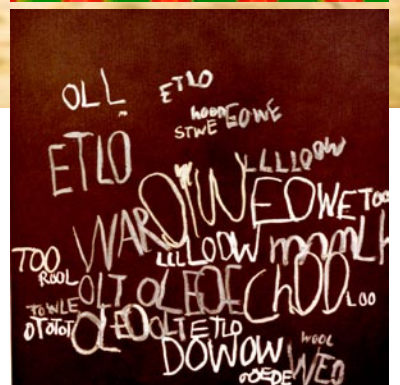




ALCOHOL COUNTRY AND WESTERN

The Logic of These Logistics



Leigh Davis

COUNTRY AND WESTERN

The Logic of These Logistics

LEIGH DAVIS



1. BIG BEND COUNTRY



This is an essay about John Reynolds' painted language.

THE iron filings of your heart shift when you drive into the South Western Texas desert, in Big Bend country, in the late autumn. The desert's warm dry volume, restricted colour range and clarity of distant objects is as a magnet for Aucklanders of more virulent weather. The desert is spread out as far as the eye can see, which is a long way, in the climate we are talking about here.

*"On man, heaven's influence works not so.
But that it first imprints the air" ¹.*

This shift happens once again when you arrive at the nearby Chinati Foundation in Marfa, and when you walk within the intense fields of Donald Judd's boxes and Dan Flavin's light-tubes, those two compelling American visual artists of the last 40 years. Each of their installations at Marfa are intensely radiant visual works. And each are works of droning sound too, which is surprising. The boxes ring hollow with gong-tone voices as audience members interact, and the light tubes buzz with the noise that electrical transformers make.

These engulfing works, Russian-doll universes, we got to, me, John Reynolds, and a red GMC 5.2 litre pick-up truck with bags in the rumble seat and Lucinda Williams in the CD player.



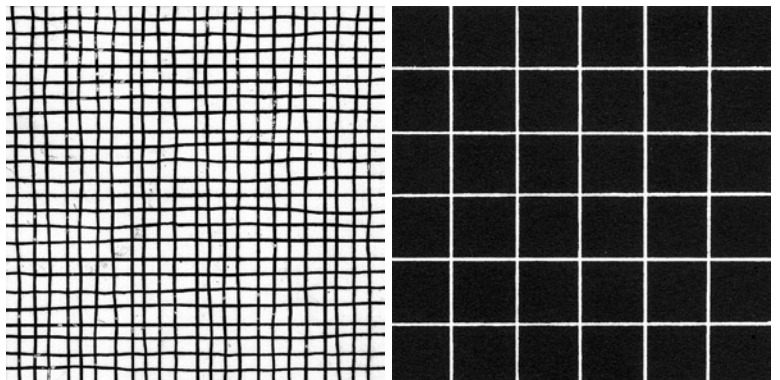
The big idea at Chinati –

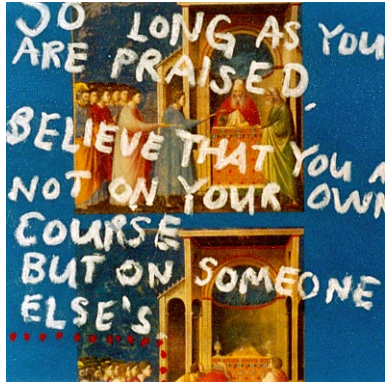
in the Texas desert, and in Marfa in the Texas desert, and in the armory and barracks in Marfa in the desert, and in the box array in the armory plus in the light tube arrays in the barracks, all in Marfa, all in the desert –

is medium.

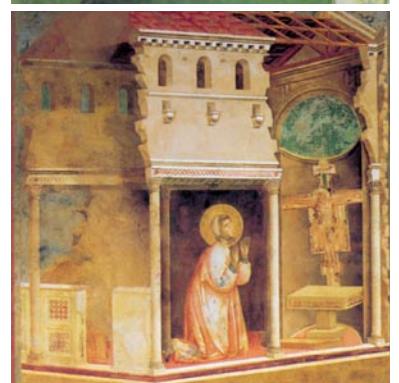
It is a property Judd calls *space* because he likes his big ideas in aw-shucks form. His is also a marvellously polemical New World tradition that liked visual art but – facially, at least – not Old World (“European”) or art-semiotic ways of regarding it.

But the New World’s relationship to the Old World is this essay’s story. It backgrounds Reynolds’ painting’s patrimony. It maps the New World and the Old World upon each other. Of related but less central interest, it tracks Marfa’s power to the presence of Giotto’s absence.





2. THE POST-CLASSICAL CONTEXT OF PAINTING



LET'S ride.

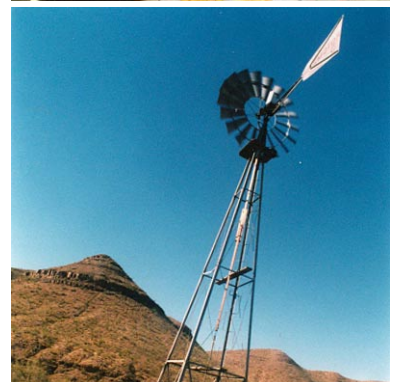
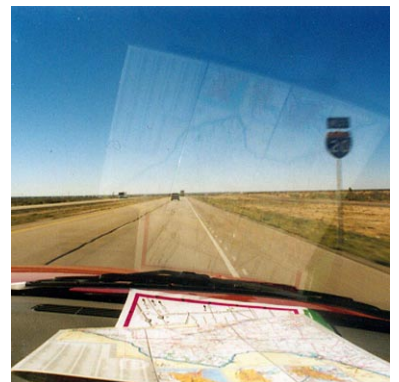
It seems increasingly clear that the old world – medieval, or more strictly post-Classical, thought - supplies major aspects of visual art's contemporary wealth of meaning. As with any present world city that is structured *in detail* upon an old one (present London, say, or Prague) much present visual art is constituted by its past. It is visual *art* - that is, it attains its category definition - because of this.

Ezra Pound, the American poet and Romance scholar, once referred to "the medieval dream" with the following piercing claim -

*"... (the medieval dream) is a very complicated structure of knowledge and perception, the paradise of the human mind under enlightenment"*²

And this old world medieval dream is Reynolds' ground too. You cannot see Reynolds' painting fully until you see it as stubbornly and diligently old fashioned: as an activation - a troublesomeness, a roaring - in traditional painting's time-honoured skin. As a refraction of the old town's bones.

Reynolds' art object is not the representation of painting's *ornaments*. The object of his work is not the thing he portrays from time to time in painting. Rather, Reynolds' object is painting's *skin*. (It's a Roland Barthes' distinction,



this *ornament* and *skin*). The *skin* in Reynolds is atavistic. It differentiates the work and sustains its interest.

In the little body of writing about Reynolds' work to date it is the ornament of the painting that has most drawn talk. The work is celebrated for its dandy doodle riot of expressive incident. That is, it is read as hovering on the edge of psychology. It is not read as hovering on the edge of painting, the source of its fundamental capacity to create and sustain excitement. One needs to do more than point out what it is that Reynolds is painting. It is more important to see what it is that is painting Reynolds.

Therefore:

The *post-Classical* is a pretty big catchall term. It is half a reference to a period in history and half a reference to a period in ideas. As a period in ideas it is chronologically fuzzy: conventionally, a point where Christian and Pagan ideas meet in a hybrid spanning maybe 500 years to 1350. Dates don't focus definition much. Re-reading the post-Classical from the present: it as a vanishing point. It seems a convergent region where the family of discourses with which we most commonly associate high culture - theology, philosophy, astronomy, and art - in their rudiments last and most richly interpenetrated.

What vanishes into this point are potent post-Classical theories which become potent criteria of visibility. The theories of most interest to the understanding of painting are: the theory of *air*; the theory of *movement*; the theory of *inside and outside*, and in addition, the theories of *the viewer*, of *depth*, *signs*, and *medium*.³

The Theory of Air is a hybrid of Classical, neo-Platonist, and Christian thought, spanning Aristotle and Dante. Aristotelian pneumatology divided the space above the earth into Air and Sky. Air was the region under the moon and above the earth, and Sky was above the moon. This distinction reflected the sense that the continuum between the earth and the stars was a continuum between the changeable and unchangeable

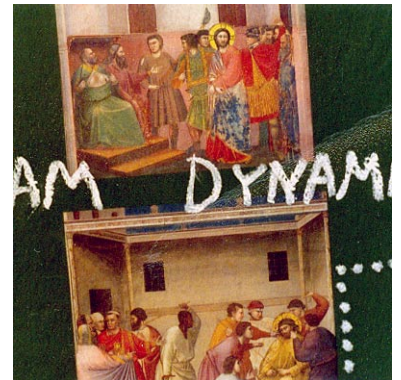
worlds, both of which are different in kind. The region below the moon is filled with air, and above with *aether*.

