

THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

desperate optimism

A Written Accompaniment to the Thesis Exhibition

by

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ABSTRACT

My work, and this paper, is hinged on the thesis that one way of discussing artwork is as a dialogue between the referential and material components. Objects, and artworks, have qualities in themselves, such as colour, weight, and dimension, and they can also be discussed in terms of what they are not, such as reference to the world, and to the artist. I have used the example of photography as the paragon of representation on the one side, and I quote extensively from Clement Greenberg to illustrate the materialist position. Once I have established the conflicting nature of the relationship, I try to illustrate how this dialogue forms a more sophisticated association that is first apparent, and how, in my work, I employ various devices to push the envelope of that association.

The title of this paper comes from John Berger's novel A Painter of Our Time, and seemed appropriate.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Approval Page.....	ii
Abstract.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	iv
INTRODUCTION.....	1
WHY.....	4
A Brief History of Western Aesthetics.....	4
Kant.....	4
Bell.....	4
High Modernism and the Cult of Anti-Representation.....	7
Greenberg.....	7
Natural Attitude.....	12
The Platonic Realm of Ideal Forms.....	15
Reference versus Materiality.....	19
French New Wave Cinema.....	20
Brecht.....	21
HOW.....	25
Verfremdungseffekt.....	25
Monotony of Content Through Subject Matter.....	25
Nude.....	26
Art versus Pornography.....	27
Monotony of Content Through Installation.....	31
Space as the Illusion, and the Grid.....	32
Cropping, Scale and the Mark.....	34
Drawing Versus Painting.....	35
The Staging of Representation.....	37
Time in the Maintenance of the Illusion.....	40
Type.....	42
CONCLUSION.....	44
In the Theatre and in the World.....	44
ENDNOTES.....	47
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	50

INTRODUCTION

...one of the things a scientific community acquires with a paradigm is a criterion for choosing problems that, while the paradigm is taken for granted, can be assumed to have solutions. To a great extent these are the only problems that the community will admit as scientific or encourage its members to undertake. Other problems, including many that had been previously standard, are rejected as metaphysical, as the concern of another discipline, or sometimes as just too problematic to be worth the time. A paradigm can, for that matter, even insulate the community from those socially important problems that are not reducible to puzzle form, because they cannot be stated in terms of the conceptual and instrumental tools the paradigm supplies.

Thomas Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions¹

My work is grounded in my position between two concurrent fields of research. The first being my Undergraduate training at what could be described as a Modernist institution at the University of Alberta. The second being my Graduate experience at the University of Calgary, which could be described as having a more Conceptual, or anti-Modernist atmosphere. Between the two I worked in the museum/gallery world at an institution renowned for its collection of large-scale, abstract works, that is desperately trying to shuck its Modernist reputation. A gallery that is, as it were, embarrassed by its parentage. It is not surprising that the thesis of my work has a relationship to both these camps.

All objects, including artworks, can be discussed in terms of their material qualities, such as height, weight and colour. These qualities exist regardless of context. Objects can also be discussed in terms of what they are not, that is, in terms of what they reference beyond

themselves, and the context they find themselves in. A chair, for example, has physical qualities that someone from another planet, seeing a chair for the first time, could confirm (weight, height, etc.). These we could refer to as the *material qualities*. Secondly, a chair also has attributes that are defined relative to its function, to fashion, and to our weight and the shape of our bottoms that the visitor from another world could not (probably) divine from the artifact. For simplicity we could refer to these as *referential attributes*.

Paintings also can be looked at in terms of these two categories of attributes which could be described as an arena of discussion within the picture frame, versus an arena of discussion that extends beyond the picture frame.

This paper is hinged on this idea: that any artwork can be discussed and evaluated in two categories, one which deals with referential/representational aspects, and how it is contextualized; and secondly, in terms of the material aspects. Paintings have qualities in themselves, such as colour, weight, dimension, etc., and can also be discussed in terms of reference, the area outside of the frame, such as reference to the model, to the artist, to the contextualization of the work within the scope of Art History, etc. One could, in this system, simplify the discussion to material qualities, (the 'isness'), and referential elements (the 'aboutness').

The first section of this support paper (**why**) frames this dichotomy of referential and material. Beginning from a Modernist stance, I have placed them, in opposition, at either end

of my discussion. After explaining the High Modernist, or anti-representational, position I discuss the concept of *ideal* representation as exemplified by the photograph and the mythology of objectivity through mechanical reproduction. I also explore how the argument has been couched, by both camps, in moral and ethical terms. The latter part of this paper (**how**) is specific to my work in the exhibition Knock Loudly: how it falls within the spectrum described above, and the devices used to ‘playfully’ explore the relationship between the referential and material attributes, within the critical model I have described. The thesis of my painting, having established the conflicting nature of the relationship, is the *moment of transition* between the two camps, or, to borrow a metaphor from Lynda Nead, the point where the two spheres, the referential and the material, touch, intersect and blur.

WHY

A Brief History of Western Aesthetics

The questions of taste and beauty in the western philosophical tradition can be traced back to the Platonic concept of ideal forms. Plato claimed that objects we encounter in sensory experience are copies of the absolute forms which lie beyond our senses. The distinction between the ideal and the actual, between the mind and body, also formed the framework for Enlightenment thought.

Modern European aesthetics is generally held to have its origins in the eighteenth century and attempts to provide universal principles for the classification, judgement and experience of beauty and especially of works of art.

In the writings of Rene Descartes (1596 - 1650) reason is said to be the only true basis of judgement, and the body is the source of all obscurity and confusion. As body, we are unable to make basic distinctions between self and the world.

Immanuel Kant (1724 - 1804) sought to distinguish sensory from contemplative pleasures. The form/matter opposition governs the whole of his *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement* (1790). According to Kant, although the pleasure experienced in the beautiful is immediate, it involves a reflection on the object and this sets it apart from mere sensuous pleasures like eating and drinking. Aesthetic pleasure is more refined because it involves the

‘higher’ faculty of contemplation.

Since the Earl of Shaftesbury (1671 - 1713) it has been a staple of aesthetic theory that selfish, or interested desires, of which the desire for possession is paradigm, are destructive to the aesthetic experience. Some theorists have even concluded that selfish or practical desires are wholly incompatible with the aesthetic process.² In Kant’s system the individual object is detached in aesthetic judgement and considered for its own sake. The art object should serve no ulterior purpose, and the observer’s desires and ambitions held in abeyance in the act of contemplation. This is the concept of *disinterested contemplation*.

Kant also distinguished a ‘free’ from ‘dependent’ beauty, the first derived without the aid of conceptualization, the second requiring an interest in the material existence of the object. For Kant the judgement of ‘dependent’ beauty is necessarily less pure or open to abstraction than the conception of ‘free’ beauty. Examples of ‘free’ beauty can be found in nature, but they are rarely seen in art. Art usually requires some conceptualization of the subject expressed. This system establishes a hierarchy of aesthetic experience. As far as possible, judgement should be free of interest in relation to both the material condition of the individual object and the aims and desires of the viewer, for it is only through this liberation of individual preference, this disinterested contemplation, that a judgement can be claimed as universally valid for all rational beings.³ The *Critique* was fundamental in the formation of European aesthetics and its influence is still discernible in art theory and art criticism today.

One narrative within Art History, and the evolution of aesthetics, is the history of the subject. Throughout most of the recorded history of western visual art religious influence and imagery predominate. This was the case in the art of ancient Greece and Rome, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance. Since the Renaissance, however, the religious theme as subject has waned. The end of the Nineteenth century and the advent of Impressionism saw the virtual disappearance of the religious subject from mainstream art. With more secular themes in art, and the diminishing importance of the subject, the still-life, landscape, figure and genre scenes became increasingly a pretext for the study of form: *art for art's sake*. The history of the subject can, post-Renaissance, be discussed in terms of the subject - material relationship.

The newly acquired freedom of expression and subject for artists led to increased manipulation and distortion of objects and, eventually, to the destruction of the illusionist pictorial space in the Cubist works on the early Twentieth century. To eliminate representation it was not enough to eliminate the portrayal of identifiable objects in a illusory three-dimensional space; to eliminate representation you must eliminate the illusory space itself. From this perspective Modernist critics in the second half of the Twentieth century were able to show very clearly the gradual flattening of the picture space from the late academic art of the mid-1800's to the abstract art of the 1950-60's. Cezanne himself noticed the effect in impressionist paintings. From Cezanne the path is easily discernable to the Cubists, and finally the collapse of the 'space' within the picture. The materialist position of art as object is elevated, while the imagery, and referential component is diminished.

