

Proposal for a materialist arena: painted space

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Abstract: The aim of the paper is to consider how certain forms of painting practice might be understood as sites where the materialism of Henri Lefebvre's conceptualization of occupation in *The Production of Space* gets played out in precise terms. Lefebvre's insistence that occupation is itself spatial production prior to conceived or 'thought' space forms the starting point of the argument. This presentation of occupation pointedly undoes both subject and object binaries and the distinction between container and contained. The careful distinction Lefebvre makes between occupation and a conceived or represented space provides the grounding for his important critique of the 'abstract space' of modernity – space conceived as indifferent container. In relation to the practice of painting the paper develops an analogous distinction between a materialist conception of the space of painting and that space as a conceived space, or as Lefebvre would put it a 'representation of space'. This is considered initially in relation to the shift away from the use of geometric perspective in early Modernist painting and eventually in relation to the abstract paintings of Gerhard Richter of the 1970-80's. These paintings operate between a mimicked photographic space which is homogenous, systematized and coherent and a more heterogeneous form of 'painted space'.

I. Introduction

I come to this discussion of occupation as someone outside of the discipline of architecture and so I will begin by articulating my motivations. Although the disciplinary context of this conference is ostensibly architecture and its related fields, my discussion will be focused on the question of how certain forms of painting might be understood as a site where the materialism of Henri Lefebvre's presentation of occupation in *The Production of Space*¹ gets played out in quite specific ways. Non-representational painting is understood by many to occupy an anachronistic position today within the field of contemporary art. However, in practice and in theory it has persisted as a healthy terrain of enquiry. This continued 'life' needs to be understood away from any conception of linear historical trajectories and instead in terms of the significance of what gets played out within these modes of artistic practice. What I will attempt to establish here is that in their resistance to unifying pictorial and representational systems and in the way that divisions between subject and object, container and contained are put under pressure, the formal experimentation of particular non-representational modes of practice find significance in light of Lefebvre's materialist conception of occupation. In this respect the specifically spatial drama that is played out within the arena of non-representational painting can be understood to hold a resonance and meaning outside its own delimited frame, beyond the 'merely formal'.

II. In the "Spatial Architectonics" section of *The Production of Space* Lefebvre refers to an example of the ritualized movements of monks walking in the space of a cloister. In this context he remarks,

"Organized gestures, which is to say ritualized and codified gestures, are not simply performed in "physical" space, in the space of bodies. Bodies themselves generate spaces, which are produced by and for their gestures."²

At one and the same time space here is described as being produced by the monk's gestures and the space produced makes these gestures possible. The gestural act is at once subject

and object. If 'the connection between space as "available" and space as "occupied" ... has nothing simple or obvious about it',³ the complexity alluded to can be considered in temporal terms. It is not the case that space (as container) is available and then one occupies it (as content). Rather, the occupation produces it as available – produces and reproduces it.

Lefebvre draws initially on Leibniz to lay the foundations for his materialist conception of spatial production. For Leibniz, 'absolute space', as space in-itself, content-less and pure 'container' may exist but it is strictly *indiscernible*. In order to introduce orientation into absolute space differentiation must of necessity be inscribed – an axes, left and right, etc. The argument that follows is a precisely aimed:

"This does not mean, however, that Leibniz espouses the 'subjectivist' thesis according to which the observer and the measure together constitute the real. To the contrary, what Leibniz means to say is that it is necessary for space to be *occupied*. What, then, occupies space? A body – not bodies in general, nor corporeality, but a specific body, a body capable of indicating direction by a gesture, of defining rotation by turning round, or demarcating and orienting space."⁴

At issue is the question of whether it is a mental act that gives space its properties, the discriminations that make it 'discernible'. This is the idealist or subjectivist thesis. The materialist thesis, Lefebvre's thesis, is that the body possesses and produces differentiations of itself – differences between left and right, between high and low, between its central axis and periphery and its capacity to rotate around this central axis. Herein the body in itself produces space as discernable and qualitative:

"Such a space would embody 'properties' (dualities, symmetries, etc) which could not be imputed either to the human mind or to any transcendent spirit but only to the actual 'occupation' of space... that is, according to the sequence of productive operations involved."⁵