In this theory *air* is therefore an idea, not merely inert and not merely a substance. It is a *low* to Sky's *high*; a metonym for worldly mutability that is layered beneath heaven, the overarching domain of permanence. Most importantly, it is a middle; that is, a region above the earth but below the sky.

Air therefore has a thickness, and latency. It is less what you breathe or what birds fly in, than it is a screen for invisible movies, and a domain of daemons who are of a middle nature between gods and men. Daemons are intermediaries, and through them alone we mortals can have intercourse with gods. Daemons are the *appropriate animals* for air, not birds, since birds are confined to the lower margins of the air and daemons are confined only to the space between the moon and the earth. Daemons have a finer consistency than clouds and like clouds are sometimes visible and sometimes invisible. "Genius" was the standard Latin translation of daemon. (Interestingly, "genius" has become a property now thought to be internal to individual people. "Genius" has thus been taken out of its post-Classical air.)

The *theory of movement* deems the air a transmission medium for lively planetary effects. In this theory movement originates with God who is portrayed as existing outside of a Ptolemaic universe. God caused the *Primum Mobile* to turn and with this turning occurred the turning of all of the transparent planetary globes between the *Primum Mobile*, the highest level of the universe, and the earth, the lowest and around which the planetary spheres spun in concentric circles.

On earth, two derived sources of motion could be observed. The first was a derivative of planetary movement, which caused *influences*, the subject matter of Astrology. Through this derivative force planetary emotions, and their symbolic colours and metallic elements, impacted earthly affairs. Such influences did not work on us directly but by first modifying the air.



AND
HIS
ghost
may be
heard



AS
IT SINGS
IN
THE

BILLABONG

The second origin of movement was “certain sympathies, antipathies, and strivings inherent in matter”. According to this conception a falling body exhibited a kind of homing instinct for the earth; the sea “desired to follow” the moon; and iron “exhibited particular sympathy for the lodestone.” According to this theory there was a certain superconductivity and ambient motion in the air.



The *theory of inside and outside* is another post-Classical staple. In this theory *inside* is outside the Ptolemaic universe, in a manner counter-intuitive to us. In this inside there is no space and time, but endless light, as where God is. Inside is up, and earth, within its layers of planetary spheres, is that point to which all lines reach down. Earth and man are peripheral, are marginal, or are on an outer rim, an *outside* to the *inside* of God.

The *theory of depth* is related to this conception of theistic space. Depth is the span between earth and God, the span with mutability at one end, and its other *inside* at the far end. This is a finite space with end points. It is imaginable not unimaginable; finite not infinite; a space between opposites. There is an up and a down. Moving upwards and towards the centre: the earth gives way to air; air to sky. Darkness gives way to light.

The *theory of the viewer* positions man as looking across deep space, with all its planetary and aerial superventions, to God. It is an habitual orientation *toward* the source of light and *through* its illuminated objects. *Up* is where you look and is what you look *through*, not *at*. It is the attitude an outsider has to *inside*, a looking *in*, a visual equivalent analogous to listening to the soundless music of the spheres. The viewer is therefore a figure in religious coordinates. He expects to see divinity. Her characteristic gaze is from changeable *here* to eternal *there*, through a space where everything is rendered intermediate.

The *theory of signs* considers the world to be text-like, or to be a book or a space of messages whereby gods are held to be

in communication with men, or as encountering them. Signs are what are left behind. They are a residue, as a burn mark is a residue, an imprint of communication conceived of as a mystical mechanism accruing force.

The *theory of a medium* is related to the theory of the air. A *medium* is what air, and above it *aether*, becomes. It is active with the passage of messages, daemons, (later) angels, influences, *enclynings*, music, and light. It is a domain where annunciations travel and reach their target.

The theory of this medium is supported by two mostly neo-Platonist collateral theories: the Principle of the Triad, and the Principal of Plenitude.

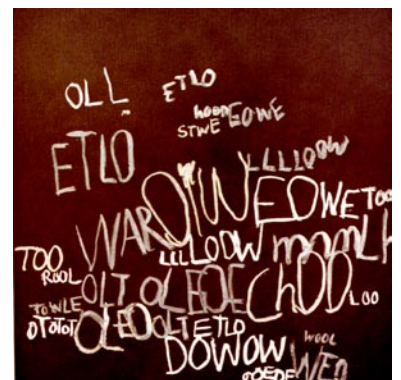
The triadic principle powerfully deems any intervening space or gap to be active, by definition, and not inert.

"It is impossible that two things only should be joined together without a third. There must be some bond in between them to bring them together" ⁴

This principle reflects the belief that gods do not meet man directly. Each encounters one another only indirectly. There must be some "wire, some medium, some introducer, some bridge" enabling the encounter. Building on Plato, Chalcidius, the neo-Platonist writer applies a deduction from natural science, and reasons that since immortal, celestial, and stellar creatures exist, as do temporal, mortal, earthly, and passible creatures, then

"it is inevitable that between these two there must exist some mean, to connect the extremes..." ⁴

The Principle of Plenitude holds that this medium is full. According to this theory, because there is a normal distribution of active agents (of communication, motion, god-like beings) throughout creation the aether and air must contain their relative share of these active agents, although invisible.

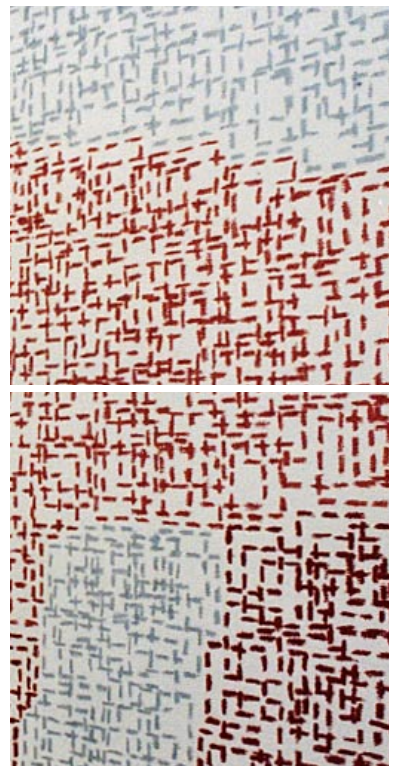


And, finally, there is a deeper theory behind all of the above. We can see now that a theory of *texts* was at work. The medieval period was characterised by conspicuous written discussion of rare texts, such that these *authorities* compounded their own weight and power, together with the content and the authority of post-Classical thought. Writing patinated by authority and antiquity did its work defining, integrating, and yielding rich images of wholeness. In the process it cast its own properties into that image. Physical space, for example, became page-like. It was deeply message-imprinted. *The invisible* was first constituted then populated and, thus asserted and thickened; it drew the amazement of onlookers. Time became textual time: history was held to resemble a sheaf of episodes, a gathering, unfolding revelation, of chapters in a single volume.





3. PAINTING'S ARDOUR



It is possible that the institution of Western painting might never have existed, or at least that its forms of visibility might have been other forms. It is conceivable that states of history could have arisen that drove little or different hermeneutic wealth into the strange wall badges that have been the staple of Western painted art. That such things, if they emerged at all, did so as merely decorative. But painting – and visual art more broadly – has a present meaning and ardour. How did this emerge, this ardent legacy, with its high conception? Likewise: its representational latency, and characteristic claims on the viewer?

Post-Classical theories and their integration suggest Western painting *itself* as we know it was never invented. Painting didn't have an independent, isolated, differently motivated, body. It had no independent worth or meaning. Rather, a post Classical discourse evolved that made of the visual world a representation, and made of the viewer a particular avid, hunting, revelation-sensitive, philosophic subject, and this matrix made painting. This world issued a distinctive phenomenology too, or a distinctive experience of the mechanics of meaning appearing in a register of awe. Visual art both copied and invented these literary discursive tools. It gained from this antecedent hermeneutic wealth. It pictorialised post-Classicism's theatre or it theatricalised post-Classicism's pictures. Painting became not just privileged within *but the same as* post-Classical space. Read



backwards from this present, painting seems best regarded as a literalisation of a phenomenally rich and strange ambient representational model. It was an activity, a portrayal, borne in a world regarded with dynamic immensity, which exhibited the chain reactions of signs' enlarging, of signs gaining power through circuits of resemblance. Painting became full, something to look at and think about for a long time, but not full as a *principal* is full. Painting *derived* its prestige, an *agent* in a perceived universe of agents that set air, depth, signs, and the viewer in a mechanism of frictions and hand-overs. This mechanism made up a physics of communication, not just congruent with but the same as the physics of meaning in the environment. It was meaning's stuff, and apprehended as falling to earth every moment.

