TWO COATS OF PAINT

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IDEAS ABOUT PAINTING

# Painting simulacra: Brice Marden, David Reed, and Gerhard Richter

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*Gagosian (980 Madison): Brice Marden, Let the Painting Make You, 2023, installation view*

Contributed by Saul Ostrow / **"Let the Painting Make You,"** the exhibition of Brice Marden's last paintings at Gagosian Gallery, set me to thinking about the relationship between Marden's earlier gestural works and **Gerhard Richter's** process-oriented abstract paintings, which in turn led me to consider the connection of their works to those of **David Reed** and then to the French artists **Simon Hantaï** and **Bernard Frize** who, like Reed, creates the illusion of an impossible spontaneity. Slowly, I came to focus on the question of why Richter is identified with post-modernism, while Marden and Reed's works are most often critically identified as being quintessentially modernist and formalist. While Hantai (the modernist?) and Frize (the post-modernist?) fit the question of what constitutes post-modern abstract painting, their references and histories are different. Instead, I decided I would focus on Richter, Reed and Marden, who all seem to transgress the formalist and modernist dictums that were generated in the 1950s and 1960s in the United States and then exported abroad. Hantaï and Frize are part of another genealogy.

*Gagosian (980 Madison): Brice Marden, Blue Painting, 2022-23, oil on linen, 72 x 96 inches*

