

ANDY BOOT

BACKGROUNDS, SURFACES AND LANDSCAPES

KALEIDOSCOPE PRESS

The title of this book purports to present three distinct parts of seeing, three distinct zones or planes integral to the organization of an image. As if each part could be localised and individually demarcated as independent, albeit no less contingent upon the other. Background. Surface. Landscape. Like a puzzle, how do all these pieces fit together? The background can be found somewhere beneath the surface of the image, which itself is a landscape. Or maybe a landscape is actually the background to an image indistinguishable from its surface? But in a world of surfaces, a world either being constantly pushed up or flattened to a surface of, say, a screen, where does the surface begin and end? Is there even a surface any more? Does not the word "surface" become redundant, tautological? Perhaps more insistent than that question is the ontological status of the image. If there is nothing but surface, a world composed of sheer façade, then that would mean that there is nothing but image – the "content" of that unbroken, unilateral, unending virtual veneer (that which becomes labyrinthian by vir-

tue of its totality, of there being no way out) – at which point the word image itself, and its constituent elements, borders on a similar redundancy. In such a totalizing context, an interesting Duchampian question comes to, alas, the surface: just as Duchamp once asked himself if it was possible to make a work of art that was not a work of art, the Vienna-based Australian artist Andy Boot asks, all but rhetorically, not to mention paradoxically, if it is possible to make an image that is not an image. Indeed, what constitutes an image now that we live in the labyrinth of images? What is its current zero degree? And how is that determined? Or perhaps better yet, legislated?

It happens that Boot had a few of these questions answered, at least provisionally, when he became fascinated by a certain kind of confetti spam. In this form of spam, a layer of digital confetti is discreetly superimposed upon an advertisement (Viagra, etc), seeking to ensure that the layer does not interfere with the legibility of the message. Superficially transformed into an image, the spam camouflages its actual

content and is therefore granted the privilege of circulation (if it sounds like a reverse allegory of the history painting, that's because it probably is). By way of addition, a specious act of subtraction is effectuated, which in turn, permits an unquantifiable multiplication of "information" to take place.

Inspired by such arbitrary zero-degree image legislation, Boot wanted to see what would happen if he applied the confetti technique, as it were, to his own practice, which he did in a series of paintings, works on paper, and even sculptures. The works on paper wield the paradoxically significant title Backgrounds (2010-). These consist of framed pieces of paper, whose surfaces have been sparsely riddled by series of all over multi-coloured, if slightly antic, worm-like marks (if they seem antic or gestural, it's because the artist availed himself of the novel technique of spaghetti tossing in order to achieve the desired effect). To describe these works as backgrounds which have been pushed up to the foreground would be more incorrect than correct, because, in the end,

what they do is shuffle such issues off to the side. In a further, say, double twist of the screw, Boot transforms this all but invisible, zero degree image into something visible, while depriving it of its original purpose, which is to act as a smuggler of textual information. If here the artist neutralises such image legislation by rendering it visible, in Surface (one) 2010, he also begins to disclose just how potentially sinister it is. In this work, Boot visibly concealed a confetti painting, like a table cloth, which was overlaid with glass, on the desk of Croy Nielsen gallery. Inconspicuously incorporated into its environment, the work inevitably alludes to a phantasmal totality, of what could be called the invisible, omnipresent labyrinth of images. And yet, given the festive and antic nature of these marks, such a minatory appraisal of the ontological status of the image is not without a sense of humor. Take for instance Untitled (2010). One of the more ridiculous yet endearing pieces from this body of work, this forlorn sculpture/painting consists of a small, ratty swath of canvas, bearing a single

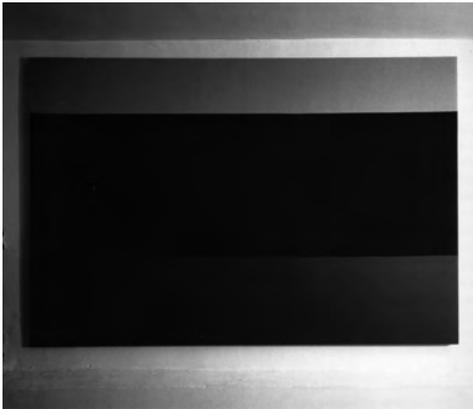
confetti mark, placed at the head of a tubular segment of black rubber, itself held in place in a small, round foundation of concrete, like a buoy. Reduced to a semaphoric minimum, this trace seems intent on claiming its place among the labyrinth of images, despite its ostensible lack of intelligibility. Anxiously signaling, its presence is assured not just by its support, but more importantly through a virtual absence, which surrounds and extends beyond it, in every direction.

