

Art and the Sublime : the Paradox of Indeterminacy

Unknowing and (Dis)orientation in the Presentation of the Unpresentable

the two contemporary artists, Franz Erhard Walter and Günter Umberg. Initially the monochrome was understood as an attempt to go beyond traditional representation and present the unpresentable. In the one hundred years or so since that initial move this understanding has broadened. The monochrome now presents itself as a genre or even project within visual art but it still has much to teach us. In the concretely abstract and performative artworks of Franz Erhard Walter and Günter Umberg, traces of this ambition remain and their work can be seen to pose questions probing our understandings and experiences of artistic meaning, its value and the real.

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Abstract

The (dis)orientation of thought in its encounter with art can be understood as the direct result of an encounter with indeterminacy as a lack in meaning. As an artist I am aware of how this indeterminacy impacts on the perceived value and authority of the artistic voice and in particular its value as a research voice. This paper explores this indeterminacy of meaning, as a profound and disturbing *unknowing* characteristic of the sublime and argues its value to advanced thought and for any methodological understanding of practice-led research.

Lyotard described the sublime as an ‘understanding’ through which art and its associated practices may be able to resist an all too easy assimilation by the public as just a consumer commodity. His thought represents an attempt to both politically and philosophically understand art’s, and particularly abstract painting’s, *affect* as a state of profound and positive *unknowing*. To talk of the sublime in art is to speak of the suspension of any comfortable certainty in being and instead to engage with the real as a limit to meaning and knowing. It is to talk of the presentation of the unpresentable as a momentary but significant dissolution of representation.

This understanding of the sublime is then further explored through the cultural phenomena of the monochrome painting and applied to the work of

The Lyotardian Sublime

For Lyotard any discussion of the sublime is a discussion about the privation attending complex conflicted silences, those spaces where the unrepresentable is 'present'. This is also a space marked by the indeterminacy generated by the shocking immediacy of the event. It is in effect and by definition an aesthetics of fear. Lyotard writes,

...the sublime is kindled by the threat of nothing further happening...Terrors are linked to privation: privation of light, terror of darkness; privation of others, terror of solitude; privation of language, terror of silence; privation of objects, terror of emptiness; privation of life, terror of death. What is terrifying is that the *It happens* does not happen, that it stops happening. (1991: 99)

But the sublime feeling itself comes into being when terror mingles with pleasure and,

the terror-causing threat...[is]...suspended, kept at bay, held back. This suspense, this lessening of a threat or a danger, provokes a kind of pleasure that is certainly not that of a positive satisfaction, but rather, that of relief. This is still privation, but it is a privation at one remove; the soul is deprived of the threat of being deprived of light, language, life. (Lyotard, 1991: 99)

Privation, that sense of the poverty of nothing happening generates terror as one becomes silenced or eliminated from either a discourse or a sense of being as defined by language. It is as though one's ability to participate and to be present as a self is threatened or at least threatened with suspension. Outside of some discursive frame one is rendered speechless. For the art that Lyotard speaks of this quality of speechlessness, of being at the limit of what it is to represent, is foregrounded. He writes of Barnett Newman, the great American abstract painter that,

[T]he escape [from the figurative prison] does not take the form of transgressing the limits established for figurative space by Renaissance and Baroque art, but of reducing the event-bound time [*temps evenementiel*] in which the legendary or historical scene took place to a presentation of the pictorial object itself. It is a chromatic matter alone, and its relationship with the material...and the layout..., which must inspire the wonderful surprise, the wonder that there should be something rather than nothing. (1991: 85)

And further,

What is sublime is the feeling that something will happen, despite everything, within this threatening void, that something will take 'place' and will announce that everything is not over. That place is mere 'here', the most minimal occurrence. (1991: 84)

This is the very small space that minimal art took on board as its content. At its most confronting it can leave the viewer with very little to hold onto. One can feel that one is literally left looking at 'nothing' and in this privation of light, this empty void, one is in fact left suspended with only one's body, ones breathing mass. For many this is a content that is simply not recognised as such...instead the shock is too much and the outrage at the savage joke, all consuming. Lyotard on Newman claims that,

Being announces itself in the imperative. Art is not a genre defined in terms of an end (the pleasure of the addressee), and still less is it a game whose rules have to be discovered; it accomplishes an ontological task, that is a 'chronological task'. It accomplishes it without completing it. It must constantly begin to testify anew to the occurrence by letting the occurrence be. (1991: 88)