Clive Bell and Roger Fry were influential early twentieth century British thinkers who belonged to the Bloomsbury circle of artists and intellectuals. Both men developed a notion of aesthetic form as a means of defending the Post-Impressionists. It is from Bell and Fry that we have the term 'formalism'. Clive Bell had this to say about representation:

"Let no one imagine that representation is bad in itself; a realistic form may be significant, in its place as part of the design, as an abstract. But if a representative form has value, it is as form, not as representation. The representative element in a work of art may or may not be harmful; always it is irrelevant." ⁴

The ascendancy of the material concerns and the waning of the importance of representation would culminate in the work of the Abstract Expressionists of post-war America.

High Modernism and the Cult of Anti-Representation

Modernist critics put forth that the true measure of the success of a work of art lies in those qualities that transcended reference and imagery. The material qualities were thought to be the path to purity. In the case of painting this meant a refinement of the qualities of the medium, colour and flatness. This progressive reading of modern art posited a direct line of influence running from Impressionism to Post-Impressionism and on to Cubism, Constructivism, Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism. ⁵ Clement Greenberg, the foremost Modernist critic after the Second World War, characterized this direct line as artistic 'self-criticism':

"The unique and proper area of competence of each art coincided with all that was unique in the nature of its medium. The task of self-criticism became to eliminate from the specific effects of each art any and every effect that might conceivably be borrowed from or by the

medium of any other art. Thus would each art be rendered “pure” and in its “purity” find the guarantee of its standards of quality as well as independence. “Purity” meant self-definition, and the enterprise of self-criticism in the arts became one of self-definition with a vengeance.”⁶

Like Kant, Bell, and Fry, Greenberg interprets aesthetic autonomy to be largely antithetical to representation:

“No one has yet been able to demonstrate that representation as such adds or takes away anything from the merit of a picture or statue. The presence or absence of a recognizable image has no more to do with value in painting or sculpture than the presence or absence of a libretto has to do with value in music...That a picture gives us things to identify, as well as a complex of shapes and colours to behold, does not mean, necessarily, that it gives us more as *art*.”⁷

In 1961 he describes the importance of the material versus referential qualities of artwork:

“...Realistic, illusionistic art had dissembled the medium, using art to conceal art. Modernism used art to call attention to art. The limitations that constitute the medium of painting - the flat surface, the shape of the support, the properties of the pigments - were treated by the old masters as negative factors that could be acknowledged only implicitly or indirectly. Modernist painting has come to regard these same limitations as positive factors that are to be acknowledged openly. Manet’s paintings became the first Modernist ones by virtue of the frankness with which they declare the surface on which they were painted.”⁸

According to Greenberg, ‘realistic’ painting ‘dissembled’ and ‘concealed art’. Even the term ‘illusionistic’ smacks of sham and charlatanism. While Modernist works were said to be ‘positive’, ‘open’ and ‘frank’. The premise being that work strictly concerned with those characteristics that were intrinsic to paint, or sculpture, were, by definition, more ‘honest’. Greenberg framed the argument in ethical terms, placing representation and reference *in opposition* to purity and honesty in art.

One history of western art is that of the pendulum of the relationship of image/reference versus the materiality, peaking one way in the perspectival, religious imagery of the Renaissance, and the other in the media-insistent work of the Abstract Expressionists in the 1950's and 60's.

The premise that the strength of artwork is to be found outside of representation, the High Modernist position, forms the philosophical underpinnings of the work of someone like abstract steel Edmonton sculptor Peter Hīde. It is in the material qualities that the strength of his large-scale sculpture lie. The metal, the rust and the sense of weight and balance, on a basic level, are compelling. The materiality satisfies an almost instinctive first impression, and our experience lends itself to the formalist argument of qualities of art. Sir Kenneth Clark, in Looking at Pictures, describes this initial impact of a work of art as immediate:

“First I see the picture as a whole, and long before I recognize the subject I am conscious of a general impression, which depends on the relationship of tone and area, shape and colour. This impact is immediate, and I can truthfully say that I would experience it on a bus going at thirty miles an hour if a great picture were in a shop window.”⁹

Peter Hīde would contend that the strength of his work, the *art*, would be found in the form, and the celebration of the materials.

In contrast, Duchamp's work, Fountain, is grounded in the referential. Fountain was first submitted to, and rejected by, the New York Society of Artists in 1917. Janis Mink describes the circumstances of the 'creation':

“Fountain was a urinal, the kind of urinal that, when installed in a public bathroom, can only be used by standing urinating men. Without a doubt, it was a mirage of standing urinating men

and other spicy possibilities that arose before the eyes of the society's hanging committee when confronted by it. Duchamp had bought the urinal and simply placed it on its flat side so that it would stand 'erect'. He signed the base, right next to the hole for the plumbing: R.Mutt. Although the signature was inspired by the comic-strip characters Mutt and Jeff, and the 'R.' stood for 'Richard', French slang for 'moneybags', the hanging committee probably thought first of a filthy cur. But Duchamp was also playing on the real name of the company he bought it from, the 'Mott Works' in New York, which he changed slightly, in the manner typical of him.

Fountain never made it into the exhibition (the first problem would have been the embarrassing question of the height of its placement), although R.Mutt had paid his six dollars to show. It was also not mentioned in the catalogue. Strangely enough, Katherine Dreier, who was familiar with Duchamp's other readymades and a member of the hanging committee, didn't recognize his gesture behind the pseudonym. Complaints were made. Walter Arensberg was in on the prank and offered to buy Fountain to support the artist, but it couldn't be found. After a while the urinal was discovered behind a partition wall, where it had waited out the entire duration of the exhibition. Alfred Stieglitz was persuaded to take an almost ennobling photograph of Fountain, which appeared in the second issue of The Blind Man, a magazine published by Duchamp, Beatrice Wood and H.P.Roche. There, R.Mutt's case was defended with feigned innocence: 'Now Mr.Mutt's Fountain is not immoral, that is absurd, no more than a bathtub is immoral. It is a fixture that you see everyday in plumbers' shop windows. Whether Mr.Mutt with his own hands made the Fountain or not has no importance. He CHOSE it. He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view - created a new thought for that object.'¹⁰

The works of both artists, Hide and Duchamp, can be discussed in terms of the twin criteria set out above, although at opposite ends. To discuss the referential aspects of Peter Hide's sculpture, what it reminds us of, its role as commodity, and the politics of Abstract Expressionism, would be, *to Peter*, missing the point of the work (with, perhaps, the exception of how the work is situated within the Modernist evolution described above). Alternately, Fountain can be discussed in purely in terms of the weight, height, colour, and formal aesthetic qualities, but again that is not the strength of the work, nor the intention of the artist.

If tested, Fountain would undoubtedly have nearly the exact same material qualities it did when it was first presented (weight, colour, size, etc.). The referential attributes, and the context however, have dramatically changed since Duchamp first submitted the work. We know Fountain, in fact, to be an important work *because* it changed the art world, that is, the way it is contextualized, in a fundamental way. Someone today displaying a urinal in an exhibition space does so in a completely different context than Duchamp. The relationship to the world, and importance to the art world is completely different and, it could be reasonably put forth lesser, than Fountain. It could be argued that Art History is a record of works that changed the contextualization of art in a basic way, pushing the envelope of the definition. Works that, although brilliant in other ways, supported the political status quo of the art world have dropped from the public consciousness.

On the subject of referentiality versus representation, Meyer Shapiro, in a 1937 response to Alfred Barr Jr. and Cubism and Abstract Art , wrote:

“The logical opposition of realistic and abstract art by which Barr explains the more recent change rests on two assumptions about the nature of painting, common in writing about abstract art: that representation is a passive mirroring of things and is therefore essentially non-artistic, and that abstract art, on the other hand, is a purely aesthetic activity, unconditioned by objects and based on its own internal laws...

These views are thoroughly one-sided and rest on a mistaken idea of what representation is. There is no passive, ‘photographic’ representation in the sense described; the scientific elements of representation in older art - perspective, autonomy, light and shade - are ordering principles and expressive means as well as devices of rendering. All rendering of objects, no matter how exact they may seem, even photographs, proceed from values, methods and viewpoints which somehow shape the image and often determine its contents. On the other hand, there is no ‘pure art’, unconditioned by experience; all fantasy and formal construction, even the random scribbling of the hand, are shaped by experience and by nonaesthetic concerns.”¹¹

Shapiro makes two observations. First, that there is no pure representation in which the artist ‘channels’ the view of the world with no input or effect. Secondly, abstract art cannot escape the ‘hand’ of the artist and attain the pure status. Critic Arthur Danto concurs:

“No doubt, in the interest of illusion, painters in the past at times sought to render their surfaces invisible, or absolutely transparent, putting the viewer in immediate contact with the scene depicted as if through air. No doubt again, in the interest of anti-illusion, painters sought to render pictorial space invisible by treating paint so opaquely that the question of seeing through it would not arise. But the most polished surface remains a surface, while the flattest surface implies depth.”¹²

Abstract artists (and critics) cannot claim the moral high ground of complete objectivity and disinterested contemplation. What both Shapiro and Danto note is that the relationship between the subject-matter and the ‘surface-matter’ is more complex.