In this framework an individual painting was not a picture on a wall and not a depicted content in the way we normally consider these things. It was not inert or motionless. It was a charged object in a charged play. It was an element in a triad that combined itself, the viewer, and the space between each regarded as a *medium*, that is, a volume of exchange, a space of transmission, a space of invisible transactions. A painting was thus apprehended as ventilated. It was something trembling with the weight of a rustle of messages performing both God's and representation's judo. It was a well of theories.

The Deism of this post-Classical thought and world is particularly rich and strange when we look back from here and begin to see it. Looking at this present past our eye-beams fasten more on a body-language of marvellous epochal apprehension and technology, and less on the apparent object



of all of this message-radiance, the hybrid God of Classicism and Christianity. With a near-Borgesian sense for us, it is the vigour, dynamics, spectacle, conjuring, and centrifugal reach of the world-as-art that most excites. Looking back, God seems vague and man seems skinny but the percussive richness, the flooding and animation between, the sensuous and transforming apprehension of images captures the contemporary object of attention. There was much *behaviour* of meaning in post-Classical thought, interchanges with illumination and transformation, up and down an invisible and speculative hierarchy. God was a "Holy, Holy, Holy": a repetition of splendid noise with no sentence structure. Meaning in the form of Divine messages came to possess a geometrically compounding moment, a ubiquity that could leap from this or that worldly object to a (viewing) subject. Meaning's arrival was always as an annunciation. From Divine origins the meaningful had been carried through aether and into air, from the unchangeable to the changeable worlds, via the intermediaries of daemons and angels. To use an electrical word-picture, painting was demanded to *earth* meaning. And a chemistry word-picture: images could be catalysts and vehicles of this leap, not as a representation of objects in space simply, but as a model of their latency and effectiveness in the manner of bearing revelations, where these revelations were coupled with but not reducible to propositions. Painting could thus be a spark in an incipient explosion. Further, painting was an operation performed in time, an element in an implied serial of transactions, as much as it was a reflection of objects in space.

A painting attained significance as a thing different from its depictions. It was not a metaphor of psychological realism or humanist subjectivity but had a metonymic status as a physical object in a meaningful context. It was *something-in-a-medium*. A painting had an independent station in a universe with peers and adjacencies, themselves *means*. It was more than an inert bearer of pictorialised images or metaphors. It was more than an occasion to admire the painter's facility. It was a rustle, polarity, station, generality, gauzy veil - if it was art.





And there is a final aspect to consider too. *Painting emerged as an activity tormented by its inability to represent the post-Classical world.* In post-Classical thought it was the relationship possessed by the visible world as a model for an invisible, exchange-based, framework of power that supplied the concrete world's voltage. But how to represent this doubled character, this combination of visible and invisible, in painting? Invisible objects cannot be painted. A distinctive suggestibility of painting, a particular dynamics and host of representational devices emerged to prise open this difference. Painting developed devices, which constituted a semaphore of (joyful) desperation derived from this necessary limit of means or this recognition that in order to make Reality accessible to comprehension, you had to make a picture, and then unmake it a little bit. Visual art of the 12th and 13th centuries here and there reveals a deformation of images due to this *frisson* of desperation. There is a problematising or stretching of surfaces and composition, so as to reveal images made visible in a manner designed to fold. This quality of "deformation" (see the discussion of Giotto's space below) could only be a subtle, marginal property, an edge between the visible representation and its portrayal *as just that*. A pictorial art could best declare this distinctive sign. It was a trace only that was employed

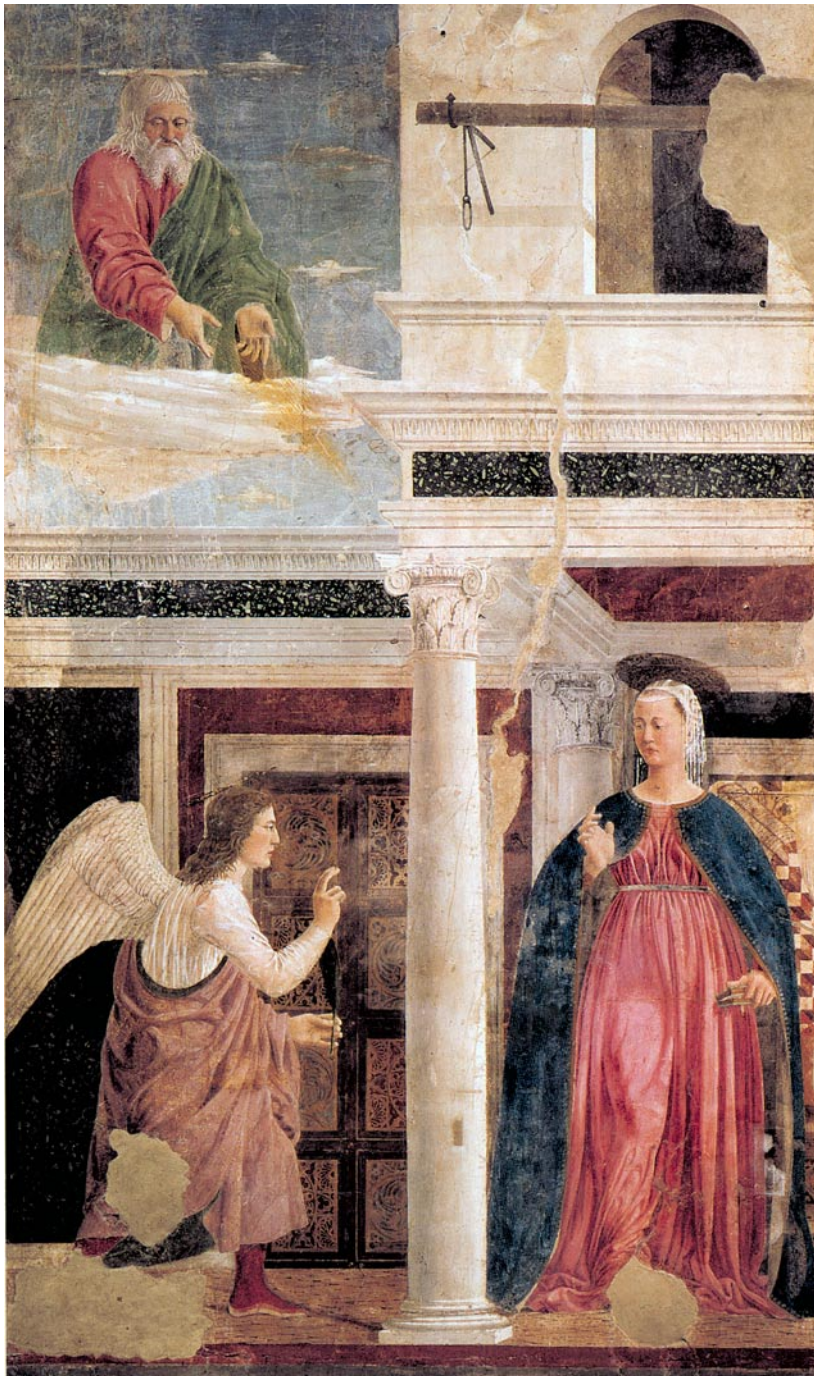
in these devices that caused such “unmaking a little bit”. A convention of sub-signs marking ripples on the surface of painting emerged. They were bare signs of trouble and partial signs of failure only, and not something that shattered the picture. It was not the world’s presence that was sought out in painting but the portrayal of post-Classical meaning; not visible likeness but what likeness itself meant and was part of. The visible world – populated, three-dimensional, concrete, familiar - *housed* the reality for which it was held to provide windows and doors. Reality was a represented but invisible *something else* to which the eye could only be guided through bad images of the world. Annunciation took place but only in a chamber, that is, in a house or framework of representation opened up or out.



Thus a major – perhaps the supreme - invention of post-Classical visual art was the invention of the hesitant edge. It was the development of a representational system where the visible world was seen to touch, to resemble and be disturbed by, the invisible one. This edge was what turned depiction into art. It required new devices of representation, the invention of new visual erogenous zones to prise the gap between the

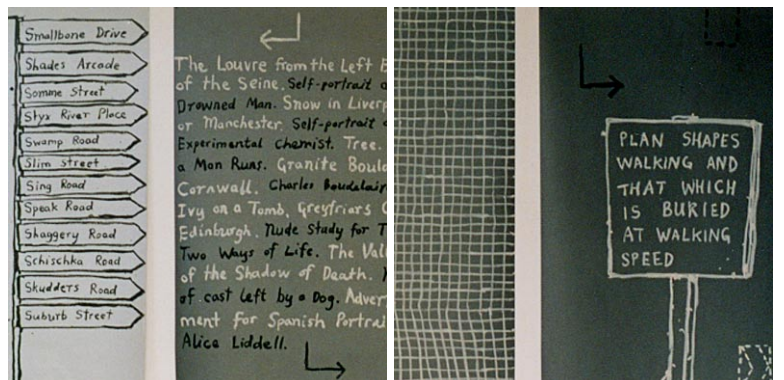
world that you can look at and its hermeneutical context, which was (strictly) the world represented in the authority of the post-Classical text.