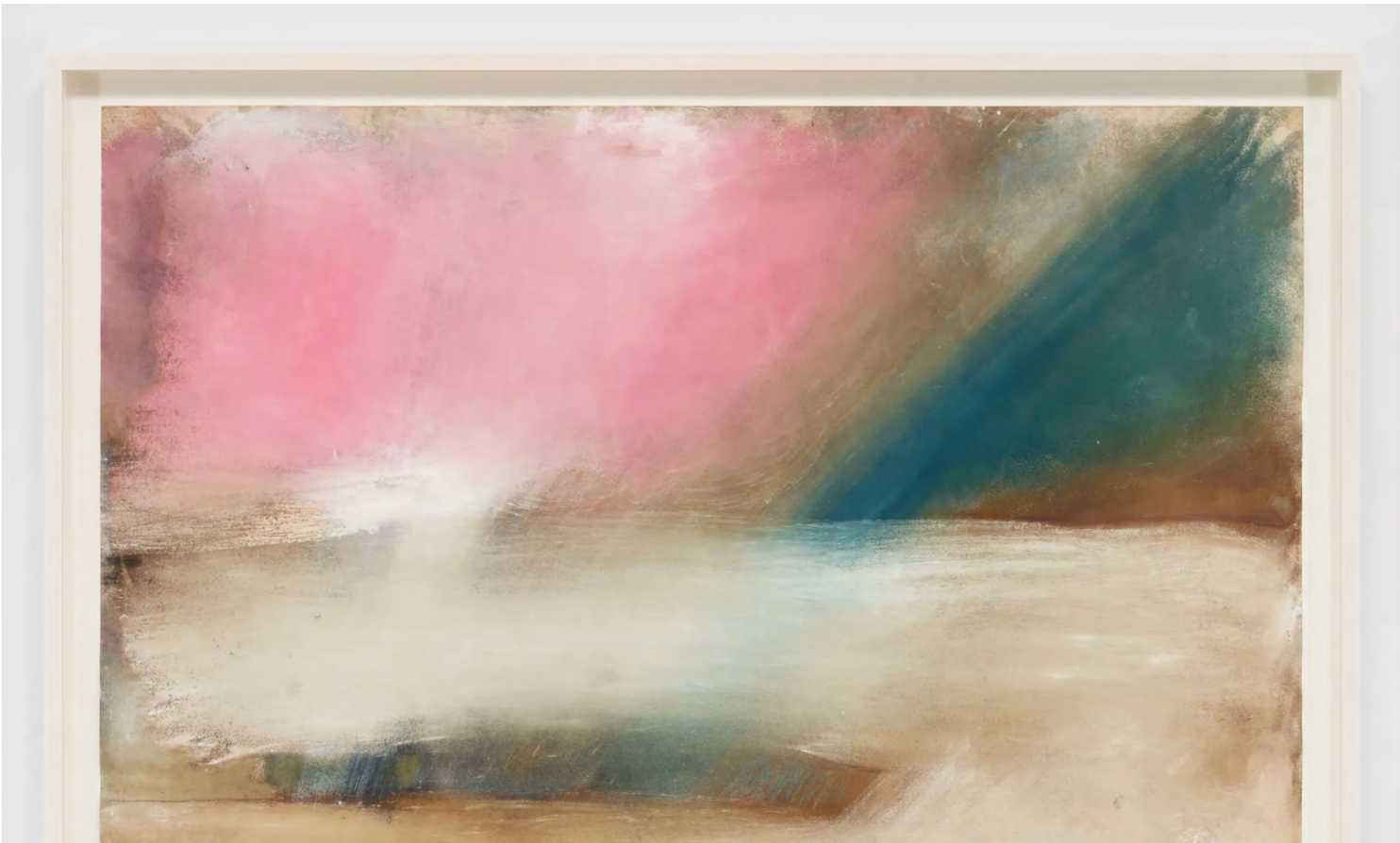
*Gerhard Richter, St John, 1988*

Marden, Richter, and Reed intentionally blur the boundaries between spontaneity and control by subversively introducing into their work the simulacrum of spontaneity and process: Reed's early repetitive brushstrokes are nearly impossible; Marden's looping bands of color, on close inspection, are anything but spontaneous or intuitive; and Richter's works are indirectly – mechanically – produced. Like Richter's work, Reed's paintings are mediated while Marden's tend to be made in series built on thematic repetitions with variations. Their works are a response to the intricacies of abstract painting and highlight their audiences' habit of seeing their expectations rather than what is actually presented to them. To achieve this, each painter devised an aesthetic built on the simulation of authenticity. In this context, one must mention **Robert Ryman's** work of the 1960s and 1970s, which occupies an intermediary position in that it is unabashedly procedural, whereas Reed, Marden, and Richter, however fraudulently, seek to preserve the aura of intuition. Though Ryman was originally identified with post-Minimalism, with its erasure he, **Richard Serra**, and **Eva Hesse** have come to be re-positioned critically as Minimalists.

*David Reed, #617, 2003-11, oil and alkyd on canvas, 44 x 190 inches*

*Robert Ryman, Untitled, 1960, oil on sized stretched canvas, 36 x 36 x 1 3/4 inches. Photo: Bill Jacobson Studio, New York*

I deduced from my reflections that Reed and Marden's introduction of the spontaneous brushstroke was a sign that must also be thought of in the context of the post-Minimalism of the 1960s–70s. Critically, during this period Marden was transitioning from Minimalist monochrome paintings while Reed along with such artists as **David Diao**, **Harriet Korman**, **Jack Whitten**, and **Mary Heilmann** was abandoning the quest for authenticity. Many of the painters working at the time with gestural abstraction and process did not push in the direction of post-Minimalism. They instead employed the iconography of the gesture to formal ends, as a way to make an abstract painting that could still claim authenticity though they did not necessarily depend on an assumed emotive content. For instance, **Ed Clark**, a second generation Abstract Expressionist painter, started to use a push broom to paint oversized brushstrokes on the surfaces of shaped canvases. Unlike Diao and Whitten, who were interested in material processes, Clark sought to sustain Abstract Expressionism's sense of urgency and action. The British painter **Howard Hodgkin** also employed oversized brushstrokes to offer a self-conscious commentary on their presentation and placement as self-contained objects. Despite such artifice, Hodgkin's aesthetic signified sincerity, authenticity, and subjectivity. At about the same time in the late 1970s and '80s, **Jules Olitski** took the most extreme approach to addressing the gestural. Abandoning his signature color field spray paintings that were identified with **Clement Greenberg's** post-painterly abstraction, he began to make the squeegee pictures using a thick acrylic gel and iridescent spray paint. In these works, Olitski used the gesture to make a physically aggressive surface of baroque swirls. In the 1990s, he would make the nearly kitschy "Mitt" pieces using a painting mitt to move the acrylic gel about, forming visceral and convoluted intestinal configurations. Olitski's theatricality perhaps comes closest to Reed, Marden, and Richter's cooler use of the simulacrum of the gestural as a vehicle for exploring how abstract painting's inauthenticity might be formally exploited.