For Lyotard this 'most minimal occurrence' is in fact political; it is an attempt to allow for a site of resistance, to the *it is not happening* anaesthetization implicit in contemporary taste and its commodity culture. The avant-garde is not about producing objects or artifacts of a conventional beauty or of generating novelty for its own sake; this is one of the reasons it is challenging and difficult for people to view. It probes and explores the understanding that postmodern art, avant-gardist art, is in fact a site of a minimal but crucial resistance, a privileged site of witnessing. For Lyotard, '...the stake of art in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was to be the witness to the fact that there is indeterminacy...to make seen what makes one see, and not what is visible.' (1991: 101) This is also an attempt and even a plea for a deep core witnessing of our ideological enframings.

For Lyotard, avant-gardist art does this through an investigation of its own nature, a thorough philosophical interrogation and testing of its own formal and conceptual borders. This kind of art often stands accused of producing a purely solipsistic art and yet what Lyotard reveals is that instead, what is generated is a site of resistance through a slowing down or rupturing of

habitual viewing patterns. And so as Kath Jones comments, a witnessing is engendered of "the increasing dominance [and all pervasiveness] of Capitalism and the technological language game of development and efficiency, which [now] determine the [modern] world." (accessed 2005)

Lyotard's vision for the sublime in art is ultimately a political one and he is intent on claiming that this,

...is more a matter of an irreversible deviation in the destination of art, a deviation affecting all the valencies of the artistic condition. The artist attempts combinations allowing the event...The art-object ...tries to present the fact that there is an unrepresentable. (1991: 101)

The monochrome

To adequately explore the art of Walther and Umberg, the monochrome itself needs some explanation. In the article *the Monochrome Icon*, Thomas McEvelley talks of the monochrome as a complex blank. He postulates how developmentally,

The fascination with the sublime progressively ate away at the figure and hypostatized the activated ground. In the twentieth century it devolved finally on the monochrome surface, the pure ground into which all the figures have dissolved, as its central icon, representing the blank of the erased cultural world... (1993: 12)

Here the monochrome can be seen as painting or indeed art contemplating its own death and in that contemplation representing an iconoclastic aggression against history, civilization and the entire world of form. This comment also reflects albeit negatively "...Mallarme's remark that the perfect poem would be a blank sheet of paper, which, containing nothing (in actuality), would contain everything (in potentiality)." (McEvelley, 1993: 13)

It has been claimed that after the Russian artist Rodchenko, "...the monochrome remains the boundary-marker of the point we have not been able to reach, the reminder of the culture we have not been able to create." (Batchelor, 2000: 153) Here it is a promise that was only able to remain a promise...a promise of the 'sublation of art into the practice of life.' The monochrome pointed in this direction by functioning as a readymade. It was able to function in this way because anyone can make a monochrome and its

execution can be quite mechanical and so art is replaced by labour. The impact of this move has had huge ramification and David Batchelor comments that,

Since the early part of this century the threshold between art and non-art has been anything but clear, [or] constant [or] consistent. The monochrome has its share of the responsibility for this...for some this has heralded the negation of value and the death of art; for others this has been a dynamic and creative uncertainty, a self-doubt which is a condition for the continuation of art. (2000: 152)

A related issue is that of repetition because the monochrome has been and continues to be a repeated visual statement in the sense that many artists have made monochromes and some artists make many of them. David Batchelor says,

...for some, repetition in art is only redundancy and wretchedness; a worthless recycling of received forms which only and always diminishes the criticality of the original. For others though, repetition can also be recovery, renewal and revaluation; the means by which the original act may be better understood and its critical purpose continued. (2000: 154)

Here the notion of the repeating monochrome is connected to the notion of the monochrome as a practice of inquiry. As practice the monochrome painting is more than an isolated although powerful understanding or insight. As a practice it becomes a form of work that goes deep into exploring how we define creativity, art and the function and form within our culture. It does this by highlighting and then probing the conceptual and physical limits of these traditions and inheritances exposing the deep-core ambivalence within their construction. Within these terms the sublime can be seen to act within a practice itself and not simply be confined to the individual artwork.

Franz Erhard Walther and Günter Umberg

The work of Franz Erhard Walther and Günter Umberg explore and challenge that fundamental dialectic in painting of figure and ground, which is a dialogue between presence and absence, form and formlessness. Both came to artistic maturity in a post war pre-reunified Germany and the political, unavoidable as it was in Germany at that time was explored by

these two artists in the formal and apparently intransigent pictorial language of modernist abstraction. The work of these two artists is concerned with site, place, the body as object and the object as body. It is an art that works at both defining and redefining its own contextual and making origins.