This disturbance is where we first pick up the traces of metaphysics as an art idea. It is a disturbance at the heart of Reynolds' painted language.





4. GIOTTO'S HESITATION



INDIVIDUAL works of Italian art of the 14th and 15th centuries are often regarded as points across an emerging portrayal of humanist subjectivity. The retrospective look at the work of Giotto for example does this. He is made into a transitional figure who bridges the gap between icon art and realism, and who accelerated the invention of modern man.

This *has to be* a humanist fallacy.

Giotto appears to have invented a distinctive form of visibility. He invented a realistic pictorial treatment of the world in order to make of this an idea of representation. Having invented a realism he could then "destroy" it or at least radically qualify it by making it stand as a model through the introduction of cross-sections. His was a multi-dimensional visual construction under load or stress. Giotto – or the Giotto industry – first secured the means of realistic portrayal, and then made it hesitant. Realistic portrayal became the support for what he really wanted to reveal, which was the limits of the painting/world couple. He was a medieval worker so this was pretty natural. He set out the world as both a representation and a fault-line.

Giotto's was a language of visible and (inferred) invisible space established by means of the representation of *dimensional and domain switches* between exteriors and interiors. This switching between was primarily achieved with the play of

three image types in a pattern of resemblance; first, buildings came to resemble clothes; second, clothes and buildings came to resemble paintings themselves ; and third, all of these were resemblances of the world.

Giotto *honey-combed* this model and the honey-combing came to be called space. His pictures encapsulate represented space via a wealth of volumes and frames, loggia, lunettes, piazzas, barrel vaults, rib vaults, groin vaults, arches, pediments, balustrades, fascia, and flutes.

By a near-obsessive depiction, with an equivalent weight too of foregrounding and repetition, Giotto's paintings dramatise the representation of clothing and fabric, especially of ecclesiastical garb. The *chasuble*, the ecclesiastical cloak or robe, is from the Latin word *casula*, which means "cloak, little house".

Finally, but less obviously and by identification almost, painting itself is made to resemble clothing and houses. You can see this in painted compositions that are co-extensive with – that is, that share the same pictorial space as - the depiction of buildings and clothes. You can also see it in the painting of complete chapel interiors so that the painting and the building became the same thing. You can see it as well in those exquisite painted interventions where God or Angels break through into the representation, or into both the image of the building and the image of the painting.

Therefore Giotto simultaneously invented painting as both the representation of visible space and the representation of *hesitation*. He painted space as a play of concealment and revelation, a dramatised ambiguity of inside and outside. His space had holes in it or more strictly, Giotto's space was deep. That is to say, it contained rents and fissures. It was a theatricalisation of not just the presence and the absence of mass, or the presence of stage forward and stage back, but of the presence and the absence of *backstage*. Representational space was a cutaway construct comprising openings and closures that consistently established the world and the world

of painting as various kinds of house construction, that is, as various insides, with outsides, or the other way around. In the process he imbued painting itself with the metaphysical prestige thus given to the world. Painting's language came to resemble the world's. This is a more profound art end than is the achievement of realistic portrayal.

Giotto increased the drama and possibilities for meaning set up by his portrait of space as porous. The representation of God's intervention was also God's intervention in the representation. Thus Giotto helped to thicken painting itself as a sign by making it thin, by simultaneously detaching it from and attaching it to the visible world through a weight of quotation and resemblance in works that so clearly relay the post-Classical text.

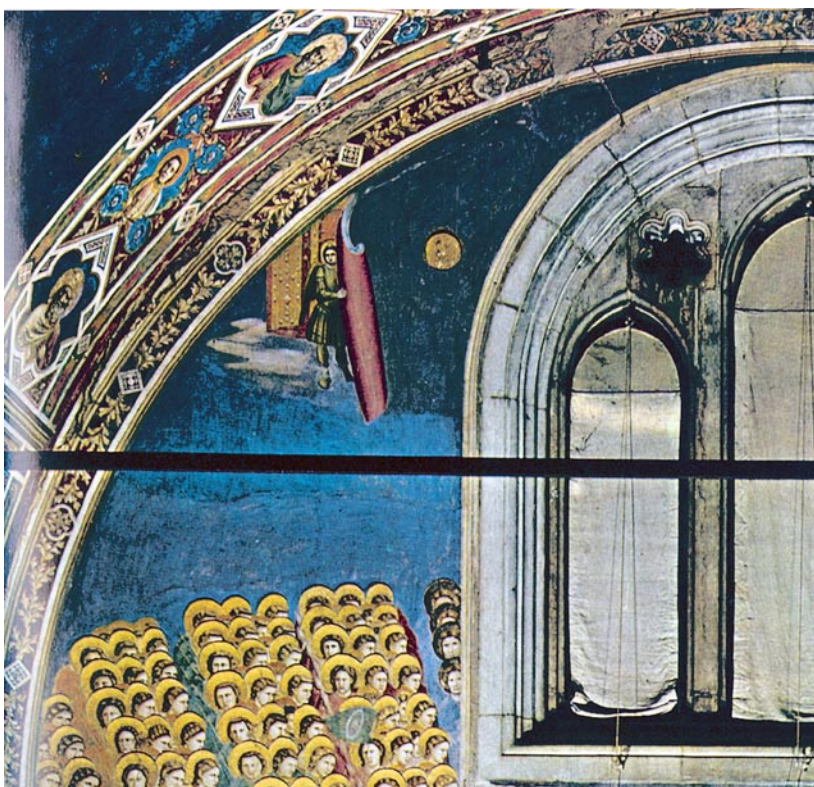
Look at the extraordinary *Miracle of the Crucifix*, with its beatific figure encased in a cutaway chapel.



Represented space is almost gratuitously displayed in the *Homage of Simple Man* detail.

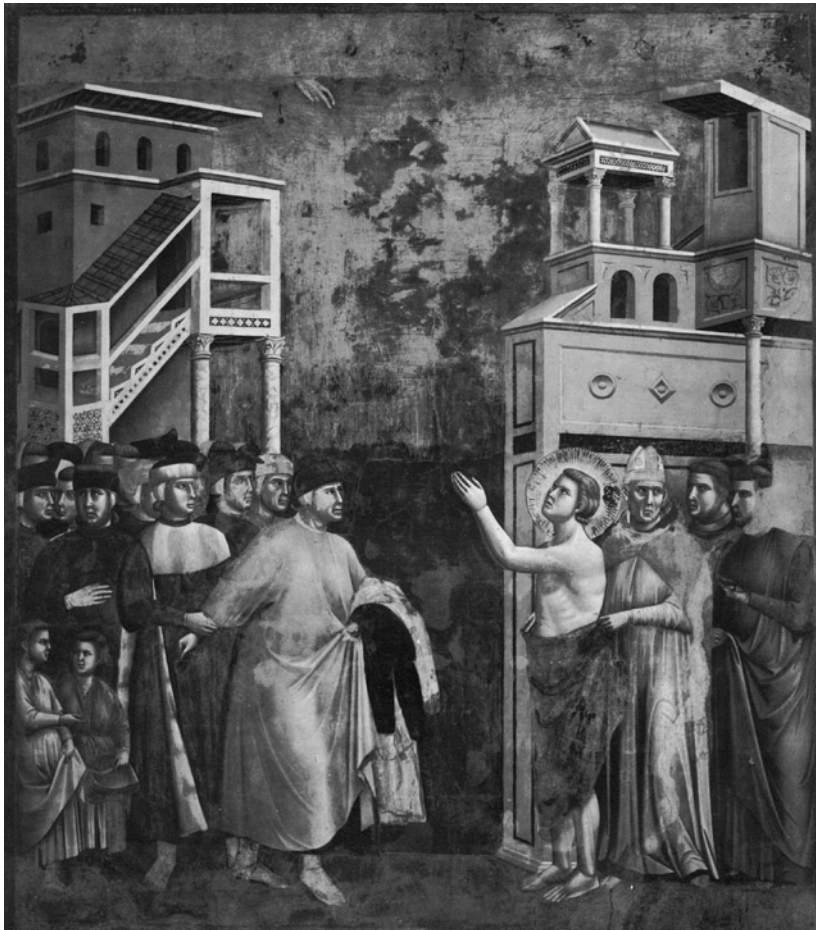


In *The Last Judgement* the building and the universe are identified.