*Ed Clark, Untitled, 1976, pastel on paper, 28 x 42 inches. Photo: Thomas Barratt*

*Jules Olitski, Mozart Night, 1992, silkscreen, 47 x 36 inches*

Richter, a latecomer to abstract painting whose roots are in German Pop Art and photo-realism, in the 1970s began making representations of abstract paintings. The abstract paintings Richter chose to simulate were modeled on the generic process-oriented squeegee paintings that Whitten and Diao had made in the late-1960s and had abandoned by the 1970s. Similarly to Marden and Reed, Richter not only adopted but adapted AbEx and then transformed it into an artifice. Where Richter differed was in preserving the aggressive "maleness" associated with AbEx, while Marden and Reed abandoned that aesthetic for one that may be considered less "all at once" and singular in effect.

In formulating this proposition concerning the inauthenticity of Reed, Marden, and Richter's works and its mediation, I realized that the approach of this threesome to abstract painting had its roots in **Jasper Johns'** influential early practice of creating imagistic representations of painting's formalist terms. In doing so, he turned the abstract from a mode of expression and pure aestheticism into concepts to be signified – to be represented or depicted rather than merely presented. Johns had thus pulled abstract painting back into the very context it was meant to escape. This imagistic turn, which should logically have marked the beginning of post-modernism, went critically unnoted for about twenty years, mainly because in the 1960–70s, the dominant critical perspectives on abstract painting were formalist and art-historical and not yet structuralist. Johns's work was seen as a neo-dadaist satire of Greenberg's formalism and **Harold Rosenberg's** vision of Action Painting, rather than advancing a new paradigm. Yet buried in his literalism was a strategy for replacing the real with its representation, which reflected trends in mass media. Johns had made the abstract into a ready-made.

*David Diao, Triptych, 1972, acrylic on canvas, 85 x 198 inches*

By the late 1960s, Reed, Marden, Diao, Heilmann, Korman, and Whitten had already begun to deconstruct painting's established forms, reducing them to mere gestures – objectified acts exploiting the look of subjectivity and process. They had learned from Minimalism and Pop that if they highlighted the theatrical nature of abstract painting, they could formally exploit its inherent artificiality. They used simulated brushstrokes and paint's materiality to draw attention to the physical presence of the artwork, rather than its signification of expressivity or intuition. This resonates with Johns's literalization of the rhetoric of formalism and AbEx. By the late 1970s, Diao, Whitten, Korman, and Heilmann would diverge in their own idiosyncratic directions. Heilmann and Korman increasingly moved away from employing negative process and gesture, Korman accenting color and eccentric geometry and Heilmann aesthetic sensibility and touch. Meanwhile, Whitten broke away from painterly processes and became ever more interested in his paintings' materiality. Today, he is best known for his mixed media, mosaic-like abstract paintings. It was Diao who most radically changed his conceptual orientation. Since the 1980s, he has used painting as a format for critically deconstructing the historicity of geometric abstract painting, thus confronting issues of formalism and identity.

The idea of representing abstract painting most obviously begins in the wake of the triumph of Abstract Expressionism. Amid the pastiche and critical failures of AbEx's second generation, Minimalism and Pop Art were acclaimed for having abandoned its depleted vocabulary of gestural tropes and transcendental aspiration. On the heels of this shift, the artists identified as post-Minimalists took on the project of exploiting AbEx's dichotomies of spontaneity and control, reductive austerity and decoration, intuition and judgement. In practice, post-Minimalist artists sought to expand art's possibilities by incorporating more varied materials and processes, while introducing elements of ambiguity, complexity, and subjectivity into their work in response to Minimalism's reductivism, standardization, and endgame strategies, and Pop's commercial imagery. Perhaps most importantly, the post-Minimalist emphasis on processes and duration sought to undermine art's increasingly commodified status.

*Harriet Korman, Figure Sleeping, 1979, 42 x 60 inches*

*Mary Heilmann, Yellow, Red, and Blue, 1978, latex on canvas, 29 3/4 x 21 7/8 x 1 3/8 inches*

Coincidentally, post-Minimalism and post-Structuralism emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Amongst the post-Structuralists, **Jacques Derrida** and **Roland Barthes** emphasized the instability of language, the multiplicity of perspectives, and the roles that context and differentiation play in comprehension, while **Jean-François Lyotard** theorized about the cognitive effects of new technologies. By the late 1980s, post-Structuralist thought, having supplied a more fluid, context-dependent narrative, had undermined the modernist insistence on reductivism, objectivity, universal truth, and the notion of a progressively developmental history. With this, first painting and then modernism were declared dead, and the arrival of an eclectic and ahistorical post-modernism was announced.