As much could be said to happen in the image of the sea in Boot's Stella di Mare (2011), which consists of an approximately two and half by two meter image of a sun-mottled portion of seascape applied to a wall like wall paper. Presented as such, the depthless light of playing on the sea's surface tends to collapse the space inside the image, pushing its contents up to its surface. As if it, the sea – which here becomes a metaphor for the image, a sea of images – could break through and come flooding in, surrounding us on all sides, like a labyrinth. Even though it already has.

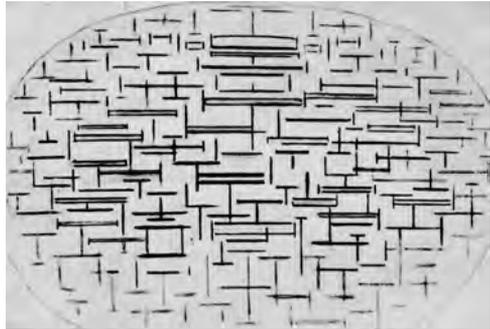
MICHELE D'AURIZIO

Dear A.,

Forgive this overdue reply. The job of covering all the surfaces in my apartment with marbled plastic adhesive requires painstaking concentration: I barely perceive the days passing because my gaze is so lost in the veined design of the material. However, I'm thrilled by the idea of living in a space that is finally generic, a space reduced to its own archetypal forms: it will be the rendering of a primitive cave!



Blinky Palermo
Untitled (für Tünn + Margarethe Konering) (Wvz 156), 1972
Cotton, 160.3 x 240 cm - Private Collection

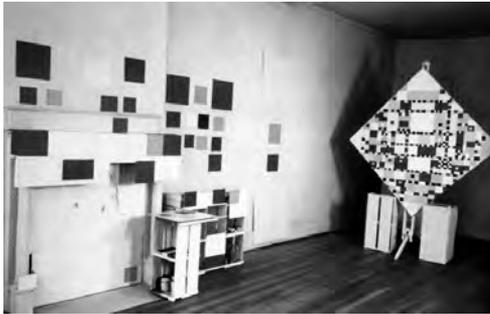


Piet Mondrian, The Sea, 1914
Charcoal drawing, 95 x 128 cm
Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice

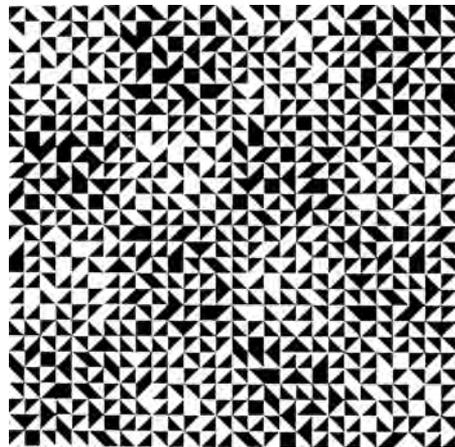
Alois Riegl distinguished the following in objects: form, "which is substantial," objective surface, "which, as it belongs to form, is no less substantial," subjective surface, "which is only an illusion of the visual sense." My apartment will be the circle of hell where Riegl is to be punished. That triad of his seems awfully hypocritical to me, affirming supremacy of sight while attributing to the tactile sense a marginal role that is, however, necessary for knowing objects. I wonder how Riegl would have interpreted a Cloth Picture by Blinky Palermo: is it not perhaps a miraculous convergence of those three qualities? In a cloth picture, the picture is reduced to its primal nature: fabric stretched on a frame, while the colour, which is the colour of the fabric itself, coincides with the figure on the surface. Moreover, even the "vision from a distance" does not suggest any bizarre interpretation: the proportions of the composition are even, the direction strongly horizontal, the use of shades of blue and green, give back those images as allusions to the landscape - and this is true from any point of view, it should be noted. Palermo achieved the greatest degree of flatness in the act of painting: his paintings are nothing more than "background." Yet, faced with a Cloth Picture, I can never restrain myself from stroking his very human cotton; from the picture emerge all the generic qualities that make it more like consumer goods - after all, who would not want to have Cloth Pictures decorating the walls of their apartment?