The angel of the *Annunciation of St Anne* breaks through both the window and the painting. The hand of Almighty God in *St Francis Renouncing His Earthly Possessions* similarly breaks through represented space and becomes visible in the painting. In this picture too, space is parted left and right and forward and back in the picture plane. The picture is deeply, vertiginously, prised open to make a blankness between the two architectural masses. Through this void (which echoes the classical acoustic void of the Pauline Damascus Road) both the naked St Francis (he is therefore outside the painting), and God describe an invisible link across it, and beyond it.



But in many ways the most extraordinary example of Giotto's representational fiat can be seen through an accident which sets up a present day contradiction of post-Classical thought, *and thus reveals it*. I refer to the end wall of Giotto's *The Last Judgement*. There are two apertures in this painting-as-building. First, there is the represented "opening" of the painting and the world together, depicted in the tearing and rolling back of the picture plane to reveal heaven's gates.

Second, there is the appropriation of the actual three-part vaulted windows of the chapel into the field of Giotto's painting, so that the painting thus makes a representation of these windows. But these real-world windows at least in the current period of history now have blank blinds pulled down across them (most likely for conservation reasons). This blanking of the windows creates an extraordinary meaning-blindness in the work. The blinds blank both the windows and a key signifier in the painting. They place an on/off switch at the heart of the climactic *Last Judgement*. The resulting perfect do-good *metaphysical* (see section 6 below) gesture of the conservation blinds ruptures the metonymic field of the work in an oblivious manner which is breathtaking.

They are blinds that would have *no force and no signification* without Giotto's representative framework.

The moon of the post-Classical text thus exerted a tidal drag on the art. To move from the familiar world we can see everyday, to the consideration of painted art, is to move in such a way that vision becomes progressively bound as much to language as to sight.



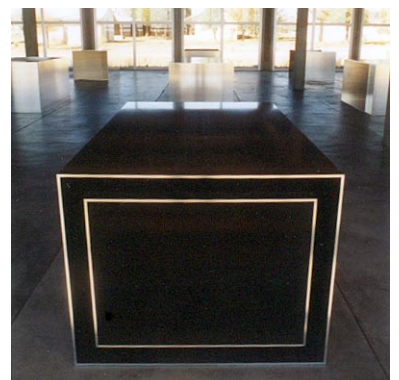
5. BRIDGE SECTION



THE above sets out the post-Classical legacy of painting's ardour. How is it also an ardour of contemporary painting? What can be said of contemporary painting's post-classical resemblance?

Start by putting an axe through the history of painting over the last 100 years, to divide a complex subject brutally, concerning divisions between different strategies of representation. For the clarity it provides. Read the history forward and back through the paradox of Minimalism.

The first representational model of painting, call it the internal one (Judd calls it "European"), involves a family of now familiar devices. Think of an easel painting: the painting as an object is minor in importance and the pictorial subject is major. The pictorial subject is composed within the boundaries of the frame and is viewed centripetally. That is, the viewer is drawn in to scrutinise the details of this composition. The painting tends to be small, static, and its meaning is independent of its varying presentational contexts, being gallery spaces, homes, offices and so on. The work presents a bounded transaction with the viewer who is regarded as spatially separated from the painting. This painting is basically metaphoric: that is, it is a tradition of pictures that trigger meaning through association and qualitative substitution. Humanist subjectivity is the transcendent signifier; in these pictures we are offered some insight into human experience. We could thus comment

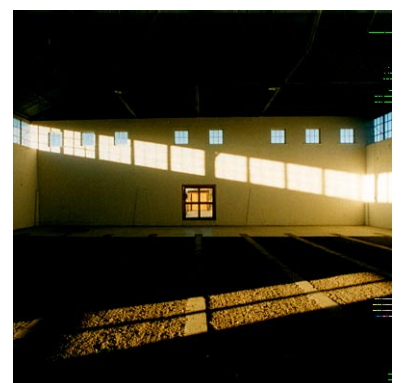


upon an image in such painting, say of the Eiffel Tower: "Oh, it is a celebration of modernist technological aspiration".

The second representational model, call it the external one, is the basis of contemporary abstracted painting of varying types. (But "abstract" of course is a carpet under which many granular and different art strategies are swept, and therefore it can only be a term applied from 30,000 feet above the target). The main simplicity of this second model is that it is the opposite of the first model, an Other created by the first, and one keeps coming back to this binary existence and the way it marks a *difference* of view. In this alter- image the painting as an object is major and the pictorial subject is minor, and frequently removed. The picture is literally and compositionally unframed, which usually means that the pictorial subject and the painting are the same thing, but it can mean that the art "breaks the frame". Small or large, the painting tends to be based upon an exaggerated sensitivity to its physical presentational context – to the room it is in, the building it is in, and the landscape it is in, often. It offers a relatively open and less bounded transaction with the viewer who perceives herself at the prompting of the work as in a world – as in a type of environment - and therefore as spatially continuous with the art's work. Space is the transcendent signifier. Here, the work is basically metonymic, that is, the work is also viewed centrifugally, which is the link between contemporary painting and sculpture. We could say about the image, say, of the Eiffel Tower, "Oh, it is all about Paris", and mean, "it is a thing that invokes and activates its context."

This second representational model is the great rag-bag coat hanger from Malevich to Knoebel and Bambury with Judd and others – pick your names - in between. These visual artists are not usually thought of as representational, although they are but what they represent are the less obvious, that is, the more general objects of visibility's form.

What are these objects? They resemble the ones of post-Classical thought with its *theories* - of *air*; *movement*; *inside and outside*, of the *seeing subject*, of *depth*, *signs*, and



medium. The language of contemporary abstract painting is atavistic because of this. It operates within a distinctive discursive formation. It is constructive of painting itself as an independent and complex *sign* – the sign of painting – and not a ground of signs. This complex sign installs a revelation-sensitive subject in a medium of transforming representations tending to be problems. It also holds painting to be the engine of a dispersed gaze criss-crossed with language.

In the 1950s Ad Reinhardt lamented art's then contraction of scope. It had moved, he said, from the medieval Gothic cathedral to the easel painting over the course of the last 800 years. Some of art at least is moving back. Painting of the post-Classical era created an art by simultaneously inventing a realist paradigm belonging to the then future of art, and turning it into a problem. Some interesting visual art of the last 100 years recommenced a same art by turning the paradigm that came to be invented after post-Classicism (the "modern") into a problem. An art of the 12th and an art of the 20th centuries are thus looped.

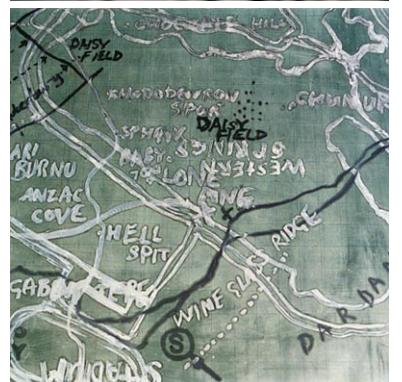
To summarise and end with Michel Foucault: this looping of past and present can be raised high. Foucault calls painting a *metamorphic* space of visual representation. It is one paired with the *labyrinthine* space of writing:

" the two great mythic spaces so often explored by Western imagination: space that is rigid and forbidden, surrounding the quest, the return and the treasure (that is the geography of the Argonauts and of the labyrinth) ; and the other space – communicating, polymorphous, continuous, and irreversible – of the metamorphosis, that is to say, of the visible transformation of instantly crossed distances, of strange affinities, of symbolic replacements" ⁵





6. LOPING INTO REYNOLDS' RANCH



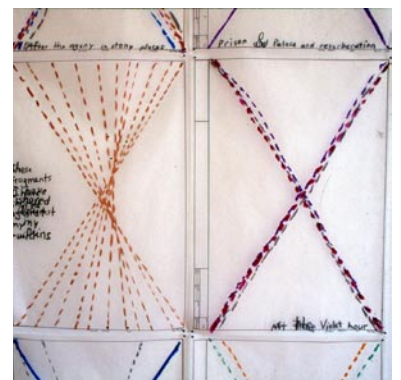
It seemed that Giotto and a discussion of painting's sign would be a stage-setting for a Reynolds discussion. The risk was that the stage-setting would overwhelm the actor. It should do. It's the right order.