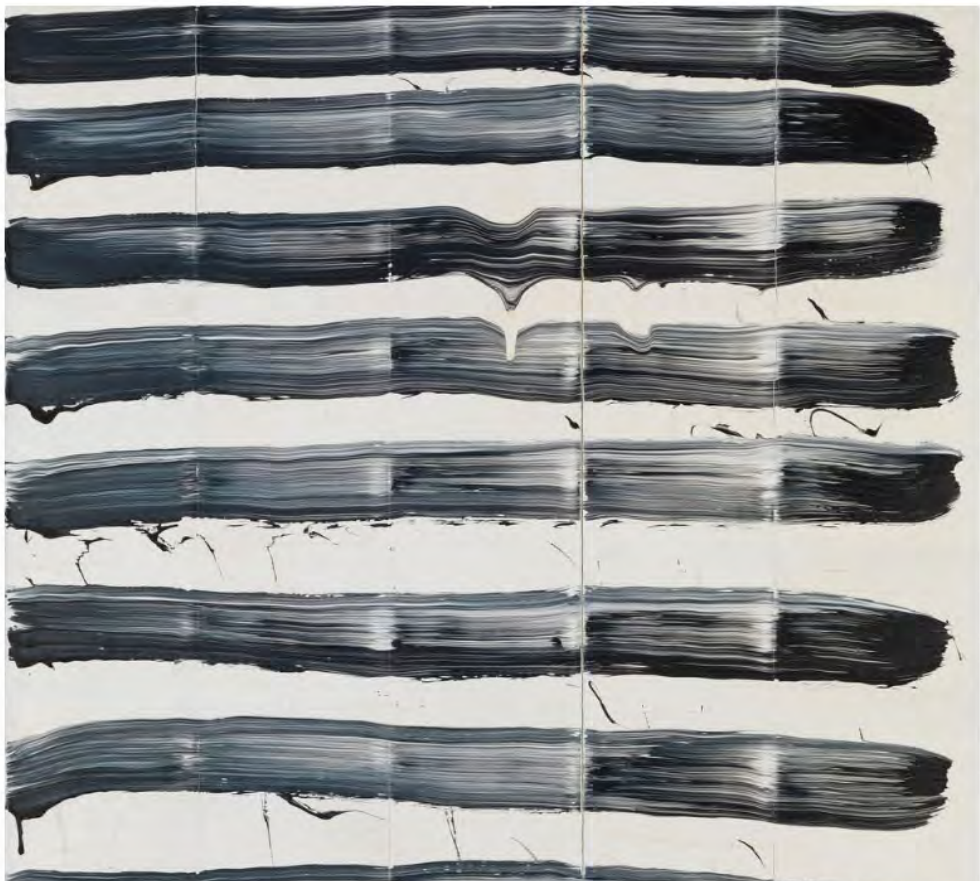
Having adopted a phenomenological orientation, the post-Minimalists knowingly or not had already engaged with the emerging post-Structuralism, which as a theoretical framework aimed to challenge the fixity of meanings and the hierarchical structures inherent in modernism. One can see in this an implicit relationship between post-Structuralist and post-Minimalist embraces of diverse non-traditional forms, materials, and practices. By departing from the bifurcated romantic/classical logic of modernism, the post-Minimalists had approached art as a phenomenological event, whose sense and status was contingent on context. This orientation had its roots in the process-oriented and indeterminate nature of AbEx painters such as **Jackson Pollock**, **Willem de Kooning**, and **Franz Kline**.

