in ways that would shape a new labor movement which distinguished itself from the Communist Party (accusing it of collusion with American capitalist interests) see Steve Wright. **Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism** (London: Pluto Press, 2002).

9

For an extended exegesis on Palermo’s monochrome, see my “‘To the People of New York City:’ Blinky Palermo’s Monochrome as Sensus Communis,” in **Blinky Palermo** (New York: Dia Art Foundation, 2009), pp. 183–199.

10

See Robert Brenner, “Persistent Stagnation, 1973–93,” in **The Boom and the Bubble** (London: Verso, 2002).