MICHELE D'AURIZIO

From the window overlooking the ocean, I often see the ghost of Piet Mondrian wandering around the pier. Who can say if Mondrian knew that his painting often ran the risk of expiring into decor? Ornament, said Markus Br nderlin, was a stowaway hidden in the hold of modern art... The belief that everything could be "reduced to a common denominator," that each figure could be "digitalised into a pattern of horizontal and vertical units, and thus scattered on the surface, that each hierarchy could be "abolished," led Mondrian to atomise the landscape, nullifying the role of the background. When the artist wrote: "The mutual action of the two opposites consisting of the inner and outer qualities (spirit and nature) can lead us to see life - and therefore art - as a constant return of the same thing (in a different way): as a continuous *repetition*," he affirmed that abstraction, and abstraction alone, could embody the universal category, but at the same time, he meant that that same abstraction would generate nothing other than *patterns*.



Piet Mondrian's studio,
New York, 1944

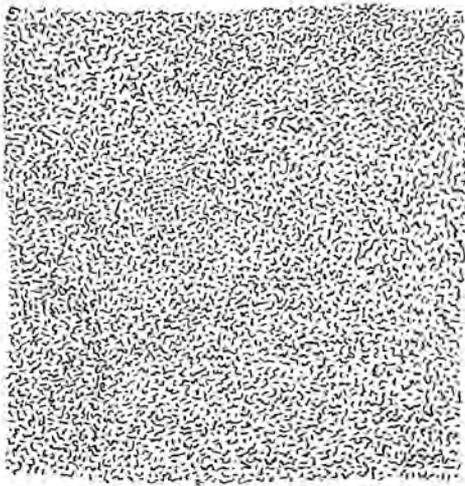


Anni Albers, *Second Movement I*, 1978
Etching / Aquatint, 71 x 71 cm
© The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation /
Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

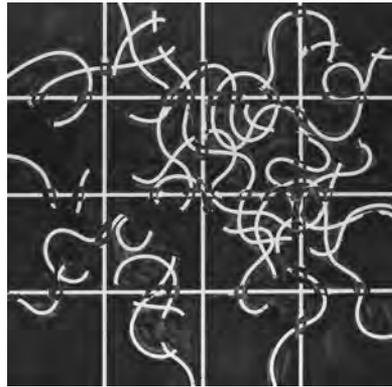
Mondrian left Victory Boogie Woogie incomplete because perhaps for the first time in his painting, he found himself before an image that expanded in space with unprecedented fluidity: it was as if the picture were inhabited by a *poltergeist* ... You know that when he died, the walls of his studio were covered with chromatic studies very similar to those of Victory Boogie-Woogie? To the first visitors it seemed that he had "scattered" one of his paintings around the space. Let us then break a lance in favour of those who have evaded any distinction between "high" and "low" abstract in favour of a widespread abstraction, that does not bask in the verbose game of background and surface but is always and only the background of everyday life! I've always loved Anni Albers, for that matter. I like to think that the designs for her fabrics were gently making fun of her husband's obsessions. Whether we like it or not, abstraction is a "bourgeois" fact and Anni gave it back in the form of consumer goods: if Wilhelm Worringer was really right when he wrote that "the urge for abstraction is the product of a great internal unrest inspired in man by the phenomena of the outside world," the *middle-class* anxiety for the "principle of form" was able to bask beneath bedcovers designed by Mrs. Albers.

MICHELE D'AURIZIO

Think about it: is it more important that an observer perceives or recognises a specific formal system, or that he senses that underneath there is a system? Donald Judd preferred the second option; he was a cerebral man, after all. In my apartment, a refined eye would know how to recognise the “repetition” – the plastic adhesive is a material produced in series, it is a *pattern* – but the space would still be perceived as lacking in specificity: a “total” environment and yet “without qualities.” At this age we have all digested the lesson of radical design! Yet I regret never having had the opportunity to know whether Ettore Sottsass Jr. knew about the Formica surfaces of the sculptures by Richard Artschwager, or if the predecessors of his designs for laminates were only tables in Milanese cafes... “At that time I thought about doing things that were within the sphere of the absolute and final,” said Sottsass, “but multiplied to such an extent that any interpretation of the three-dimensional shape was corrupted, to then become the permanent, plaintiff, obsessive, relentless and uncontrollable presence of stray bits of matter in space, such that no one could ever detect their origins or locations or interrelations. For him, laminate was an “extra-human” material, not only because it was industrial, but because it could spatialise the surface of an object to the point of negating any structural feature.