The ‘Natural Attitude’

The opposite side of the materialist/referential spectrum enunciated by Modernists in 1950- 60's is pure reference and pure representation. It may be suggested that in the absolute clarity of representation there can be found a measure of objectivity. This “generally held, vague, commonsense conception of the image as the resurrection of Life”¹³ is what Norman Bryson critiques in Vision and Painting as the *natural attitude*. This is the pervasive mythology that nothing could be more ‘real’ and ‘honest’ (reminding us of the ethical colour this conflict has assumed) than the naturalistic depiction of the ‘real’ world and the rendering of the ‘objective’ space. Bryson describes the natural attitude, in which ...

”the image is thought of as self-effacing in the representation or reduplication of things. The goal towards which it moves is the perfect replication of a reality found existing ‘out there’ already, and all its effort is consumed in the elimination of those obstacles which impede the reproduction of that prior reality; the intransigence of the physical medium; inadequacy of

manual technique; the inertia of formulae that impede, through their rigidity, the accuracy of registration. The history of the image is accordingly written in negative terms. Each 'advance' consists of the removal of a further obstacle between painting and the Essential Copy; which the final state is known in advance, through the prefiguration of Universal Visual Experience."¹⁴

"...Apart from the tax of style that must be paid to human fallibility, the dominant aim of the image, in the natural attitude, is thought of as a communication of perception from a source replete in perceptual material (the painter) to a site of reception eager for perceptual satisfaction (the viewer). Setting aside the informational 'noise' caused by style, by the resistance of the medium, and by the vicissitudes of material decay, the communication of the image is ideally pure and involves only these termini: transmitter and receiver"¹⁵

In the mythology of the natural attitude, style and materiality hinder the transmission of the image which must be accepted as a reflection of a pre-existing real. The transmission of that image is the 'dominant aim' in the natural attitude. The material qualities of, for example, a work of art are only 'informational noise' that interfere in the direct transmission of what is presumed to be purely referential information (ie. 'Reality').

The best device for the direct transmission of a perceived real is, of course, the photograph. Roland Barthes, in The Photographic Message, reminds us of the photographic paradox:

"...when one wants to be 'neutral, objective, one strives to copy reality meticulously, as though the analogical were a factor of resistance against the investment of values (such at least is the definition of aesthetic 'realism')"¹⁶

Lynda Nead, in her work The Female Nude, describes photography as being believed to have these qualities. Photography, she says:

“is imbued with an ideology of realism; it is regarded as a transparent medium, offering more or less direct access to its image. Within Platonic terms, the visual image is less removed from corrupted reality (and is therefore more debased) than the written word which is regarded as the medium of imagination and self-expression...Compared to painting and drawing, the photographic image is seen to be an unmediated representation, both in terms of its means of production and of its consumption. In the process of representation, the photographic image is assumed to offer little interference with the truth of its subject. It is the automatized image: it seems to eliminate the human agency and reflection, thus enabling direct access not simply to an image but to the represented object itself.”¹⁷

Within the natural attitude, photography carries the mythology of *pure representation*.

Photography, and by extension photo-realist works, are felt, in this model, to offer greater access to reality, to be the perfect analogon of reality.¹⁸

The extent that the photograph/artwork succeeds in granting this access depends upon the extent to which the “image remains unknown as an independent form”¹⁹. It is all reference, so the myth proceeds, with no independent existence of its own. This is what Meyer Shapiro critiques as the concept of ‘passive representation’. With painting (drawing, cinema, theatre), Barthes says, the message develops a supplementary message, in addition to the analogonical content itself, which is called the *style* “whose signifier is a certain ‘treatment’ of the image (result of the action of the creator) and whose signified, whether aesthetic or ideological, refers to a certain culture of the society receiving the message.”²⁰

A balance/binary relationship exists between the Modernist ‘pure’ aesthetic of non-representation on the one side, and on the other the “generally held, commonsense conception” that the photograph, as passive representation, is “exclusively constituted and

occupied by a 'denoted' message, a message which totally exhausts its mode of existence."²¹

On the one side is the idea that the moral high-ground is to be found within the purely material qualities of a work, and on the other is the thought that snatches of reality, and by extension objectivity, can be found in the absolute reference, such as the photograph, which carries none of the transmissional 'snow' of style and materiality. What John Berger describes as the belief in the transparency of media, offering direct access to the real.²²

The Platonic Realm of Ideal Forms

In the Platonic realm of ideal forms, the illusion of reproduction has to the world a relationship of cheaper and cheaper copies, each moving ever further from truth. In The Republic Plato makes the point that simple reproduction is the most hollow of exercises, and the results having the significance of reflecting the subject in a mirror:

"Now what name would you give a craftsman who can produce all the things made by every other sort of workman?"

He would need to have very remarkable powers!

Wait a moment, and you will have even better reason to say so. For, besides producing any kind of artificial thing, this same craftsman can create all plants and animals, himself included, and the earth and sky and gods and heavenly bodies and all things under the earth in Hades. That sounds like a miraculous feat of virtuosity.

Are you incredulous? Tell me, do you think that there could be no such craftsman at all, or that there might be someone who could create all of these things in one sense, though not in another? Do you not see that you could do it yourself, in a way?

In what way, I should like to know?

There is no difficulty; in fact there are several ways in which the thing can be done quite quickly. The quickest perhaps is to take a mirror and turn it around in all directions. In a very short time you could produce sun and stars and earth and yourself and all the other animals and plants and lifeless objects we mentioned just now.

Yes, in appearance, but not the actual things.

Quite so; you are helping my argument. My notion is that a painter is a craftsman of that kind. You may say that the things he produces are not real; but there is a sense in which he too does produce a bed."

Plato makes the distinction between the realm of ideal forms, which he equates with truth, the realm of carpenter or craftsman, who makes his 'copy' base on the ideal form, and the realm of painter, who will 'copy the copy'.

"Now the god made only one ideal and essential Bed, whether by choice or because he was under some necessity not to make more than one; at any rate two or more were not created, nor could they possibly come into being.

...Shall we call him, then, the author of the true nature of Bed, or something of that sort?

Certainly he deserves the name, since all of his works constitute the real nature of things.

And we may call the carpenter the manufacturer of a bed?

Yes.

Can we say the same of the painter?

Certainly not.

Then what is he, with reference to a bed?

I think it would be fairest to describe him as the artist who represents the things which the other two make.

Very well, said I; so the work of the artist is at the third removed from the essential nature of the thing?

Exactly.

The tragic poet, too, is an artist who represents things; so this will apply to him: he and all other artists are, as it were, third in succession from the throne of truth.

Just so.

...The art of representation, then, is a long way from reality; and apparently the reason why there is nothing it cannot reproduce is that it grasps only a small part of the object, and that only an image. Your painter, for example, will paint us a shoemaker, a carpenter, or other workman, without understanding any one of their crafts; and yet, if he were a good painter, he might deceive a small child or a simple-minded person into thinking his picture was a real carpenter, if he showed it to them from some distance."²³

The photographer and representational painter cannot, at first glance, escape the title of 'thrice removed' from the truth. The dishonesty lies in the primarily referential nature of the work. At issue, in the quoted passage, is the existence of more primary source material in both the bed and the platonic form of bed.

To escape the Platonic condemnation that mere representation, copying or aping, only takes us further from the truth, the work has to rise 'above' reproduction and become an object in its own right, thus rising (at least) one tier in the Platonic system. How, then, does a work rise above being simply a knock-off of reality? Shapiro reminded us (above) that "there is no 'pure art', unconditioned by experience; all fantasy and formal construction, even the random scribbling of the hand, are shaped by experience and by non-aesthetic concerns". The crux of the issue is the relationship between the work and the world, or the depicted and the depiction.

Foucault separates the relationship of the thing depicted and the depiction into two camps, that of *resemblance* and *similitude*. Foucault states that resemblance "presupposes a primary reference that prescribes and classes" copies on the basis of the rigor of their mimetic relation to itself. Resemblance serves and is dominated by representation". One is able to "claim the privileged status as model for the rest...the hierarchy. He suggests, alternatively, a lateral relation of 'similitude' in which each has a relation to the other, but on a horizontal axis. With this relationship each 'work' has equal status...bed and picture of bed are related, but in a lateral way.

