

Collective Monochrome: Art Against Doubt

We are told there is a deep-seated human need, or urge, for the affirmation of the self in the form of its own image. The urge then proceeds outward to image one's environment, and then to image one's position in this environment and in relation to other beings (it doesn't necessarily happen in this order). This urge, the regenerative axiom of image production, spanning centuries, has always been a default setting for artists to work from. This entrenched urge is supported in art schools, is repeatedly enacted at consumption level within the art market, and is even argued by some as the very substance of art.¹

Arguably the imagist urge offers no real confrontation of the contemporary media apparatus that reconstructs it, continuously, for no perceivable purpose other than the generation of capital. We are thus occupied by a self-supporting system, where alternatives such as 'abstract art' are generalised as oppositional to this system. This particular framework of interpretation is perhaps recognisable as the reductive ideological legacy of late-Marxist criticism. From the perspective of this view, the imagist urge and its incubator, the culture industry, has won out, by and large. The modernist project of resistance, and the historic avant-garde's radical transformative pitch, have been presented as failures. It must be stressed, however, that these failures are largely a judgement leveled at intentions read from tangible results - a kind of rationalisation of the labor-relations of art and culture, and an encroaching of an alien framework of doubt upon the complex, meta-affirmative knowledge domain we call art. It is entirely feasible that the history of abstraction has produced the semblances of an alternative path to this interpretive framework. However, it also is unfortunate that much abstract art has let itself dangle off this scenario of doubt.

At least, within some circles, the feeling is an increasing sense of the gratuity of persistent tacking manoeuvres, on the part of abstraction, in relation to the imagist urge. Conventions within representation appear to be endlessly tweaked and shifted, but rarely felt to be substantially challenged. Pocketed across the globe are groups of artists increasingly adopting the old term "non-objective" in order to articulate counter intentions to some of the imagist problems encountered in the idea of abstract art. Non-objective tendencies within art today, strangely enough, include some strong leanings toward social space in order to question the limits of meaning and representation. We could say that for some there are attempts to bring a critical view of the image to the very hands of the public.

From a social standpoint, art's role is a terrifying problem for many Australian artists. Much contemporary work would prefer to laugh it off. However in the 1990s, this question became central for groups of artists here and there. In Sydney, it came to bare upon certain artists' thoughts about what it meant to make abstract art, as a general and historically defined entity. At a time when radical artist-run spaces like CBD Gallery met their fate at the hand of property development, groups like the Sydney Collective in the mid to late 1990s stepped up, with 30 or so artists exhibiting together without reference to the individuals involved. Five exhibitions and a manifesto were produced. There was also the Blue Lotus Group, where a few artists would work on single artworks, again with the idea of detaching work from identifiable workers. From these politically ambiguous, back-to-basics, experimental beginnings a focus on abstract and concrete art-making activities emerged into the more formal, public presentations we find in the foundations of MOP and now Sydney Non Objective. Both projects are public galleries.

Billy Gruner's work emerges from this particular cultural environment, in whose formation he has played a large part. Gruner's *Collective Monochrome* project engages with this redeveloped social obligation of the artist/artwork nexus, but from the perspective of the radical potential of non-objective painting and art making. Gruner's message is simple: "the CM project illustrates that the only thing wrong with painting (art by proxy) is what we ourselves seek to project" and that those who are critical of the *CM* project "often [...] leave with an experience that reveals that they were worried about the art historical, and that in the present you can do certain work when its tenets have been reconsidered from alternate perspectives".² This is the kind of thought, hinged upon the claims an artwork appears to be making though reconsidered from a different perspective, that pursues the crucial idea at hand: which is to work against a culture of doubt.