The task is to frame the *what* of Reynolds' abstraction. Reynolds art scratches. It is ostensive argument, but what does it argue? What does this painter scratch, materials or meaning? The assumption is, Reynolds' is a language, else he makes gee gaws not signs.

The less obvious task is to put *Western* into *Country*, and show that an art made in Auckland is at most a discursive variation only within the regularities of Western representation.

So what is this art and how does it disrupt?

Reynolds is an Auckland, post-McCahon, painter. His work is carnal, particular, and plentifully diverse, in physical size, visual strategy, and media. At its heart are three big pictorial ideas. The first concerns composition emphasising movement. The second concerns the use of a vernacular strategy with a directness of treatment and an interplay of private and public signs and levels of meaning. The third concerns the idea of the *metaphysical*, which is to say, rupture is Reynold's basic device.



These three ideas are also central for Reynolds' older Auckland trailblazer, Colin McCahon, too. They are an *appellation* feature.

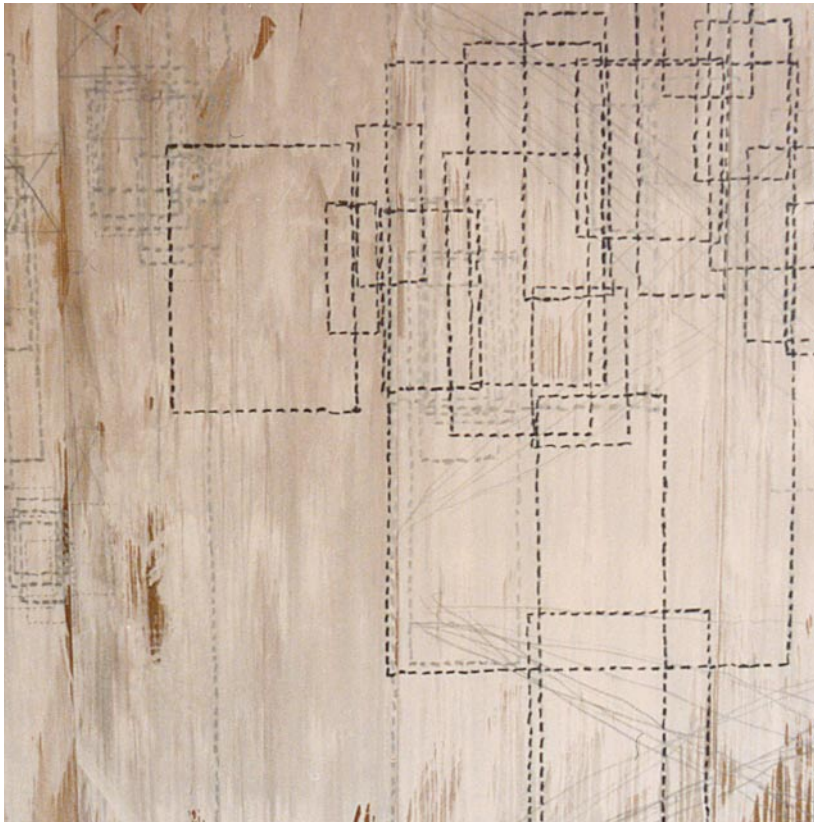
And these are big ideas from painting's history. At its most scratched Reynolds' art becomes most familiar as portraying the face values of painting's sign. Wounded, it is most corporeal. Distressed, the most supported by Western art. Reynolds' art is Giotto's hesitation, blown up. It is this doubling that is the work's allure; that for all its arresting novelty we know each work to be old. That the representation of movement, vernacular marks, and rupture sit deep in the bosom of painting's class, and are not gestures that rely on any simple fascination with rudeness or expressionism for their effect.

Movement

Reynolds' paintings exaggerate movement. They have a distinctive body language; one could say that they are commonly either "jitterbug" figures or "waltz" ones, meaning Reynolds commonly employs one or both of two compositional "speeds": the languid, slow explosion, or the fast and hectic one. On the slow side are visual incidents that are diagrams - spirals, necklaces, bushes, webs - in attitudes of drift or expansion. On the fast side is the figure of radiation, which is a relatively recent feature and one associated with a reduction in the variety of visual incident in Reynolds' work. The radiation figures - the all-over patterns of dashed 'dancing squares' or straight lines - contains more of an illusion of expansion in a three dimensional way.

Another distinctive compositional idea based on movement is that of gravity. Gravity appears, in drizzly paint, and in other top-down or falling figures.





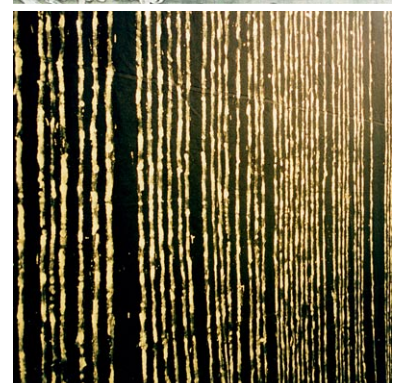
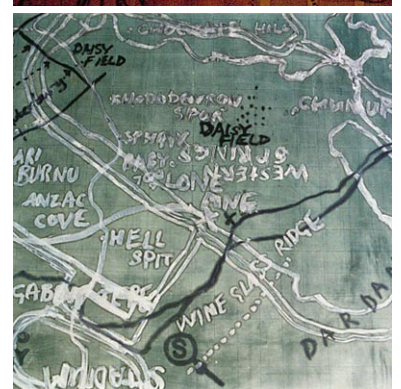
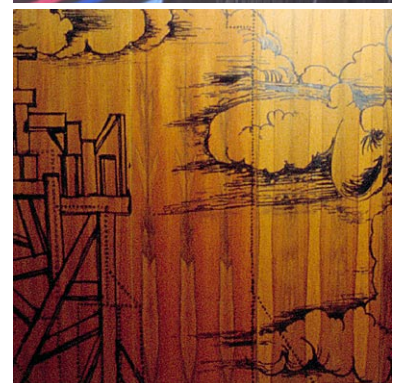
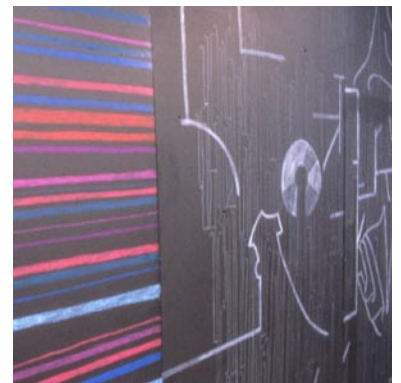
Vernacular

The vernacular in art is creole language. It is where an ordinary and distinctive local speech is used as the media for the traditional objects of art. Here found materials – in Reynolds

involving actual place names, historical events, and idiomatic figures of speech – embody art meanings and are worked for their abstract potential. Reynolds employs local place names for example as the titles of paintings. See, say, **Eureka School** (1993), **Hope Street** (1997), **Western Springs** (1998 ; with Western Springs being both a lakeside park in Auckland and a cultural mechanism or well-head) or **Nietzsche on White's Beach** (1995). The use of such titles stretches and literalises a general idea or emotion rather than creating an extended visual resemblance. The titles are important to the works. They and the painting provide mutual context, but variably, as delicate and generalised tissue, as play, or as startling literal reference. The *speed* – the way in which a title is conscripted by a painting- keeps changing. **Hope Street**, for example, is the name of both a painting and a literal streetscape. **K Rd** (1995) is a construction site, a ramshackle assembly of platforms and scaffolds. It helps to know that the Auckland street, Karangahape Road, runs into Queen Street, Auckland's main and more genteel thoroughfare. **K Rd**, the painting, runs into the idea of Queen St like a stockcar. **Nietzsche on White's Beach** has a racial moment. White's Beach is a beach near the Reynolds family bach at Anawhata on Auckland's west surf coast. The bright tattoo of surf in lines summoned by the title stands in some relationship to the serial finger daubed waves of the painting. But the painting's "beach" depicts a visual style that is more Maori than white.

But the vernacular is not only a property of titles. It is more a property of materials, and of how they are treated; in a new visual language, which can only be a language broken open, raw, with unworn edges. This is a large topic with Reynolds.