"Resemblance serves representation, which rules over it; similitude serves repetition, which ranges across it. Resemblance predicates itself upon a model it must return to and reveal: similitude circulates the simulacrum as an indefinite and reversible relation of the similar to the similar." ²⁴

The painting has a relationship to the world, but, importantly, can transcend reference, and acquire the quality of uniqueness and authenticity, moving at least one rung up Plato's

ladder (like the bed in the quote above). The work is not simply a reference to something or, more likely, a series of things, but has a unique identity. It could be argued that the closer the 'artwork' becomes to the subject, the more aggressive the references and the truer to life, the more it slides along our scale from material towards reference, the more it resembles Plato's mirror. The less weight is carried in an independent existence, free of the subject, and the more it exists as simulacrum. As we learned from Bryson, in the natural attitude the work is more successful as a transmission of reality the more the more it *hides its existence as an independent form*. If the relationship between the work and the primary source material is more a horizontal, distributional relationship rather than a hierarchical one of original/copy then we escape Plato's condemnation of 'thrice removed'.

Francis Bacon suggests that the artwork can achieve a 'life' of its own (existence as an independent form), and thus rise above illustration:

"...I used a very big brush and a great deal of paint and I put it on very very freely, and I simply didn't know in the end what I was doing and suddenly this thing clicked, and became exactly like the thing I was trying to record. But not out of any conscious will, nor was it anything to do with illustrational painting. What has never yet been analyzed is why this particular way of painting is more poignant than illustration. I suppose because it has a life completely of its own. It lives its own life, like the image one is trying to trap; it lives on its own, and therefore transfers the essence of the image more poignantly."²⁵

The Czech writer Milan Kundera poetically describes the merits of 'objecthood' in his 1973 novel Life is Elsewhere:

"The next day, he asked Grandma for permission to use the typewriter; he copied the poem on special paper and it was even more beautiful than when he recited it aloud, for it had ceased to be a mere group of words and had become an *object*; its independence was beyond a doubt; ordinary words exist only to perish as soon as they are uttered, for they serve only

the moment of communication; they are subordinate to objects; they are only their signs. By means of the poem, words have been transmuted into objects themselves and were no longer subordinate to anything. They were not destined for ephemeral signalling and quick extinction, but for permanence... the poem that he had written was as independent and unintelligible as reality itself. Reality does not discuss, it simply *is*. The independence of the poem provided Jaromil with a marvellous world of concealment, the possibility of a *second* existence.”²⁶

Reference versus Materiality

My thesis is that all artworks share, and can be evaluated on two sets of qualities; the referential and the material. The significance of some works lies more in the referential attributes, while in others it is the material. One could put forth the examples of Dickens and Joyce, suggesting perhaps that Dickens’ work relies more on the referential qualities while Joyce more on the material. If you were a television producer looking to make a film (ie. change the material) of these works, the Dickens’ should translate more successfully because less of the artistic ‘weight’ is carried by the media. You could transfer the story to another media with the least amount of damage to the original work.

Once it has been established that these sets of qualities, the material and referential, exist, and, as Greenberg and the natural attitude suggest, they are in conflict, one can situate artworks within this landscape, as with the Dickens and Joyce, or the *Hide* and Duchamp. What’s more, one can manipulate this relationship in the creation, or contextualization of an artwork. Playing one trait off against the other, and moving, as it were, up and down the scale. Like the Necker cube, the consciousness of the viewer metaphorically flips from one

to the other. One could, as Sir Kenneth Clark describes, ‘stalk’ the image, trying to hold the referential and the material qualities in your mind simultaneously: fully realizing the reference while being unavoidably aware at all times of the media. He describes the Velasquez, Las Meninas:

“I remember that when it hung in Geneva in 1939 I used to go very early in the morning, before the gallery was open, and try to stalk it, as if it were really alive...I would start from as far away as I could, when the illusion was complete, and come gradually nearer, until suddenly what had been a hand, and a ribbon, and a piece of velvet, dissolved into a salad of beautiful brush strokes. I thought I might learn something if I could catch the moment at which this transformation took place, but it proved to be as elusive as the moment between waking and sleeping.”²⁷

Examples of conscious movement between the two categories, the referential and the material, can be found in French New-Wave films and the idea of the *self-reflexive cinema*. This was a movement that underscored the process of film-making in order to transcend the illusion of the film and the narrative. Devices were employed to constantly remind the viewer of real nature of their experience.

”The psychological affect of these conventions - and it must be considered a calculated effect on the directors’ part as well as a function of economic necessity - is to establish aesthetic distance between the audience and the film. New Wave films are constantly reminding us that we are watching a film, and *not* the reality which a film inevitably resembles, by constantly calling attention to their “filmicness”, to their own artificially created nature. The abrupt and, above all, obvious manipulation of our perception in these films through the use of jump-cut, shaky hand-held cameras, and the like jolts us out of our conventional involvement with the narrative and our traditional identification with the characters, who are often less recognizable as characters than as actors playing characters. This is because New Wave cinema is, in a sense, *self-reflexive cinema*, or *meta-cinema* - film about the process and nature of film itself. According to the New Wave *cinéastes* (loosely, “*film artists*”), the conventional cinema has too faithfully and for too long reproduced our normal way of seeing things through its studiously unobtrusive techniques. The invisible editing and imperturbably smooth camera styles cinema of the thirties, forties, and fifties, and much of the sixties were designed to draw

the spectator's attention away from the fact that he was watching a consciously crafted artifact. But the disruptive editing and camera styles of the New Wave say to us constantly, "Look, there is a film being made right before your eyes," and to emphasize the point a director or his technical crew will sometimes appear just inside the frame of a narrative sequence, as if by accident, to remind us that whenever we watch a film a handful of artists are controlling the process immediately beyond the frame."²⁸

A more recent example of this device can be found in the popular recent film Shortcuts. In Shortcuts (1993) director Robert Altman disrupts the straightforward story-line of the traditional narrative and offers it back to us in an apparent random fashion. Each disruption reminds the viewer of the media, and interrupts the illusion. The device goes beyond the traditional 'flashback' device of, say, Citizen Kane. The device Orson Welles used in 1941 has long since been absorbed into the cinematic consciousness, contextualized, like Fountain, and no longer has the ability to 'snap us out of it'. The flashback has changed the way film is contextualized to such an extent that it is arguable that the viewer doesn't even register it.

This device has a theatrical pedigree. Bertolt Brecht used the techniques of having the musicians on the stage and the use of placards to give the spectators an objective perspective on the action, and the harshly cynical presentation of material to prevent emotional empathy between the actors and the audience. He referred to this as the 'alienation effect' (*verfremdungseffekt*).

"So you should simply make the instant
Stand out, without in the process hiding
What you are making it stand out from.
Give your acting
That progression of one-thing-after-another,
that attitude of

Working up to what you have taken on. In this way
 You will show the flow of events and also the course
 Of your work, permitting the spectator
 To experience this Now on many levels, coming from
 Previously and
 Merging into Afterwards, also having much else Now
 Alongside it. He is sitting not only
 In your theatre but also
 In the world.”²⁹

Although the intention was didactic, the effect was the same as Robert Altman’s disrupted narrative and the painter’s bold brush stroke. Brecht’s *verfremdungseffekt* seeks to sabotage emotional empathy between the viewer and the referential part of the work, altering the communicative/narrative role of the work and combating the “degree to which the image remains unknown as an *independent* form”.

The ability to transcend reference, and the reinforcement of the independence of the object, leads us back to qualities of the first order. If the work is to have qualities beyond reference, then those, by definition, are qualities of the object itself, or as we defined them, the material qualities. To transcend what it is about, it must engage what it is. The work must evoke the character of the media, whether that be film or paint. A part of the material strength of the work is the engagement of the media. Art is media specific.

In fact one of the interesting things about photo-realist paintings, beyond the clarity of reference to life, is the *lack* of brush-strokes. The viewer is constantly aware of the medium by virtue of its absence, like the empty chair of a missing relative at the dinner table. We are

fascinated not by what is there, but, in a negative way, but what isn't. In actuality the paint and the materiality have more presence than they otherwise would because of the juxtaposition with the heavily referential aspects.