The *Collective Monochrome* project must also be understood in relation to a particular preoccupation within the history of abstract art: the idea of gesture. It's feasible that the other major problem within abstraction is the notion of the gesture as an ambiguous sign. It is an idea somewhat concealed by the title of Gruner's ongoing project, yet the gesture is the vital linkage

between two big ideas contained within the project's name. The idea of collective activity, on the one hand, and monochrome painting on the other, are two historically weighty themes. Some might suggest that the idea underpinning the *CM* project is too ambitious, because it collides notions of pluralism with that of the autonomous artwork. In Gruner's wider practice we find the themes of pluralism and autonomy pitched against each other in unconventional ways. Within the *CM* project, however, we find them played out through the apparently understood conventions of 'making' a painting. Yet with the *CM* project we could accurately state that any encounter with these paintings is probably met with a set of assumptions, on the part of the viewer, arising from these understood conventions. The assumptions are overturned when an understanding of the project is gained, and the beginnings of an understanding is located in the title of the project.

In a recent artist statement, Gruner has presented the most recent incarnation of the *CM* project as such:

Materials: Acrylic on un-stretched, primed Belgian linen.
Size: Variable.
Provenance: Billy Gruner, Unspecified Number of Assisting Participants.
Participation: A group is formed to assist painting, either before or during the event. Exhibition co-ordinator and group decides bandwidth, numbers of stripes, measured or hand drawn, angles of pitch, etc. co-ordinator pre-selects yellow tone, arbitrates on any concerns, outcome of situation, appearance of installation, and of general space. Preferably the making is documented by digi-cam. This imagery may be shown during the exhibition if suitable.
Requirements: A clear wall area, linen pre-cut by co-ordinator to appropriate rectangular size and securely pinned in landscape orientation. Co-ordinator provides table, bucket, paintbrush, acrylic. If required, pencil, tape, straight-edge, and drop sheets.
Artist will cover material costs.

The above schema projects the framework for the production of *CM* numbers 11 and up. *CM* numbers 1 to 10 were conducted under a different, more simple schema: a primed canvas was hung on a wall, and a pot of paint with a brush was provided, offering any viewer/visitor the opportunity to apply a coat of paint to the canvas - to make a gesture. One requirement Gruner had was that the painter sign their name on a sheet of paper provided in order to indicate their participation in the project.

The question of gesture has been curiously seductive for those attempting to articulate the substance of modern art. The movement of the artist's brush, the hand, the body, has often been cited as the crucial meaning-giving moment in the creation of artworks. The gesture is a sign, and an elusive one at that. It contains as its signified the perceived fact of action. In the modern period the gesture itself has often been given equal standing to the apparent meaning of an image the gesture may be said to portray. Within the gestural mark we may see intention (or lack thereof), and the strange thing about this is that despite the huge variety of different gestural signs that have been made in artworks, spanning over 100 years, the one unchanging element, the signified *fact of action*, has remained the principal fascination. The concern with gesture is an obsession with a mark or a form whose very identity is *how* it is made. In a contemporary sense its reception is hinged upon the uncertainty of interpretation in understanding how gesture should rightfully signify. Here I would suggest that this question of gesture has developed a celebration of doubt within abstract art.

In Georges Rouault's *Head of Christ*, 1905, the aggressive line work purporting to represent the pain of Christ slips all too easily into the autobiographical space of the artist. In Jackson Pollock's *Number 1*, 1948, the vertical 'subject matter' of the Artist strains against the gravitational reality of the horizontal movement of Pollock's body in production of the work. In Gerhard Richter's *Abstract Picture*, 1992, we likewise see grand gesture, though here 'grand' simply describes scale, with subjectivity being absent, and furthermore we cannot pinpoint the exact mode of action or making. In Bernard Frize's *Baille*, 2003, we see evidence of the brush, evidence of the speed of the gesture. What we fail to grasp is the character of the authorial hand. In fact the work cannot have been produced by a singular hand, or even two. The inability to count the hands needed to make a Frize painting unravels the gesture as a coherent sign: action is divorced from its mark because an understanding of the action cannot be gained.