Franz Erhard Walther was born in Fulda in 1939 and reached his artistic maturity during the sixties when he presented his performance-demonstration of *I. Werksatz (First Set of Works, 1963-69)* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in December 1969. At this time he relied on the viewer to physically complete what were in effect instruments or pre-works whose appearance were determined by function. Walther has said of his work that "...I want to create conditions that produce a mental image." (Knievers, 1993: 82) It is relevant to note that he has not mentioned creating work that produces a mental image but rather *conditions* that generate a mental image. Early on in his art practice Walther abandoned gestural 'informal' painting but retained from that time an interest in beginnings with an ambition to go, "back to the starting point, where nothing has a form yet, and everything has just begun to be formed." (Lingner, accessed 2005)

Knut Nievers has written that "...Walther has understood an 'open work of art' to be a material, formal and instrumental arrangement that becomes a work only through an acting recipient. Thus what the artist prepares is not an opus but an operandum. In Walther's view the actual work comes into being in the head of the person who comes into contact with the 'pre-work'...Thus the actual work remains immaterial." (1993: 80)

For Walther the work is always a form of participation but particularly a participation involving the body. Consequently the work is also a meditation on the body as origin for the work. This is demonstrated by a curious photograph of the artist holding his hand within a Romanesque window of the Liobakirche near Fulda. Here the hand occupies or is framed by a black space, an announcement of Lyotard's place as the mere 'here', the most minimal occurrence. I feel all of Walther's work is bound up with this simple but poignant gesture. It seems so futile and yet so fundamental. It is a gesture towards the impossible representation of origin, of *happening*. It asks the question how can one occupy the impossible inside of experience, the impossible *before* of the event.

We can trace this range of preoccupations on the impossible throughout Walther's oeuvre. He is unwavering in his pursuit of it. The body is both blind and motionless. It is not capable of 'saying' anything. The body can only be there either as memory or a kind of dumb labour. His work

demonstrates and signals the impossible of interiority. There can be no inside to consciousness and representation, only outside. To be *in* is to not *be* at all.

To reinforce this lack of interiority Walther reinvents and actively works with the notion of pedestal or base. Knut Nievers comments that the,

Pedestal is a central concept in Franz Erhard Walther's work...[it] is a metaphor for everything that really supports us and upon which our own images come into being, images that the work of art in Franz Erhard Walther's sense does not anticipate, but to which it gives form: our images on his pedestal. (1993: 90)

In Walther's work the landscape itself becomes a pedestal; a frame to his performing and to our performing of his pre-work. The pedestal like the frame functions to define and name art. Walther's expansion of its dimension to all dimensions is an attempt to tease the collapse of what we call art into what we call life. Where is the line? This pointing is a genuine witnessing to the unrepresentable; that to which Walther's work gestures is finally ungraspable.

Günter Umberg born in 1942 has for thirty years focused on painting through the near exclusive making of black monochromes. In Umberg's handling the monochrome could be considered as the painting of no-event. His paintings force the viewer to approach the degree-zero of the work of art, the thing-in-itself. And yet when installed for exhibition Umberg's paintings as such can at times 'disappear' and instead animate or draw attention to the environment as shifting frame around themselves. Umberg has rigorously, determinedly and repeatedly posed the question, what is painting? Through this repetition he seeks on the one hand to shift the object that is painting back into view as a painting and yet on the other hand this repetition establishes a clear sense of privation, a sense that nothing is happening at all and that he is but repeating the same.

Interestingly Umberg, has worked to distance himself from the Barnett Newman statement 'The Sublime is Now'. He does not want involvement or association with a metaphysics that stems from what he considers that statement's conceptuality. (Kersten, 1989: 68) Instead Umberg wishes for a direct confrontation with the work of the painting itself, its affect. And yet this affect is one of alarming absence as the works of Umberg seem to map voids or describe voids through how they optically puncture support walls with 'holes'. And yet up close the works have a physical objecthood that is very perceptible. His work has been well described by Henry Staten, as