This observation unearths another aspect of the image/material relationship. Unlike the position of the Modernists, or that of the natural attitude, these two conflicting 'drives' can reinforce one another. In other words, a thick brush stroke can have more presence, as paint, when it serves the second role of describing the breast than it would amongst an abstract series of strokes in a non-referential painting. Thus, in this case, the language of the referential world is appropriated as a formalist tool, in a similar manner to the idea of brush-strokes being omnipresent in the high finish, high realist painting discussed above. The reference elements can underscore the materiality, and vice-versa. In Linda Nochlin's review of a recent exhibition of the work of Jenny Saville, she finds the painterliness carries more than materialist meanings:

"Let me hasten to add that this is not the 'return to painting' so fervently desired by conservatives and derided by radicals. One might say that Saville's work is post-'post-painterly', to wrench this term out of its original Greenbergian context: painterliness so over the top that it signifies a kind of disease of the pictorial, a symptom of some deep disturbance in the relation of pigment to canvas. Although the surface and the grid both play an important role in Saville's formal language, both are melted down and sharpened up by the oddly repulsive brushwork that marks her style."³⁰

Nietzsche, in the opening pages of Birth of Tragedy, describes the relationship of the Apolline and the Dionysian in works of art:

“These two very different tendencies walk side by side, usually in violent opposition to one another, inciting one another to ever more powerful births, perpetuating the struggle of the opposition only apparently bridged by the word ‘art’; until, finally, by a metaphysical miracle of Hellenic ‘will’, the two seem to be coupled, and in this coupling they seem at last to beget the work of art that is as Dionysiac as it is Apolline - Attic tragedy.”³¹

Not to equate the referential/material duality with the Apolline/Dionysian, but the nature of the relationship is similar. While in perpetual conflict they can, on occasion, incite more “powerful births”.

The first portion of this paper outlined a possible relationship between the referential and material aspects of an artwork. With that as a working premise, I postulated that a work can ‘move’ along the scale created by that duality, and that this opposition can either reinforce or undermine these qualities. The next part of this paper describes the specific work in the exhibition Knock Loudly, and the variety of devices that control this movement and explore this relationship.

HOW

Verfremdungseffekt

In my work I am attempting to operate, like the self-reflexive cinema described above, in a representational manner, but with complete disclosure. This has become the thesis of my paintings: not only do they operate within that area of perception where the line ceases to be a line and begins to describe the shadow of a breast, but they are *about* that moment of transition. The moment Kenneth Clark stalked in Las Meninas. In this way, ideally, they make reference, but you never lose sight of the materiality and painterliness. Working “in your theatre but also in the world”. The representational part of the paintings suggest the illusion, but the materiality doesn’t fulfill the fantasy of transmission. The representation of, for example, the nude, delivers the *information* of the figure, but not the *illusion*.

In this portion of this paper I will discuss various devices the paintings employ to direct the “empathetic viewer”, to balance the physicality of the work with the image, and to maintain an aesthetic space while still working in a referential manner.

Monotony of Content through Subject Matter

How then choose the interesting fact, the one that begins again and again? Method is precisely this choice of fact; it is needful then to be occupied first with creating a method; and many have been imagined, since none imposes itself. It’s proper to begin with the regular facts, but after a rule has been established beyond all doubt, the facts in conformity will become dull because

they no longer teach us anything new. Then it's the exception that becomes important. We seek not resemblances but differences, choose the most accentuated differences because they're the most striking and also the most instructive.

Robert Pirsig, Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance ³²

The subject matter of my work was chosen because of the role it plays in this movement between the material elements and the referential ones, between the two and three-dimensions, or between art and life.

No one will argue that the nude and the still-life, which make-up a large part of my exhibition, are over represented in the annals of Western Art History. For that reason they have the effect of nullifying their subject matter. As Lynda Nead says in The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality:

“Anyone who examines the history of western art must be struck by the prevalence of images of the female body. More than any other subject, the female nude connotes ‘Art’. The framed image of the female body, hung on the wall of the art gallery, is shorthand for art more generally; it is an icon of western culture, a symbol of civilization and accomplishment”³³

The Art Historical pedigree serves the purpose of cancelling, particularly in art circles, the ‘nakedness’ of the nude. The art gallery legitimizes the nude female body. We don’t question, or *don’t see* the nude woman, but instead, perhaps, focus on the material manipulation of the paint. This point can be illustrated by the analogy of jazz music. The old standard becomes the subject around which to produce the work. It is a structure on which the musicians can improvise and build new melodies. By using You are My Sunshine as the structure for the improvisation the audience and the musicians have drastically shortened the

learning curve. The melody is familiar so the musicians and audience can focus on the improvisation (materiality), and on what is different than the last time you heard it.

The effect is the same with the still-life. We, as a culture, have absorbed them into our lexicon of standard images and, just as audiences no longer start at jump cuts or flash-backs in a movie, we accept the bowl of fruit and wine bottle as a part of the art vocabulary. The nude and the still-life, and perhaps the Crucifixion, have taken on the character of the white walls and security guards in the art museum. In the western art world, we don't stop to puzzle over the meaning of the scene, who is who, or even the barbarism. Once the reference is blocked the materiality gains prominence in the same way the post-Renaissance subject developed into a pretext for the study of materials. The work Still-Life Crucifixion, in my thesis exhibition, plays on this idea. The work is comprised of twenty panels, with different fruit painted from different angles, but all on the same scale, in the same bowl, and on the same ground. My thesis is that the content (or referential weight) of the work is diminished through its historical monotony. This referential monotony is played off against the production process which is offered up as *sincere reproduction*. All of the elements have been reproduced exactly to scale and different views have been offered, suggesting a pseudo-scientific system. Countering that is the effect of the installation as a set instead of individual works. This effect will be discussed in the next section.

The female nude as subject matter 'moves' in particularly interesting ways. As Nead points out, the nude holds two positions, at once in the centre of the art world paradigm, as

shorthand for art, and also on the edge, as nakedness and pornography:

“For art, the female nude is both at the centre and at the margins. It is at the centre because within art historical discourse paintings of the female body are seen as the visual culmination of Renaissance and Enlightenment aesthetics, but this authority is nevertheless under threat, for the female nude also stands at the edge of the art category, where it risks losing its respectability and spilling over into the pornographic. Since pornography may be defined as any visual representation that achieves a certain degree of sexual explicitness, art has to be protected from being engulfed by pornography, in order to maintain its position as the opposing term to pornography. The erotic plays a critical role within this system: it is the borderline of respectability and nonrespectability, between pure and impure desire.”³⁴

The art historical authority legitimizes what would otherwise be a pornographic experience.

Even Sir Kenneth Clark recognized the need to quantify the erotic content. The erotic content has to be carefully monitored and controlled:

“The desire to grasp and be united with another human body is so fundamental a part of our nature, that our judgement of what is known as ‘pure form’ is inevitably influenced by it; and one of the difficulties of the nude as a subject for art is that these instincts cannot lie hidden, as they do for example, in our enjoyment of a piece of pottery, thereby gaining the force of sublimation, but are dragged into the foreground, where they risk upsetting the unity of responses from which a work of art derives its independent life. Even so, the amount of erotic content which a work of art can hold in solution is very high”³⁵

Thus the female body as subject works in two very different, oppositional, ways. It is becoming apparent why the nude is such an effective subject for my thesis of charting the moment of transition; the razor’s edge of reference and materiality. Not only does it have the quality discussed above of pushing the materiality to the foreground through the monotony of the subject matter, but it also, metaphorically, sits at the precipice of ‘art’ and pornography, tipping one way, then the other. Linda Nead says it is the *reference* to life, or what we have already discussed as the mythology of pure representation that decides the role that the figure plays: either female naked body, or art historically legitimized nude:

“Compared to painting and drawing, the photographic image is seen to be an unmediated representation, both in terms of its means of production and of its consumption. In the process of representation, the photographic image is assumed to offer little interference with the truth of its subject. It is the automatized image: it seems to eliminate the human agency and reflection, thus enabling direct access not simply to an image but to the represented object itself. If the object in question is the female body, then the photograph can be seen to afford the viewer direct access to the body, and sexual arousal with the minimum of interference from the medium itself. According to the same ideology, ‘artistic’ representation foregrounds its medium and its making, and this element of artistic intervention inhibits or blocks the immediate sexual gratification that is offered by the ‘natural’ realism of the photograph. Within contemporary culture, the pornographic effect is believed to be produced through the unmediated visibility of the photographic image”³⁶

Pornography is achieved through a perceived pure reference. The realism/reference moves the representation of the female body from being perceived as art to, on the other side, pornography.