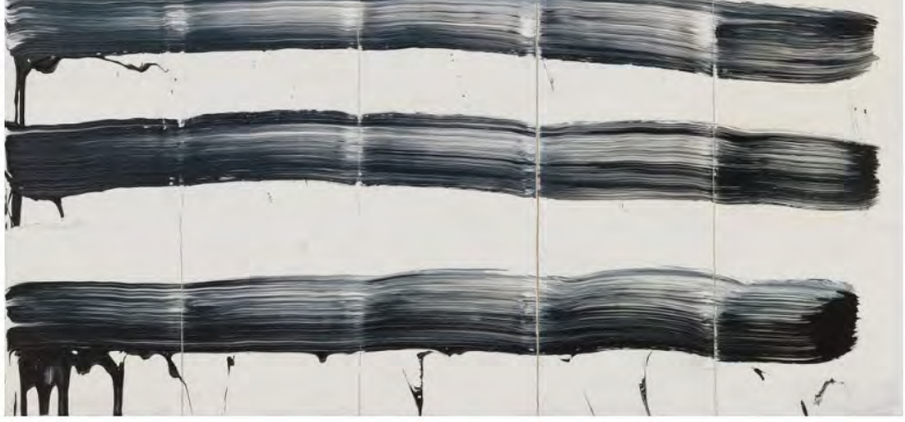
*Jasper Johns, Map, 1961*

While Abstract Expressionism elicited expression through the immediacy of the artist's emotional response and action, the post-Minimalists engaged their audiences in a more thoughtful, more intellectual approach to the work's structure, its form, and the relationship between its elements and context. The post-Minimalist aesthetic, as forged by Marden, Reed, Whitten, Diao, Heilmann, et al., was similarly premised on embracing process as a means of turning paintings into events. To do this, they entered into a nuanced dialogue with AbEx's gestural traditions. These painters – aware of the differences between spontaneity and intentionality, chance and determinism – chose to deliberately ignore them. This approach to the AbExers' iconography of the gesture and use of various non-traditional painting techniques once again aligns them with Johns's emphasis on the ambiguity of representation and the semiotics of the material signifier. Unlike Johns, however, these artists were concerned more with the "how" of painting than its "what."

By questioning expressivity and transcendence, Marden, Reed, and Richter among others contributed to a broader critique of the artificiality inherent in painting per se. They negotiated the tension between signification and the real, challenging viewers to confront the constructed nature of artistic creation. By stressing the act of painting as a performative and self-aware endeavor, Marden, Reed, and Richter bridge the gap between post-modernist and formalist aesthetics, demonstrating a keen awareness of the canvas's potential as a conceptual space that extends beyond its physicality and reveal abstract painting as a stage for the thoughtful interplay of aesthetics, cognition, and speculation rather than underlining its expression of subjectivity or its reiteration of formal problems. In this Reed, Richter, and Marden seem intent on coaxing their viewers into deciphering meanings embedded within the structure of their material processes and imagery. This layering leads to a consideration of the relationship between self-referentiality, self-reflection, the associative, and meaning. Marden, Reed, and Richter thus contribute to post-modernism's discourses concerning identity, the semiotics of images, and signification. Even though, in the context of post-modernism, art may be artifice, a cultural conceit, or little more than a fetish-commodity, painters such as Marden, Reed, and Richter have sustained abstract painting's aesthetic and cultural value as a mode of resistive thinking. In most cases, though, this has been misread or at least subsumed by its own model, thereby giving rise to the kind of acritical aestheticism and nostalgia that bolsters painters who promote gestural abstraction as a genre or motif rather than a mode of inquiry.

*Brice Marden, Untitled, 2021-23, kremer ink and graphite on Rives BFK paper, 22 x 33 inches*





*David Reed, #90, 1975, oil on canvas, 76 1/8 x 56 inches*

*Gerard Richter, Cage 1, 2006, oil on canvas, 114 1/4 x 114 1/4 inches*

**Of interest:**
"**Simon Hantaï: Unfolding,"** curated by Molly Warnock, Timothy Taylor, 74 Leonard Street
New York, NY. January 25 through March 2, 2024.

**About the author:** **Saul Ostrow** is an independent curator and critic. Since 1985, he has organized over 80 exhibitions in the US and abroad. His writings have appeared in art magazines, journals, catalogues, and books in the United States and Europe. In 2010, he co-founded (with David Goodman and Edouard Prulehiere) the not-for-profit Critical Practices Inc. as a platform for critical conversation and cultural practices. He has also served as art editor at *Bomb*, co-editor of Lusitania Press, and editor of the book series Critical Voices in Art, Theory and Culture published by Routledge. A collection of his essays, *Formal Matters*, was recently published by Elective Affinities.