In this sense occupation is spatial production already at this elemental level. At the same time that the body occupies space as a material thing, it produces that space as possessing 'sense' not grounded in the mind but in the body itself. As Lefebvre says of the spider in its web: 'it's "here and now" (in Hegel's sense) transcends the realm of "thingness", for its embraces relationships and movements'.⁶

I have focused here on the philosophical framework of Lefebvre's materialism because in his careful insistence on distinguishing occupation from a conceived or represented space, Lefebvre provides the grounding for his critique of the 'abstract space' of modernity. This, in turn, is relevant to the discipline of Western painting where geometric perspective, a key representational figure of abstract space for Lefebvre, is a dominant system of so-called 'naturalistic representation' from the Renaissance to the 19th century.

Abstract space, as Lefebvre defines it, is itself a container model of space. It refers to a conception of space understood as generic – space in general, pure unchanging medium and not connected or shaped in itself by a content. As such, it is the model of an indifferent container. It is also indifferent in the sense that, as a homogenous and isotropic medium, it involves no qualitative differences and, hence, one part is exchangeable with another without loss. As Lefebvre describes it, '[any] part of the container can receive anything. This indifference becomes separation, in that contents and container do not impinge upon one

another in any way.’ He continues his description in operative terms: ‘The constitution of such a logic of separation entails and justifies a strategy of separation.’⁷ In other words, this mode of representation not only represents or conceives of space, it begins to act upon it. This is the central critique of the abstract space of modernity.

If we return to Leibniz, Leibniz had shown that an isomorphic space is conceivable as a representation alone; it is in practice, strictly speaking, indiscernible. Space conceived as homogenous and unchanging does not represent experienced reality. The moment space is occupied it is differentiated and rendered qualitative, complex and, in fact, temporally imbricated. However, as a dominant representation of space in modernity, abstract space is clearly operative within reality (and Lefebvre would argue that it is violently so). The space of modernity is not, then, homogenous in reality but as a force operating upon reality in the name of rationality, abstract space has homogeneity as its goal. Lefebvre’s main critique of abstract space and those institutions and powers complicit with it within modernity is that it entails a confusion and conflation of a representation of space with a spatial practice, in other words, a conflation of a mental or technical conception of space with the *real*. Whereas representations of space are by nature coherent and systematic, spatial practice is not. This conflation and confusion of the mental and the real can, critically, become a justification for a repression of complexity and difference.

III. In relation to the practice of painting I aim to draw an analogous distinction between a materialist conception of the space of painting and that space as a conceived space, or as Lefebvre would put it a ‘representation of space’. What I have to say of abstract painting and space within abstract painting in fact holds for any form of painting that does not operate with any kind of consistent underlying representational armature. I use non-representational painting as a model because it can, and often does, make this issue so explicit. With the collapse of the representational imperative in painting after the birth of photography and the rise of modernism in painting, perspective is dispensed with as a dominant representational system. The movement towards abstraction in painting is not, however, as my argument should make clear, a simple movement towards abstract space in Lefebvre’s terms. It is a pertinent question whether or not the kinds of visual reduction early modern painting engaged with actually involved a concurrent reduction of complexity in spatial terms? This ultimately is a question of spatial construction. If, following Lefebvre, a conflation of the mental and the material involves a repression of heterogeneity, early modern abstraction is, in fact, significant in its questioning, consciously or not, of such a conflation. This is a matter that can hold a sustained relevance to painting as a site of practice today.

Lefebvre sets out a ‘conceptual triad’: *spatial practice* (the practiced space of a society: the space it produces and reproduces) – *representations of space* (space as conceived) – *representational spaces* (symbolized space: connected to art, these are the spaces of affect). While the perspectival grid operates within the field of art where it dominates within the discipline of painting from the 15th to the 19th century, it falls under the category of a ‘representation of space’ in Lefebvre’s schema. It is space as systematically conceived and, as such, it is highly coherent. Based on the grid, geometric perspective is also, not coincidentally, an exemplary model of abstract space. In practice, as a coherent and pre-given spatial framework, it dominates over what is represented within it. The possibility of any reciprocal interaction between container and contained within painted space is negated; its whole logic is that it stabilizes that relationship.