“In another permutation of this fantasy of male arousal there is the case from sixteenth-century Italy, of Aretino, who so admired the exceptional realism of a painted nude Venus by Sansorino that he claimed ‘it will fill the thoughts of all who look at it with lust’...For Aretino, the realism of the image seems to draw the viewer directly into speculation on the female sexual body, rather than towards a mediation on the body in and as art.”³⁷

The ideology of realism tells us that the photo is closer to the object, or even the analogon.

The realistic art object takes the place, in this fantasy, of the woman.

All of the nudes in Knock Loudly play on this idea of the moving towards the real, the reference, while still maintaining the overt material qualities. The point of the work Nude in Orthographic Projection is that it springs from pure reference. The piece is a cut-away cube with exactly life-sized, corresponding views of the model presented on each face. Measurements were taken of the model and the dimensions laid out precisely. All of possible

information was offered along with pseudo-scientific visual cues, including the orthographic layout. Finally, rather than existing in two-dimensions on the wall, the piece is presented in three-dimensions. T.J. Clark, when discussing the Degas pastels of prostitutes in the Parisian cafes notes that part of the work's social acceptability was the medium and modest scale, *in spite of* the subject:

“...these critics evidently approved of the satirical edge to Degas's depiction of Paris, and did not seem to find his subjects too rebarbative. Part of their clemency had to do with the pastel's small size and its odd, modest medium, part with its lending itself to an anecdotal reading, and part with the fact that its women were fully clothed.”³⁸

Nude in Orthographic Projection is intended to play along the border we have established between the material qualities and the reference to life, or in other words the sanctified 'nude' and the pornographic 'naked'. The devices used to that end are the absolute reference to life-size, the three-dimensionality, and the paring down of the 'anecdotal read' until it is nonexistent.

The nude as subject works well with my thesis because it has the simultaneous double role of private and public. Of reassuring us with its legitimate art historical resume, and at the same time subverting that legitimization by virtue of its erotic content and the danger of it 'boiling over'.

“The pure and independent aesthetic experience is thus seriously compromised by the nude. If the transmission of sexual drives into artistic creation is impossible then the nude also presents the risk of too much sex - too much, that is, for art. The triumph of a 'successful' representation of the nude is the control of the potential risk.”³⁹

As I have defined my thesis as that moment of transition between the material and the

referential (the 'flip') ideally I would push the representation to the 'boiling point'. While Nead critiques the 'successful' representation of the nude in the control of the potential risk, this is exactly the point where I would like my work to sit.

Monotony of Content Through Installation

Related to the concept presented above, that the interpretation of the work is altered through its over-representation in the annals of art history, is the idea of producing the same monotony of content, but in the microcosm. Showing Monet's Haystacks (1891) or the facades of Rouen Cathedral (1894) all together in one exhibition, produces a different effect than seeing one work from the series in isolation. The repeating motif stresses the differences between the works rather than the similarities. As each new painting is hung the relationship between the work and the haystack becomes more commonplace, and the individual shadows, brush strokes, etc. become increasingly more important. The rarity of the differences increases while the direct referential importance becomes less rare, and less significant. We no longer 'notice' the spire, but rather the unique blue in a particular shadow stands out in a way it wouldn't should the work be seen in isolation.

This, in microcosm, is a related effect to the 'monotony of content' in the macrocosm of art history discussed above. In the monotony of content through installation the contextualization of the work, in effect, changes every time a new work is hung, and the autonomy of the individual work, and all of its components, is subverted in favour of the broader installation.

The Globe and Mail lifestyle's critic Russell Smith describes the effect:

“British Vogue, for example, last May published a spread of new works by seven British contemporary artists, including Tracey Emin of rumpled bed fame, and Jake and Dinos Chapman, the weird cartoonists. The premise was simple: each artist had to use supermodel Kate Moss as a subject or muse. They could interpret her anyway they chose, but the art had to be about her. The results were so widely different - an evaporating ice sculpture by Marc Quinn, called *Beauty*, a set of drawings of the model projected onto the model herself by Gary Hume - that the result was not only an overflow of the different tendencies in the art world, but also an explanation of them. Since the reader didn't have to worry about figuring out what each piece of art was about - the subject matter was the same for each artist - one mystery was removed from the interpretation. The trick made it totally clear what each artist's preoccupations were. This was the most exciting and accessible insight into new and difficult art that I have ever seen in the popular media.”⁴⁰

Space as the Illusion, and the Grid

As pointed out earlier, in the history of representation the destruction of 'space' within the picture was the apex of the materialist position. One of the referential elements is the narrative suggested by the illusion of space within the image. All elements, such as perspective, that deny the two-dimensionality of the work contribute to the illusion and reinforce the relationship of dependence between the image and the primary source material: painting as window versus painting as object.

In my component of the exhibition Knock Loudly, several devices are employed to prevent the image, and the illusion of space, from overpowering the materiality of the work, and vice-versa. Two elements used to play with this idea are the figure and patterning.

In addition to the role that the nude plays as an art historical icon, described above,

the figure in these works also plays a secondary, more intimate, part. I often employ the figure, painted in a somewhat realist, or representational, manner because it, more than any other illusionistic device, suggests a *specific* space because it implies the physical space of our own bodies. We know how much space our bodies use, and thus, how much space is implied in the work. In Hans Hofmann's The Gate (1960) there is also the suggestion of space, and the push and pull of colours, but it is an ambiguous space. In my work the figure serves as a wedge, 'opening' the space to a definite size. The viewer (and the paint) have less work to do.

Juxtaposed with the figure are patterns. Patterning implies the two-dimensions of the support, and denies the illusion of space created by the figures. In this way a tension (movement) is suggested between the reference/illusion and the materiality of the support. Again, the language of representation is appropriated to underscore the two- dimensionality of the work. The drawing and the referential elements underscore the material.

Grids are, of course, patterns, and work in the way mentioned above, but they also have a wonderful schizophrenia in that they reinforce the picture plane to such an extent that it allows no other elements. Something 'placed' on the grid immediately reinforces the figure ground relationship, and thus the illusion of space. In this way the grid is a material element insisting on the flatness in a Modernist way, but also has referential attributes, by reinforcing the figure/ground relationship. If the grid, or pattern, should be tilted at all then the image goes from denying the illusion of space, to insisting on it. The tilted grid/pattern is, in fact,

the basic component of linear perspective.

Cropping, Scale, and Mark

The crop is a device to control the read of the viewer in several ways. First it interrupts the narrative and reminds the viewer that this is a picture, in the same way that the ‘crops’ in the Robert Altman film described above. Francis Bacon describes using the edge of the canvas as a device to control the pervasiveness of the narrative:

DS “And do the vertical breaks between the canvases of a triptych have the same sort of purpose as those frames (the ‘boxes’ within some of Bacon’s portraits) within a canvas?”

FB “Yes, they (vertical breaks between the canvases of the triptych) do. They isolate one figure from the other. It helps to avoid story-telling if the figures are painted on three different canvases.”⁴¹

The broken plane interrupts the narrative. In the case of a work that involves more than one panel the read of the viewer is altered in another way. As shown above, in the section discussing the monotony of content through installation, the ‘read’ of each individual piece changes as it is contextualized by the works hanging with it. The autonomy of the individual work is subverted, and it is instead read in terms of the entire set.

The scale of the work also relates to the ratio of scale of mark. In the work Meat Hooks, for example, one of the reasons for making it a number of pieces was that the size of the work controls the relative scale of the brush strokes. Because the piece is composed of smaller tiles the relative size of the brush-strokes can be maintained, and with it the materiality of the application.

Scale, particularly when discussing figurative work, has a relationship to the read of the viewer. A work that is 'person sized' will have a different relationship than a work that is pocket sized. Everyone remembers being shocked by the size of the Mona Lisa the first time.

Nude in Orthographic Projection was constructed exactly to scale in an attempt to increase the referential element. In the case of the nude, as discussed above (Lynda Nead and Kenneth Clark), the stronger the reference to life (ie. photography) the greater the danger of the work slipping out of the social construct of 'art', and into the social construct of pornography. By altering this formula between art and pornography I either underscore, or undercut the relationship between the work and the original reference, the model.

All of the elements that reinforce the resemblance, like making the painting the same size as the actual subject reinforce the referential elements and, if the oppositional nature of the illusion to material holds true, should drive the work away from materiality towards reference and resemblance.

Drawing versus Painting

Drawing and painting have different roles, and different results when juxtaposed in an artwork. John Berger, in an essay on Millet, notes:

“A drawing records a visual experience. An oil painting, because of its uniquely large range of tones, textures and colours, pretends to reproduce the visible. The difference is very great.