Reynolds paints *rude* works (and Daemons didn't go to finishing school). He uses rude materials like bare plywood; rude paint in rude (gloopy, drizzly, mopped) applications; and employs rude, or unevenly distributed, endless, compositions. His oil sticks are knubbly, sticky, like lipstick, and sometimes applied in a more haphazard fashion than you might be used to. His lines or marks are on the jerky side of gestural, the jerky side of baroque. The drawing is not so much "primitive"

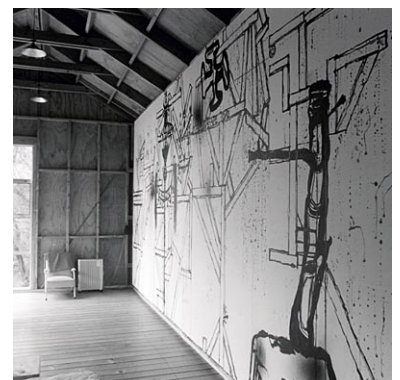


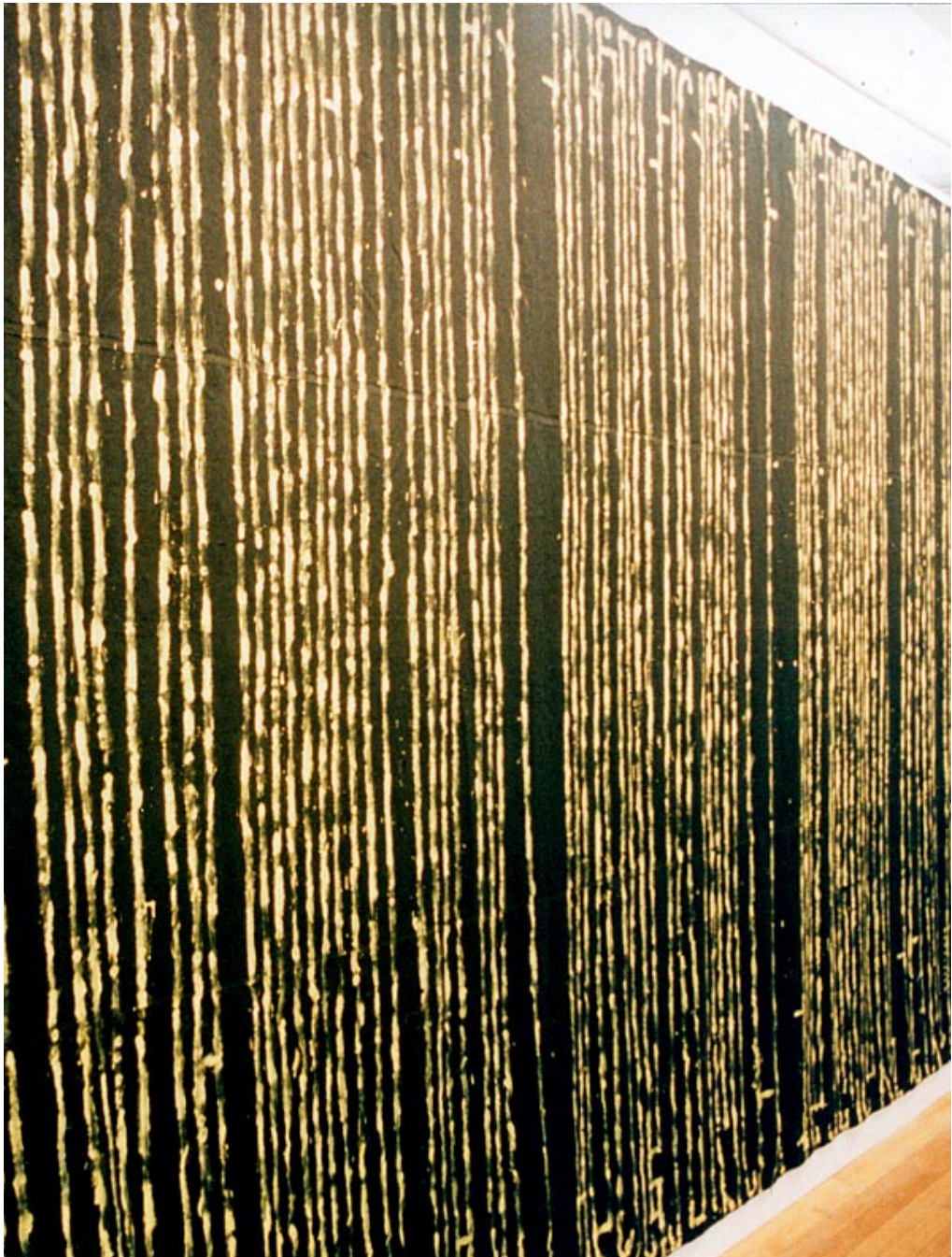
as simply independent of conventional drawing. Reynolds is thoroughly rude. At times he is off-putting rude and you shrug your shoulders. And frequently the works are larger in size than is polite.

This direct, pushed, vigorous painting is of course a deliberate aesthetic and a Western staple. It is a desperate joy of representation, one we have already met. It is a homage to painting as such, under the guise of perverting it. Through this and urgency comes a greater voluptuousness, more elegance, more carnal and engaging surfaces or states, in more explosive communication with the viewer. In Donne's phrase, there is more *imprinting of the air*.

- mixed media on 50 sheets of paper
- mixed media on panels
- mixed media on plywood
- graphite and burns on plywood
- Mondrian Chrysanthemums and medieval marginalia
- Marginalia plus chrysanthemum and pacific spirals graphite on wood
- Spiral details on postage stamps
- Mosque at Cordoba (Spain) plan
- Cordoba mosque plan (left), Tree of Life plus arteries of an old man (Da Vinci)
- Acrylic and crayon on plastic sheets
- Ink on canvas
- Celtic spirals and spiral underdrawing
- Maori cave painting details on Knossos ground plan
- Oil stick, lino, and acrylic on canvas and wood
- Mixed media on stainless steel, spiralisation – in paint and burning
- Oil/wax crayon and lead pencil on chalkboard
- Oil stick crayon and acrylic on chalkboard
- Stainless steel spiralisation in paint and burning
- Mixed media on chalkboard
- Mixed media on medical chart

(List taken from back catalogue slide series, artist handwriting)





This rudeness is a time-honoured way of ballasting lyrical art, and is therefore an unsurprising feature of Reynolds. It is also a time-honoured way of showing ardour. Each Reynolds painting works hard and with original means to arrest the jaded onlooker. A Reynolds painting is an attempt, by a forcing of two-dimensional means, to make a certain envelope for the viewer. It is a confrontation with this viewer, seeking agitated exchange by physical means.

It is a rudeness that is an aspect of abstraction. Reynolds' vernacular style is part of a wider visual art device that could be called "metaphysical".

The Metaphysical

Because the word is fundamentally important to some artworks, and to Reynolds', (and it is McCahon's greatest singularity), we digress, to discuss it. It may name a particularly strong appellation feature of *New Zealand painting*, at least.

In philosophical discourse *metaphysical* is now a hollowing-out term. It is as mercury on a mirror, seeming to give off so much but in application so slippery, bright with prospects but too vague. *Meta + physical*: "in a different order than can be understood by the senses", and there we are, at best uncertain, conducting an enquiry into the world with seeming irrelevant tools.

(This is a footnote: the above is what has become of the word in common use. In fact *metaphysics* is a key to the spiritual fate of the West, and is at philosophy's durable heart. *Meta* meaning *of or through, by means of or beyond*: *physis*, (a super-set of *physica*), which is that which emerges from itself in an unfolding or opening up; Heideggerian metaphysics, *as emerging abiding sway*; metaphysics - in New Zealand art history it engages our ancient radar in a four-square chime with McCahon's great concepts of *the gate* and *the way through*.)

But the term in the discourse of art knowledge as opposed to the discourse of philosophy has its own history and content,

but it is one rarely used. It most recently came up, like a whale barely touching the surface, in the critical writing of T.S. Eliot, whose eye in turn had caught the little swirl in the Renaissance English writers called the Metaphysical Poets. Prior to Eliot, according to received (and reductive) wisdom, Donne and company were called "Metaphysical " because they employed hard, curiously mechanical images and metaphors in their poems, as in

*" ... the soul is fastened to the body gumphis subtilibus, ' with tiny little nails'. We may smile at the (almost 'metaphysical') quaintness of the image... "*⁴

This is the principal clue: 'metaphysical' was once the term for a curious difference, something discordant in context, a hybrid of the same and the other.

Somewhat following Samuel Johnson (who argued that in the Metaphysical Poets "the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together"), Ol' Possum advanced what now seems his single most powerful art critical intervention. He argued that these poets were *metaphysical* because they participated in a "dissociation of sensibility". Eliot made the actually astonishing observation

*" The poets of the seventeenth century...possessed a mechanism of sensibility which could devour any kind of experience.. In the seventeenth century a dissociation of sensibility set in, from which we have never recovered "*⁶

Tracing this development from the seventeenth century to "our civilisation" he goes on to comment:

*"The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning".*⁶

These few words cannot now be read casually. They are the E=MC2 of twentieth century art discourse. By so defining "metaphysical" Eliot named *the* central concept of art last

century by revealing that that which was held to be so new was so old. The famous Possum was evidently trying to find some term in art knowledge which could name his own brand of non-representational poetry and its origins. *Metaphysical* was the word he took up, to locate the sign of the Modern in the midden of the Renaissance. The word identified delamination, a correctness prised apart, an irruption where something "hard" was felt to be occurring.