Merleau-Ponty's comments apropos Cezanne's painting are of note in contrast:

"[He] came to find that inside this space, a box or container too small for them, ... things began to move, colour against colour; they began to modulate in instability. Thus we must seek space and its content together."⁸

Cezanne, of course, was one of the early pioneers to dispense with perspective and the resulting instability would provide the productive core to one of the key painting practices of early modernity. When the coherence of the perspectival framework is removed in Cezanne, individual brushstrokes operate instead as material 'events' orientating themselves spatially in relation to each other, in relation to the painting's surface and in relation to its frame. In this way space is constructed materially in act. This is a highly complex and unstable process and as Merleau-Ponty points out, space and content are not conceptualized separately here but are realized as one.

In a later instance within modernist painting, for example, Miro's *Painting* (1927)⁹, where the visual vocabulary is more pared down and there is a more dramatic shift away from all representational armatures, it is again very clear that the work's spatial framework is not given in advance. Every element that is introduced into the painting's field impacts upon it to produce its space. In this case we may have a simple evenly painted ground, but it is what Deleuze and Guattari¹⁰ would describe as a qualitative multiplicity in that the ground is given as unstable and is fundamentally responsive to any inscriptions brought to it. Insofar as any additional element introduced to the work can radically recast its spatial field, the ground of Miro's *Painting* is not a 'prior' space. Here again, container and content are bound. Whereas Lefebvre describes a 'logic of separation' as an operative principle of abstract space, an unstable logic of interaction is the productive principle at play here.

The distinction described above is centered on a very different conception of what the field of the painting is understood to be in spatial terms. This is something that is played out and dramatized across a series of paintings by Gerhard Richter through the 1970's and the 1980's. Richter produced two quite separate but related series of paintings in the 70's and the 80's, the first of which I will call the 'pure photo-abstracts' and which can be understood as quite strictly conceptually motivated paintings. The second group of abstract paintings also incorporates a mimicked photographic space but not uniformly as do the pure photo-abstracts. The pure photo-abstracts of the 1970's are important paintings insofar as in them two meanings of the term, 'representation of space' converge: firstly, in Lefebvre's original sense of a 'conceived' space (in the case of Richter, the allusion is to a technologically mediated space) and, secondly, in the sense of space-as-represented, that is, a re-presented 'world'. In the photo-abstracts of the 1970's, for example, *Abstract Painting* (1977)¹¹, gestural abstract paintings are submitted to a technical process whereby the visual quality of the image is transformed to mimic that of a photographic image. In quite precise ways, the kinds of tonal shifts, coloration, variation of focus and blurring typical of the photographic image are imposed upon an abstract painting. The transformation of the painted surface from a series of discontinuous marks – the site of facture – to a seamless continuous surface is one of the notable effects of these paintings. Through a technical painterly process that aims to mimic a technological process a dramatic artificial unification of the image is performed. Via this mimicry Richter brings a system to the space of an abstract painting that has all the clarity and transparency of what Lefebvre would term a 'representation of space'. It is as if a coherent

predetermined spatial framework dictates the space of the image. What happens here unmistakably as well is that the painting surface is denied as material to return unequivocally to its metaphorical status as 'window'. We read the image as if we are looking through the surface of the painting into the image as a represented world, the second sense of a 'representation of space'. It is interesting to consider whether the photo-abstracts raised the question of the window metaphor in respect of abstract painting in general for Richter and whether this impacted upon the development of the later abstracts – in particular in their very pointed refusal of any kind of unity.