The virtuoso performance of the oil painting assembles all aspects of the visible to conduct them to a single point: the point of view of the empirical onlooker. And it insists that such a view constitutes visibility itself. Graphic work, with its limited means, is more modest: it only claims a single aspect of the visual experience, and therefore is adaptable to different uses.”⁴²

Drawing, or graphic work, is already more abstracted from the subject because it has more limited imitative means than painting. The illustrational, or referential binds are, by definition of the medium, already weaker. In my work the drawing often works *diagrammatically*, in opposition, to the paint, reminding you that this is a two-dimensional representation. In my work Flag Nude, for example, the sketched hand implies that there is to be a limb here, and this is the positioning, and yet it not presented in a way so as to suggest the illusion of the a real hand. The loose drawing amidst all of the paint offers the *information*, but not the illusion. Presumably that portion of the painting could be replaced with a text panel stating “the left had would be here, lax, with fingers pointed towards the floor”. This is *verfremdungseffekt*, offering the information while discrediting the illusion. It is the same effect as Jean-Luc Goddard’s jagged editing in Breathless, Altman’s disjointed narrative in Shortcuts and Francis Bacon’s arrows. The information is offered *diagrammatically*, in such a way as to diminish the illusion.

Conversely, it could be argued that, as drawing has less in the way of *material* elements, it is more about the subject. The drawing describes, while paint has more of a ‘media presence’. As Norman Bryson points out, paint *has more potential* to record the production process: ”...encaustic, tempera, and oil paint are potentially even more deictically expressive than calligraphic painting, in that their work consists of moulding and modelling

as well as painting: the variable viscosity of the pigment opens up a parameter of the trace unavailable to ink.”⁴³ The drawing and the painting co-exist in my work, switching between the illusion, or narrative, and the media recognition.

In the same essay on Millet quoted above, Berger further notes:

“He (Van Gogh) made dozens of paintings copied closely from engravings from Millet. In these paintings Van Gogh united the working figure with his surroundings by the gesture and energy of his own brush strokes. Such energy was released by his intense sense of empathy with the subject.

But the result was to turn the paintings into a personal vision, which was characterized by its ‘handwriting’. The witness had become more important than the testimony. The way was open to expressionism and, later, to abstract expressionism, and the final destruction of painting as a language of supposedly objective reference. Thus Millet’s failure and setback may be seen as an historic turning point. The claim of universal democracy was inadmissible for oil painting. And the consequent crisis of meaning forced most painting to become autobiographical.”⁴⁴

The bold brush stroke is the footstep in the sand. It is autobiographical. The soft mark is ‘biographical’, it is about the subject, about the nude. The bold stroke has a dual role. It is about the media but, as noted by John Berger, it is also autobiographical. The witness is in danger of “becoming more important than the testimony”.

The Staging of Representation

Compare three works: Freud’s Girl with White Dog (1950-51), Matisse’s Carmalina (1903), and Degas’ The Tub (1886). All three are wonderful paintings of nude women, but operate in totally different ways. In the Degas the figure is totally turned away. The

implication, or story-line, is that she doesn't know the artist (and viewer) is there (or doesn't care). We are also in a personal space, there is the suggestion of her bed, and personal items on the bureau. The suggested narrative is that she is not modelling, she is bathing, and that the situation is not staged, but chanced upon, rather like a commercial Hollywood movie. Of these three works, the narrative element is the strongest in the Degas.

In the Freud painting the model stares towards the painter, but in an unfocused, unseeing way. She is looking in our direction, but not at us. She appears to be in the process of dressing, or undressing, but *not posed*. There is the implication that, like the Degas, this is a moment in the middle of a process: the temporal element.

There are, however, other elements that suggest the presence of the artist/viewer. Elements that implicate involvement, and not just the voyeurism of the Degas. The model, the bed, and the dog are staged *for* the artist/viewer. Everything is directed towards the artist. The space is much more shallow than the Degas, like a theatre set. The space, and everything in it, is composed by the artist, for the viewer, unlike the Degas, where the supposed implication is randomness. The read, in other words is that Freud has staged a situation to paint, while Degas has, just as carefully, arranged things to appear random. The hint of staging in the Lucien Freud painting indicates (and implicates) the audience (the artist/viewer). This, again, is the *verfremdungseffekt*.

Finally the Matisse. In this piece the space is obviously a studio, everything is arranged

(or composed). Her body directly confronts us (the viewer/painter/photographer), like a Paul Strand portrait. In this work the question of 'story line' seems the least insistent. One could argue that of the three, presumably similar, experiences of the three artists (they each hired a model, 'composed' her in a manner that pleased them, created their works and later paid her), the Matisse appears the least staged. The illusion (the bath in the Degas and undressing in Freud) in Carmalina becomes less important and the material qualities more so. We have been trained (in much the same way as has been illustrated above in the case of photography and the mythology of naturalism) to pick-up the visual cues in the work, the model, the studio, the pose, etc. and to see this as (just) a model study.

My point in discussing these three works is to underscore the use in my work of the compositional staging to control the amount of attention the viewer pays to the story versus the material. The staging can be a formalist tool to direct how much, or how little time is spent within the story, and within the *illusion of space and time*.

In my work Flag Nude the subject places the work securely within the Western art historical paradigm which has the result, as illustrated above, of reducing the referential weight. The figure has been arranged centrally, in much the same manner as the Freud and the Matisse, occupying most of the surface space of the image. There are few other visual clues to suggest a narrative (there is no lover's glove beside her, for example). What T.J. Clark described as the 'anecdotal read' is diminished. The woman's features are undefined, we can't tell if she is happy or sad, so as to diminish a psychological read/story. Finally, the

material elements: the brush strokes, the drawing, and the collaged elements, all keep the physicality of the medium at the fore. All of these elements serve to diminish the direct, illusionistic, representational aspects of the work.

The patterning of the ground, while in the first instance reinforcing the picture plane, also makes reference to Cezanne's Madam Cezanne in a Red Armchair (1893 - 95). The obscured features, while on the one hand denying the psychological read, are, at the same time, suggestive and dramatic. The one element plays off the other.

Time in Maintenance of the Illusion

An obvious referential element, and one essential to narration, is the implication of time. Narration proceeds in the fourth dimension. In the examples of the Degas, Matisse, and Freud (above), the Degas makes the most obvious reference to time and process. The work is presented as a 'snap-shot' taken during the bath.

In the Freud painting the time element is not so obviously suggested, but it is there in that the model is *half*-undressed, suggesting process. Countering this temporal element in the narrative of the painting is the *denial* of the temporality of the process of painting in the high degree of finish that Freud has achieved: disguising the media and hiding the process of painting.

Norman Bryson, in Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze, explains the concept of the *deictic* and how it relates to the tradition of Western painting. The deictic, in linguistics, is that category that contains information concerning the locus of the utterance. The Western tradition in painting suppressed the deixis because oil painting has been treated as a primarily erasive media:

“What it must first erase is the surface of the picture-plane: visibility of the surface would threaten the coherence of the fundamental technique through which the Western representational image *works* the trace, of ground to figure relations: ‘ground’, the absence of the figure, is never accorded parity, is always a subtractive term. The pigment must equally obey a second erasive imperative, and cover its own tracks: whereas with ink painting everything that is marked on the surface remains visible, save for those preliminaries or errors that are not considered part of the image, with oil even the whites and ground colours are opaque: stroke conceals canvas, as stroke conceals stroke.”⁴⁵

The obvious mark of the artist thus has a dual role, in that it at once subverts the illusion of space, but also suggests the production. The highly finished work disguises the process of painting and reinforces the illusion with the minimum of interference from the material. Girl with White Dog is ‘beyond time’.

Hans Hofmann taught that this double role of the mark was what painting was all about: the double locus of the mark existing on the surface *and* in the represented space.⁴⁶

The Degas, by virtue of medium of pastel, has the most sense of the process of production, of the individual history of the work, and of the deictic marker. We are reminded of T.J.Clark’s observations (above) that the Degas pastels, by virtue of their modest medium, were granted greater latitude in terms of the sexualized subject than Manet’s oil painting of

Olympia was.

Type

Type is another tool, like the grid, that has an ambiguous role in my discussion about material versus referential attributes. Lettering exists in different roles, and on different levels in my work. I often employ text as an element of still-life (a newspaper, poster, etc.).Ironically, as text only exists in two-dimensions, it is enhancing the illusion of three-dimensional space. This is the tilted grid, described above, which flips from denying the illusion to insisting on it.

Secondly I use lettering as a pattern, like the grid, to reinforce the picture plane, and the two-dimensionality of the work. Type frustrates the illusional space and creates a spatial tension when something painted in an illusionistic way is juxtaposed with it.