Ettore Sottsass Jr.,
Project of Plastic Laminate, 1978



Heimo Zobernig, *Untitled*, 2009
Acrylic on canvas, 200 x 200 cm.
Courtesy: Friedrich Petzel Gallery, New York

Do you remember when I wrote that I was fascinated by *pattern* because there any talk of background and surface was useless? How would you interpret something like a laminate, which is not a form but only a surface? I would say that flatness should be intended as a “binary” form. Today we can counter the sermons of Greenberg with the *ready-made* abstractionism of very normal laminate! Think about the work of Heimo Zobernig. Think about his ability to treat the tradition ironically without being blasphemous. Think of his amused approach in handling the more academic and technocratic modernism – his paintings, where the grid is “disturbed” by a tangle of lines similar to colonies of enzymes, echoes of the reference to the performance of the blue Klein that is in the background. In Zobernig the dialectic background/surface, as well as the representation/abstraction, are resolved in a “manner” – a manner which is pure theatre, pure camp sensibility, pure decoration.

MICHELE D'AURIZIO

For the dining room of the Palais Stoclet, Josef Hoffmann commissioned from Gustav Klimt three mosaics to be “embedded” in the surfaces of the Paonazzo marble walls. Klimt and his colleagues in the Art Nouveau movement saw that the decorative potential of the natural motifs lay in their lending themselves to be interpreted as abstract designs. The subject of the two mosaics positioned on the long walls of the room is the tree of life, whose leaves form a spiral pattern spread over the entire surface; in both, a single figure (Expectation) on one end is balanced by a couple embracing (Fulfilment / The Embrace); the centre of the figure is dominated by the tree trunk. The third mosaic, however, is on the wall; it is a purely abstract figure, which unlike the two larger mosaics is not set against a background of marble but fills the entire surface: it is a rigorously flat figure. How wonderful, right? In a conversation with John Armleder, Daniel Baumann defines a Plank by John McCracken as “a person who does not speak, who is comfortably there, but totally at ease on the sidelines, without a real relationship with others. It involves the whole room [but] remains an alien, although it is very beautiful.” Doesn't it seem like the sweetest definition ever of an ornament?



Palais Stoclet, Brussels
view of the dining-room, 1905-11
© Moderne Bauformen XIII, 1914
Photo: MAK / Georg Mayer



John McCracken, Untitled # 3, 1974
Paint, resin, fibreglass, wood, 82.5 x 122.5 cm
Private collection, Germany
Courtesy Galleria Massimo De Carlo, Milan

Without running into acrobatic codifications, the only function attributable to McCracken's Planks is decorative. The Planks are “made” of pure colour, but the colour, regardless, tends to be interpreted as an abstract property. It is the energy that emanates from the surface that makes the experience of these otherwise anonymous forms surreal. Similarly, the objects by Sottsass are archetypal forms, in which laminate is a cosmetic, but it is thanks to the laminate, on the surface, that we find that short circuit between the formal symbolic and totemic reference and the highly personal sense of the sacredness of every individual who uses those objects as the “spreaders” of magic in everyday life. The Planks with the marbled surface were short-lived however: the attempt to create a sculpture taking it from a more vibrant form of painting “becomes a mere exercise in *camp sensibility*, an attempt to play with the perception of others. But the world of cosmetics, “things-that-are-not-as-they are” already belonged to the references of McCracken from the moment in which his art was defined as a “fetishization of surface.”

MICHELE D'AURIZIO

For the surfaces of my apartment I chose marble because I don't want to lose contact with the earth. I won't commission mosaics to be set into the walls, I will not resort to the use of modernist *patterns*, much less Sottsassian laminates. And yet this operation has no purpose but to provide a background to my everyday life. When asked about the difference between art and decoration, Armleder replied that ultimately there is no difference. Once, he invited a renowned French interior designer, Jacques Garcia, to create an eclectic "set" for some of his pictures so that they wouldn't lose their aura of works of art and could be interpreted the same way as all the other ornaments in the environment. But now the days of eclecticism are in the past and what remains is only the opportunity to love the art that exalts the banality of everyday life.



John Armleder: Jacques Garcia,
installation view, Centre culturel suisse, Paris, 2008
Photo: Sébastien Agnetti



2001 A Space Odyssey
film still, 1968

It is dawn. I'm going back to my work with the adhesive plastics.
See you soon.

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