Eliot saw (or *foresaw*) the evolution of a new hybrid of abstraction but he did not argue it in avant garde terms. As almost always, Eliot found the attribute in tradition. (Less obviously, Eliot found the attribute too in Dante's ordinary style and syntheses of curious images and local affairs.)

The rehabilitation of metaphysics did not continue beyond Eliot (but *collage* gained currency as a kindred but over-blown term. Collage is not art with wounds, as *metaphysical* is. It is train-smash art).

After Eliot we can say more about *metaphysical*. We could define *metaphysical* as a quality in a work of art. Materially, it is a rupture or jolt, a torn element, a quite concrete separation in the surface of support media that makes lamination or hybridity of material or of idea - or both - directly and surprisingly visible or available. It is a problem in the mechanism of meaning. Simultaneously: the *medium* is made visible, it is caught in operation, and changed. *Metaphysical* is an attribute of sacrifice: a sharp and contrary element in context. It is thus a complicating or problematising component, often under-read as a *defect*. It is often a sudden and surprising code shift in media that draws attention to itself in context and that foregrounds media as an idea, by breaching it. The *meta* equals a translation or a shifting of plane or exponent: *physical* equals a directness of force, either a collision or a literalisation of mark, element, or idea. *Metaphysical* thus viewed is a property attending the thickening, the deconstruction of, the peculiar forcing of materials and differences within the heterogeneity of signs.

Once, metaphysical had a link to Giotto's hesitation.

There is an Annunciation painting in the National Portrait Gallery in London. It is of the medieval period, and portrays a broadly realistic Virgin Mary. Despite, she has an over-painted pale gold dashed line coming down from heaven from over her shoulder in the top left of the painting, across her front, dropping down, down, to terminate in the folds of her lap. That is metaphysical.

The *zips* in Barnett Newman are metaphysical.

The painting of McCahon's **Blind**, on separate panels, on the support of separate literal household blinds, is metaphysical. As is so much else: speech balloons, partial rubouts, written text on the face of paintings, poor materials.

The chrome drawing pins, the tiny circle of hobnails ("*gumphis subtilibus*") in Reynolds **Nebuchadnezzar's Head in a Wave** is likewise metaphysical, even within the context of Reynolds' generally direct and materialised style.



The amalgamation of the knotted plywood and the staining and graphite lines of **The Burning of the Boyd** are metaphysical.



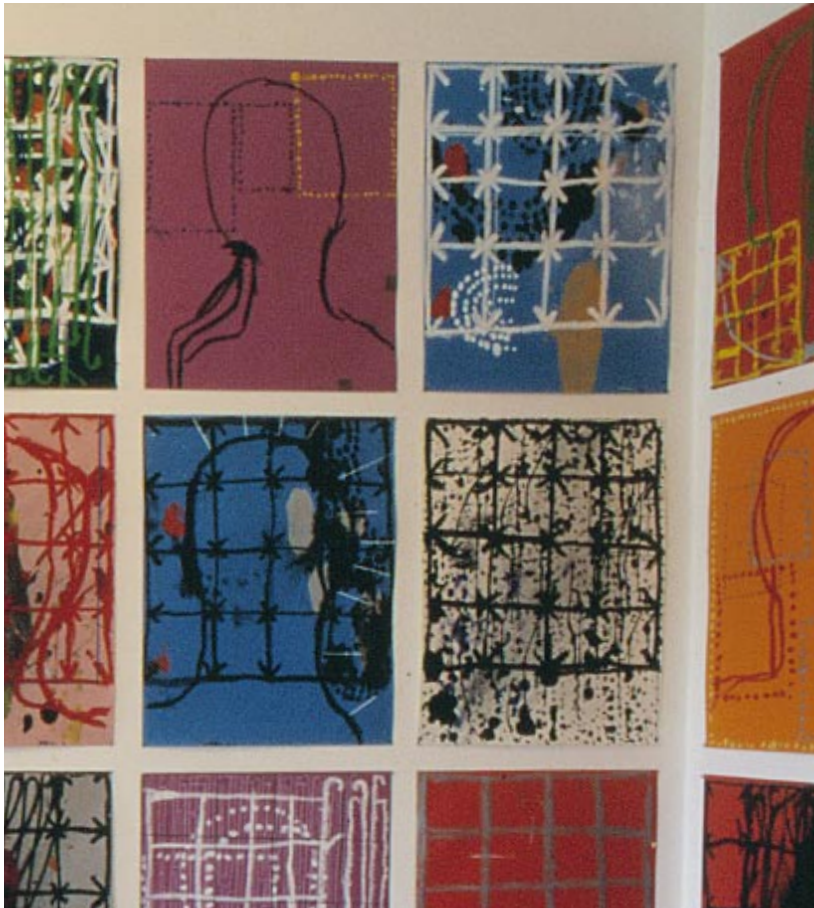
Reynolds' use of writing over painting, or text over picture, is also metaphysical. It is a proximity – the domain of text layered on the domain of painting – common in Reynolds and of course common in New Zealand painting. The **Maxim** works (1996) are examples, to drill into.

These are extraordinary icons. Torn out pages of Giotto images are stuck with drawing pins to their supports and are overwritten with Nietzsche maxims in coloured oilstick. It is likely a rupture to both systems to lay one on the other – as Parma ham, on melon. What is the resulting taste? A new one. A dissociation of sensibility. The effect of one scheme draws correspondence from the other. The visual teases *rhythm* from the written. The written teases *idea* from the visual. Pattern recognition flares, becomes off-balance and searching. There is a lack of closure, a gap, into which the eye crowds in. And this crowding in, teasing and tugging, is the broad chime of where *textual* and *pictorial* go snap at the level of register. Which is often the register of classic narrative, as is so evident



in Reynolds' paintings' titles.

As Ludwig Wittgenstein would say: it is a crossing of pictures.



The **Office of the Dead** (2001) is metaphysical. It reads the literalness of road signs as geometric abstract art, or the other way around, and brings the memory of highway space and speed inside.

And so on.

Although they are strongly related art history terms, *metaphysical* is not the same as *abstract*. It is a different categorical fascination. The distinction between *metaphysical* and the common sense of visual art *abstraction* may be a matter of tolerance for thickness and variety of visual language. I am not sure. The metaphysical is a rupture in, and therefore a revelation or literalisation of, whatever constitutes art's host, "in order to force, to dislocate if necessary,



language into.. meaning". The abstract is a means of clarifying the same host or support, by reducing semiotic abundance and mixture to its fewest terms. *Manifold* is a central idea of the metaphysical. So is polysemy. *Singular* is a central idea of abstraction. So is monosemy. Both strategies are commonly directed at achieving an art of surprising difference *relative to* the viewer's habitual technology of thought.

So how does John Reynolds' art resemble painting's wealthy sign with its distinctive mechanics and phenomenology of meaning? How does Reynolds create works of visual art that disperse its viewers' gaze and criss-cross it with language? He makes painting come to life by rubbing and scratching at it, by inverting it, making, by a kind of mischievous *camera obscura*, an inversion, a rupture of *pushed* surfaces, materials, and many speeding figures. Thus chased, embodied, warmed, thus made vivid, painting in a state between noun and verb comes to be apprehended *largely*. To extend the photographic metaphor - painting comes to be apprehended as that which lies beyond Reynolds' extreme close-up here, blow-up there.

Walter Benjamin somewhere describes beauty as the object of attention on the edge of resemblance. Any Reynolds' work resembles painting on or from its edge. That is the characteristic of Reynolds' art's abstraction. The power of Reynolds' avowal is that it parades with continuous apparent disavowal, with a slyness and evenness of temper. Reynolds ardour is distinctive both because of the *what* that is made luminous through being treated *metaphysically*, and because of the *distance of this resemblance* or the gap across which it is made to travel by indirection and loosened signs - a certain springing in the logic of all these logistics.

References

- (1) John Donne "The Extasie"
- (2) Ezra Pound, *The ABC of Reading*, New Directions, 1960, p104
- (3) The understanding of Medieval or post-Classical thought set out in this essay is heavily indebted to C S Lewis' *The Discarded Image*, Cambridge University Press. 1964.
- (4) Lewis, p. 60.
- (5) Michel Foucault, quoted in Simon During, *Foucault and Literature*, Routledge, 1992, p 77
- (6) T S Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets", 1921