The trajectory of modernist painting was charted programmatically (and infamously) by the American critic Clement Greenberg. Greenberg traces the development of modernist painting as a gradual progression and advancement toward a reflexive recognition of the integrity of painting's support in the two-dimensional picture plane – in other words, flatness as the 'truth' of painting. This is not, however, a simple flatness for Greenberg. Rather, it is a form of flatness that paradoxically allows for a more precise kind of spatial illusion. This is an illusion that does not mimic space in the world, sculpturally and as a body would know it but is, instead, an illusion of space '... into which one can... travel through only with the eye'.¹² Along with the sensory division of labor at play, the fact that Greenberg's theorization of a strictly optical form of illusion returned painting to a continuity with the 'window' model of the image so structurally tied to geometric perspective (even if the framework itself had been rejected) has been widely critically commented on.¹³ Despite the radical differences described above between the two traditions, an ideal of pictorial unity does still haunt many modernist practices and this forms the critical link. Geometric perspective establishes the concept of the image as a continuous whole both spatially and temporally and this is what carries through largely into modernist abstraction – hence the capacity for the window model to still haunt it, despite its protests. For Steinberg the question of what is at stake in the window metaphor of the picture plane even in an abstract painting is ultimately a question of representation – through the unity of the pictorial field, the visual field itself is re-presented: 'even in Picasso's Cubist collages, where the Renaissance worldspace concept almost breaks down, there is still a harking back to implied acts of vision, to something that was once actually seen'.¹⁴

Steinberg himself pointed to the notion of the 'flatbed' in the paintings of Robert Rauschenberg from the 50's and the 60's¹⁵ as a radical alternative to the model of space-as-represented in painting. The significance of the flat, horizontal working surface in Rauschenberg's work is understood to define a move from the vertical, phenomenological posture of seeing to the horizontality of the act of gathering and accumulating information: "any flat documentary surface that tabulates information is a relevant analogue of his picture plane... And it seemed at times that Rauschenberg's work surface stood for the mind itself—dump, reservoir, switching center..."¹⁶ Steinberg's analyses do ultimately move the 'space' of painting to the opposite extreme where the painting surface becomes exclusively the zone of an accumulation of information, whether visual or textual. Because I want to hold to Lefebvre's insistence on a corporeal grounding for spatiality, this is not the argument that I will take up here. However, Steinberg does raise interesting questions regarding what constitutes, or can constitute, 'space' in the domain of painting if we are rigorous in challenging representational models (in both of the forms raised above).

'The horizontality of the [flat]bed relates to 'making' as the vertical of the Renaissance picture plane related to seeing'.¹⁷ This distinction between act and vision as it pertains to a

conception of the picture plane returns the discussion back to the question of occupation as spatial production. For Lefebvre the laws of space are ‘...laws of discrimination in space...’¹⁸: to produce space is to produce a series of differences. Space takes on ‘sense’ and orientation through a series of qualitative discriminations: relations, directionality, demarcation and hierarchies. To go back to my earlier terminology, these spaces are produced by and for the bodies that generate them. While not outside the scope of a visual comprehension, this conception of spatial production is absolutely distinct from the representational logic of the visual described above. The order and sense of a painting from this perspective is grounded neither in a strictly visual order nor is it the product of a series of mental acts but, is rather, a concrete production of relations – a working through in act. Like the horizontality of the flatbed, the painting’s surface might be understood as an arena or site where the space of the painting is performed or played out rather than space-as-represented. However, unlike the flatbed, where the status of the painting surface is more that of a generalized receptacle, here the space of the painting is always in a process of production whereby it is made specific and qualitative. If, for Lefebvre, occupation produces space as available, he is close to Heidegger in tying the word space to the term ‘room’, *raum* in German, with its connections to the idea of ‘making room for...’¹⁹ In both cases, ‘space’ is transformed from the generic – extension –, to the specific – to ‘spaces’.