Finally, text is also used in a didactic way to emphatically direct the viewer. Like the exhibition label, the lettering in this case brackets the visual experience, in essence directing the viewer from *outside* of that experience. In the exhibition the work Meat Hooks plays on, and with, this role. The didactic programme is subverted by having nonsensical phrases that may or may not relate to the image they caption. Some of the captions appear to underscore the gestures in the panels, some seem obscurely related, while others seem arbitrary. As with many of the devices discussed in this paper the emphasis is on playing with the way that these devices are understood to work.

One could almost characterize the different relationships described above as the lettering ‘in’ the still-life as being about the relationship between the viewer and the painting (the illusion); the lettering as pattern being about the relationship between the painter and the painting (the materials); and the meta-message of lettering as didactic panel as about the relationship between the painter and the viewer: text that foregoes the painting and is outside the visual experience.

The first portion of this paper described the relationship of the materials and the referential elements. This portion of the paper has been devoted to describing various devices used to manipulate this relationship. Each work in the exhibition Knock Loudly can be situated within this scale and, using the devices described, can be ‘moved’ along it, stalking Kenneth Clark’s ‘flip’ of perception.

CONCLUSION

In the Theatre and in the World

“Traditionally, processes had been disguised: the polished marble skin of Canova’s sculpture and the enamel-like surfaces of Ingres’s painting testify to the proposition that the magic of art is to produce images that put the viewer in mind of what the images are of - goddesses, saints, princesses, a duke - without reference to how the image arose out of the material manipulations. The fingers of the artist would remain visible only in the clay studies, or the preparatory sketches, which would be cherished by other artists or by connoisseurs less concerned with *reference than with touch*”

Arthur Danto, Embodied Meanings: Critical Essays and Aesthetic Meditations ⁴⁷

In her text *Philosophical Issues in Art* Patricia Werhane qualifies her definition of formalism:

“This interpretation of formalism may be an exaggeration of what more sophisticated formalists mean to say. These theorists argue that one must examine the whole work of art as a finished independent unit to find out what a work is about. For example, one must read *Ulysses* rather than examine Joyce’s personal life to find out about this novel. But in the examination of the artwork one looks at the subject matter and what is expressed in the work as well as the formal structure. All of these elements are equally important. The point is that each needs to be examined as it appears in the context of the work rather than as it relates nature, to tradition, to the artist, or to a possible audience.” ⁴⁸

Given the opportunity I would situate my work somewhere within that definition. In this paper I have taken the opportunity to establish one model for discussing artwork, that being as a conversation between the material and what I have chosen to call the referential elements. Having established these poles, and their inherent conflict, my work, as I hope I have expounded, playfully navigates between them. This is also why many of the elements that make repeated appearances in my work, such as the grids, the nude, and elements of text, have double roles with regard to representation. While on the one hand they reinforce (or

undermine) the representation of three-dimensional space, they often function as ‘moles’, playing one half of this relationship off against the other.

The first part of this paper (**why**) set out to illuminate the framework within which this discussion could take place. I began by introducing the High Modernist position, and the anti-representational stand adopted by such thinkers as Greenberg and Bell. Contrasting this is the mythology of the ‘natural attitude’, or that prevalent belief in the objectivity of representation, exemplified by photography. In this section I also point out how the argument has been couched, by both camps, in moral and ethical terms. The second portion (**how**) was written in the first person and generally dealt with the specific works included in my thesis exhibition Knock Loudly.

It could be put forward that I am the most formal painter, in that I co-opt the elements of representation, and use them as devices to direct the viewer towards the material elements of the work, and vice-versa. Arthur Danto, describing an exhibition of Hans Hofmann says:

“The work itself could, uncharitably, be said to look like a painted abstract bulletin board, but in fact the redemption of paper by paint was a transition from rectangles affixed to a surface to rectangles both on the surface and within a represented space, and this double locus of the painted rectangle was pretty much what Hoffmann taught that painting was all about. Painting, he tirelessly maintained as both a teacher and a writer, was inherently representational, which meant that the picture plane must be preserved in its two-dimensionality and at the same time achieve a three-dimensional effect...But whereas all paintings are representational, Hofmann’s, in addition, are *about pictorial representation*.”⁴⁹

Not only are my works representational, they are *about* representation. Everything is about the work and about that moment of transition between the material qualities and the

reference: about the *moment of representation*.

As I have said since I arrived at the University of Calgary, I am a formalist, but not a Modernist. The result is, as mentioned above, formalism with complete disclosure, or representation with complete disclosure, depending upon which avenue you approach from. Painting that is, ideally, 'in your theatre but also in the world'.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Thomas Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (1962; rpt. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 37.
- 2 George Dickie, Aesthetics: An Introduction (1971; rpt. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 1977), pp. 14-15.
- 3 In preparing this synopsis of Kant's aesthetic I have relied on Linda Nead's excellent summary in The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity, and Sexuality (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 23-24.
- 4 Dickie, p. 77.
- 5 Robert Atkins, ArtSpeak: A Guide to Contemporary Ideas Movements and Buzzwords (New York: Abbeville Press, 1990), p. 102.
- 6 Clement Greenberg, Modernist Painting (1960), as quoted in Arthur Danto, Embodied Meanings: Critical Essays and Aesthetic Meditations (1994; rpt. New York: Noonday Press, 1995), p. 326.
- 7 Clement Greenberg, as quoted in Gene Blocker, Philosophy of Art (New York: Charles Scriber's Sons, 1979), p. 169.
- 8 Clement Greenberg, Arts Yearbook 4 (1961), pp. 109 - 116, as quoted in Francis Francina, ed. Pollock and After: The Critical Debate (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), p. 5.
- 9 Kenneth Clark, Looking at Pictures (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), p. 16.
- 10 Janis Mink, Duchamp: Art as Anti-Art (Koln, Germany: Benedikt Taschen, 1995), pp 66 - 67.
- 11 Meyer Shapiro, "The Nature of Abstract Art", Marxist Quarterly (vol. 1, no. 1, January, 1937), pp. 77 - 98, as quoted in Francina, p. 4.
- 12 Danto, p. 113.
- 13 Norman Bryson, Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze , (1983; rpt. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 3.

- 14 *ibid.*, p. 6.
- 15 *ibid.*, pp. 7 - 10.
- 16 Roland Barthes, Image-Music-Text, trans. Stephen Heath, (1977; rpt. London: Fontana Books, 1990), pp. 19 - 20.
- 17 Nead, p. 97.
- 18 Barthes, p. 17.
- 19 Bryson, p. 14.
- 20 Barthes, p. 17.
- 21 *ibid.*, p. 18.
- 22 John Berger, About Looking, (1980; rpt. New York: Vintage Books, Random House, Inc., 1980), p. 54.
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- 24 Michel Foucault, This is Not a Pipe, trans. James Harkness, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), p. 44.
- 25 David Sylvester, Interviews with Francis Bacon 1962 - 1979 , (1975; rpt. London: Thames and Hudson, 1980), p. 17.
- 26 Milan Kundera, Life is Elsewhere, trans. Peter Kussi (1973; rpt. London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1987), pp. 59 - 60.
- 27 Clark, pp. 36 -37.
- 28 David Cook, A History of Narrative Film, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1981), p. 462.
- 29 Bertolt Brecht, as quoted in Berger, p. 65.
- 30 Linda Nochlin, "Floating in Gender Nirvana", Art in America, March 2000, p. 96.
- 31 Friedrich Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy , trans. Shaun Whiteside (London:

- Penguin Books, 1993), p. 14.
- 32 Robert Pirsig, Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, (1974; rpt. New York: Bantam Books, 1984), p. 238.
- 33 Nead, p. 1.
- 34 *ibid.*, pp. 103 - 104.
- 35 Kenneth Clark, The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form, (1956; rpt. New York: The Bollingen Foundation, 1964), p. 8.
- 36 Nead, p. 97.
- 37 *ibid.*, p. 87 - 88.
- 38 T.J. Clark, The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers, (1984; rpt. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 101 - 102.
- 39 Nead, p. 13.
- 40 "From Miyake to Museum: Man Ray's show at the Art Gallery of Ontario Reflects the Century's High-Art Obsession with Fashion", Globe and Mail, 22 July, 2000, p. R5, col. 5.
- 41 Sylvester, p. 23.
- 42 Berger, pp. 84 -85.
- 43 Bryson, p. 92.
- 44 Berger, p. 84.
- 45 Bryson, p. 92.
- 46 Danto, p. 113.
- 47 *ibid.*, p. 92, (my italics).
- 48 Werhane, pp. 100 - 101.
- 49 Danto, p. 113, (my italics).

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