From the cross-section of chosen artworks - paintings - discussed above, we have the idea of the gesture as a fractured sign. One that contains signifiers that move between referents. The

gesture points to powerful, though ambiguous emotions in Rouault and Pollock, and also refers to the particulars of the work's making. The gesture is without emotion in Richter and Frize. It has become empty of the content we are encouraged to see in Rouault and Pollock, and refers instead to action itself and is less able to be directly situated in relation to the artist's body. The gesture thus begins to refer to the viewer's own vision and thought rather than the apparent thoughts and emotions of the artist. The greater the distance between the mark made and the understanding of its gesture, the more the gesture floats, or shifts, in the mind of the viewer, and the more the viewer is forced to confront their own perceptions, their own act of interpretation, and their own sense of doubt in the face of the artist's chimera.

Within Gruner's *CM* numbers 1 to 10 we see the game shift a little. It is as if Gruner has watched the drift of *gesture as floating signifier* and decided to ground it, and perhaps in the simplest sort of way too: by not encouraging the chimera, not pursuing the line of doubt. If the history of modern painting has sought to problematise the authorial gesture, yet still retain the cause of the problem: the so-called author, then surely the answer is to either abandon the fixation with gesture, or abandon the singular author.³ Gruner has chosen the latter. By setting up an environment for the viewer to participate in the making of an artwork, doubt is eliminated. Instead discovery prevails, hinged upon the idea of social space. Gruner's project creates a sense of society over a sense of the individual, because the haphazard way in which coats of paint are applied have no particular bearing upon any eventual aura the artwork might have. In *CM* number 5, for example, a wet coat of paint applied by one viewer/participant was canceled out by another coat applied by another viewer/participant a minute later. On this night, the opening of *CM* number 5 at Conical in Melbourne, the project apparently demonstrated the futility of painting. Coats of wet paint were continuously layered on top of one-another by different viewer/participants, in different ways, with the effect of pulling off almost as much paint as was being put on. Over the three week period, however, the paint was allowed to dry, from day to day, and as the traffic through the gallery slowed, single coats were allowed to set in the way the viewer/participant had intended. The entropic feel of the opening night was replaced with a more ordered, preconceived measure of the *CM* project. It is these two scenarios, taken together, that gives the *CM* project its character as a social index. The disorderly mob of the opening night was counterbalanced by the more measured presence of one or more people engaging with the project on a periodical basis.

The question of the weighty category *monochrome* in *CM* is answered simply: if one limits the options then the terms of engagement become clearer. With the new works - *CM* numbers 11 and up - the options are even more limited. There is still one colour supplied, but the viewer/participant is given rules as well as options. It remains to be seen exactly how this recent shift will bare upon the project as a whole. Perhaps it is a variation to test the effects of restriction and selection, pitching the project into more overtly political space.

As we watch the *CM* project unfold, we may hopefully see a new dialogue formed for collective gesture. Perhaps the project may restore the monochrome's long standing promise of tactile, complex, radical space, rather than the posturings of autonomy and idealism that it has too often be seen to represent. Thus the crucial point of the *Collective Monochrome* project is to overcome the ideal and the hallowed, which has always needed a culture of doubt in order to survive.

Daniel Argyle, Melbourne, 2008.

Notes:

1. See for example the BBC television series *How Art Made The World*, first broadcast on BBC Two in 2005. The series was produced by Mark Hedgecoe and presented by archaeologist, art historian and classicist Dr. Nigel Spivey.

2. Billy Gruner, artist's notes, 2008.

3. Admittedly Bernard Frize's paintings are well documented, like Gruner's *CM* Project, as eventuating from multiple hands. Images can even be found on the internet that demonstrate how Frize's works are supposed to be made. However, we are still compelled to pitch his work into the realm of doubt, because they imply a single hand in their presentational pitch - the autonomous artwork - conventional painting hung by itself on a wall. Thus Frize's works are akin to the conjurers art - we admire the finesse - and we embrace the doubt as the thrill of mystique in the face of the works' isolated presence on gallery walls.