...intensely black-looking paintings on thin sheets of aluminium, made of dry particles of graphite or ivory black, which he brushed dry onto moist dammar, horizontally and vertically, thirty or forty layers, building up a porous texture that registers the disciplined lines of the brush strokes in the strikingly dry painted surface. This texture is extremely fragile: the merest touch will destroy it. This fragility, together with the thinness of the support - which makes the painting seem at first to be part of the wall - creates a sort of attenuation of materiality, at least in the sense of withdrawal from three-dimensionality. Yet the paint, with its delicately refined yet charcoal-like texture, remains intensely material, and in the absence of any figure, shape, or line, the eye can only perceive the colour as bound to this materiality. (2002: 79)

Reacting to a world of rampant commoditisation Umberg in his work attempts to make apparent and tangible the fragile space of the separate, autonomous painting. As a *radical* painter he seeks to reinvestigate and re-establish in his practice the formal autonomy of the work of art and of painting in particular. (Gibson, 2003: 202) In doing so he also seeks to reaffirm the primacy of the relation between the viewer and the physical artwork itself. (Gibson, 1989: 44) Umberg's distinctive black paintings are, as Staten has testified, painstaking and time consuming to make. Because they are very fragile and easily marked, to own an Umberg painting becomes an exercise in care and protection. (Gibson, 1989: 46) In this way the painting-as-object can be seen as analogous to the existential fragility of the body in the world. The painting opens up an unexpected space of care and attention. Thus there is an extra desperation or edge in the work of Umberg in his attempt to claim not just a space for painting but a parallel space for objects and people.

With Umberg's paintings there is, as remarked on earlier, an opticality. This is very evident in the actual installations themselves but can also be seen in the photographs. The matt, unreflective black of the painting make the paintings appear to look like black holes against the stark white of the gallery walls. The black monochromes of Umberg seem in this context to act as stilled centres encircled by the ever expanding frame of the surrounding gallery architecture. In this respect the surrounding environment is literally defined as a frame - complex, ornate, distinct - by the 'empty' core that is the monochrome.

The paintings of Umberg generate a complex range of possible viewing relationships for the viewer. Each of them though is testing because each deals with a kind of privation. To view the work one is encouraged to look out from the painting to see the surrounding environment as frame and the work itself as absent or if one steps up and scrutinises the piece up close one sees evidence of labour, of doing, only. In an Umberg painting the work of art is difficult work. One is left alone, unmirrored and so, absent to oneself.

Conclusion

Liotard's understanding of the sublime is predicated on a profound accepting and tolerating of indeterminacy. This indeterminacy is one confronted by many viewers when faced with much of the avant garde art of the twentieth century and this is probably nowhere more confronting than when faced with the apparently blank and impervious forms of minimalism and the monochrome painting. The questions and experiences generated by this art go to the very core of what it is to understand contemporary aesthetic experience. Both in his painting and in the installations of his paintings Umberg challenges what it is to see and read painting. Likewise Franz Erhard Walther, in his objects and pre-works, establishes different ways of experiencing and so of coming to know work as art. In this way both artists extend the viewer's participation with and perception of representation and its limits and demonstrate how the sublime as defined by Lyotard can work as resistance to the commodification of viewing. Two things are achieved in doing this. The first is to signal a concern with and then actually demonstrate through formal and practical critique, the necessary fundamental inadequacy of any current symbolic discourse to deal with the needs of that current historical time. The second is to then explore ways of how to keep alive and 'visible' the continued witnessing of this discursive inadequacy to the compelling silence of the unrepresentable.

Indeterminacy is the absence of interpretive certainty. For the creative practitioner this absence is a constant companion, as it is of course for any researcher; but for the creative practitioner the situation is amplified by the lack of defined protocols in relation to practice, method, goal and final destination of the creative output. It is not that protocols don't exist but rather they are only available after the event of making. The import of this to practice-led research is significant. It compels the researcher to work with the indeterminate complicitly as an unavoidable reality and so to engage in practice as serious play. Art as research thwarts habit, discursive or

otherwise. It demands ever-new forms of interpretive critique while not doing violence to the work of art's immediacy of affect. There is a necessary lack of adequacy between discursive language and the art event that has to be both accepted and accommodated. The Lyotardian sublime points to this situation and validates the artist's experience of it. It defines that liminal and porous space between matter and event, and the enculturated and the discursive, as the *work* of art. In this respect the practice-led researcher has to grapple with the indeterminacies implicit in practice and then again when seeking to articulate the findings of that practice exegetically knowing there can be no adequacy between the two registers. It is through this portal of difference that practice-led research can make available the artist's or creative practitioner's voice as a research voice. It is a voice that has been silent too long.

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