Richter’s abstracts of the 1980’s are difficult paintings. They embody a kind of refusal to ‘work’ as abstract paintings in the conventional terms of their time. These paintings do not unify; they do not establish their own identity as integral wholes. A multitude of different modes of being in respect of spatial relations and an often jolting discontinuity of languages is established which works in conflicting directions and does not come to resolution. For example, in *Isa* (1980)²⁰ the lucid visual instantaneity we find articulated in the pure photo-abstracts of the 70’s is confronted and contradicted with a space that is articulated in explicitly gestural terms, that is, which temporally traces itself across the painting’s surface. No resolution is proposed; they remain in contradiction. *Abstract Painting* (1984)²¹ is an especially perplexing and interesting painting. It masterfully constructs space optically through colour but this is counter-posed by a strong appeal to tactile sensation. The tactility of the surface gestures of the painting construct space differently, however, than do the marks that define the cylindrical forms. And, again, planar and volumetric spaces collide and create a sense of discontinuity across the whole of the painting. What I am describing of the abstracts of the 1980’s is a kind of drama where a wager is set to see what painting becomes if ‘space-as-represented’ is counteracted with a ruthless rigour. It is a risky game because the danger is that one ends with pure undifferentiated chaos - ‘bad painting’. These are risks that Richter embraces with a palpable and fairly unrestrained enthusiasm. It is exactly the determination to sustain a multiplicity of forces and logics that I am speculating is Richter’s strategy to prevent a representational logic from slipping back to overtake the paintings. In the heterogeneity of the movements involved, the painting resists coalescing into a unified ‘picture’. It asserts itself instead a material and a materialist site. One of the important and significant aspects of this is that the visual here is one aspect of ‘painted space’ amongst others – touch, movement, time and gesture.

IV. Conclusion

For Lefebvre ‘abstract space’ involves the conflation or confusion of the conceived (the mental) with the material, in other words, a conflation of a conceived representation of space with those spaces produced through the occupation of space. And this inevitably involves a

repression of the complexity and heterogeneity of the space of occupation itself. Within the narrower domain of painting, this issue can be seen to find itself played out within the problem of how the 'space' of painting is understood. In practice, early Modernist painting immediately and inevitably questions this conflation when it dispenses with the representational armature of the perspectival system: the dualism of container and contained collapses to produce a radical kind of reciprocity between visual event and the spatial field. The abstract paintings of Gerhard Richter of the 1970's and 80's revisit the same question but mediated initially by the specific question of the historical impact of photographic space on painting. The work that eventually emerges in the 1980's involves both a critical questioning of paintings status as a 'representation of space' and an intensive interrogation of the possibility of painted space as a heterogeneous field – inhabited, 'made', acted out through painting, rather than depicted.

Endnotes

- ¹ Henri Lefebvre (1991) *The Production of Space* trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, Blackwell, Oxford.
- ² Lefebvre, p. 216
- ³ Lefebvre, p. 170
- ⁴ Lefebvre, pp. 169-170
- ⁵ Lefebvre, p. 171
- ⁶ Lefebvre, pp. 173-174
- ⁷ Lefebvre, p. 170.
- ⁸ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice (1964) "Eye and Mind" in *The primacy of perception, and other essays on phenomenological psychology, the philosophy of art, history and politics*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, p.76. For image link:
<http://www.artandarchitecture.org.uk/images/gallery/8dae1f91.html>
- ⁹ image link: <http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ViewWork?workid=9585&tabview=image>
- ¹⁰ Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (1987) *A Thousand Plateaus*. trans. Brian Massumi, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, pp. 483-484
- ¹¹ image link: <http://www.gerhard-richter.com/art/paintings/abstracts/detail.php?6187>
- ¹² Greenberg, C. (1993) "Modernist Painting" in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism Volume 4: Modernism with a Vengeance 1957-1969*, Ed. John O'Brian, University of Chicago Press, London, p 90
- ¹³ Krauss, Rosalind E. (1993) *The Optical Unconscious*, MIT Press, London; Steinberg, Leo. (1972) "Other Criteria" in *Other Criteria: Confrontations with 20th Century Art*, Oxford University Press, London; Judd, D. (1975) "Specific Objects" in *Complete Writings 1959-1975*, The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax.
- ¹⁴ Steinberg, p. 82
- ¹⁵ image link: http://www.studio-international.co.uk/studio-images/rauschenberg/untitled2_b.asp
- ¹⁶ Steinberg, p. 88.
- ¹⁷ Steinberg, p. 90
- ¹⁸ Lefebvre, p. 170
- ¹⁹ Heidegger, M. (2001) "Building, Dwelling, Thinking" in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, Perennial Classics, New York, p.356.
- ²⁰ image link: <http://www.gerhard-richter.com/art/paintings/abstracts/detail.php?6282>
- ²¹ image link: <http://www.gerhard-richter.com/art/paintings/abstracts/detail.php?4967>

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