

Lynn Stern: Thoughts on Abstraction

I have long been attracted to abstraction —more accurately, a particular type of abstraction — and have found it increasingly important in my work as a photographer. Recently, I began thinking about why that is; this essay is an attempt to organize those thoughts.

There are many who think abstraction in photography is a contradiction in terms, in that they believe photography is inherently a medium of representation. I disagree. Because photographs can depict people, places, and things with great and accurate detail doesn't mean this is all it can do, or what it 'should' do. Instead, just as painting is defined as a medium of paint without regard to what kind of image is painted, photography should be defined as a medium of light without regard to what kind of image that light creates.

Indeed, this is precisely how it is defined by Diarmuid Costello in *What is Abstraction in Photography?* Costello cites a new generation of philosophers who state that "photographic imaging is henceforth identified by whether or not it implicates a 'photographic event' in its causal history — that is an event of recording information from a passing state of a light image formed in real time on a light sensitive surface. This can, but need not be, the camera's film plane or sensor: it might equally be a piece of photographic paper or film exposed directly to a light source. What matters, as the term 'photography' implies, is the role of light in the image."¹

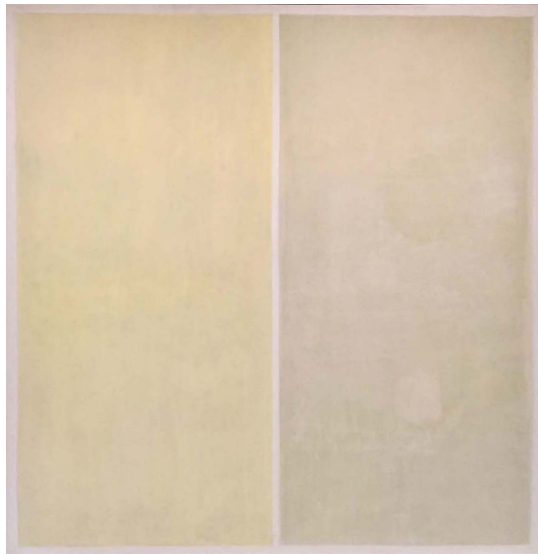
Thus, abstraction in photography is just as 'legitimate' as representation or documentation, and as appropriate to that medium as it is to painting. Interestingly, many of abstraction's earliest proponents — Man Ray, László Moholy-Nagy, Nathan Lerner, and György Kepes — were both painters and photographers; indeed, Man Ray would have been quite happy with Costello's definition, since he believed "It is light that creates"² and that "light is an instrument as subtle as the brush."³

That said, regardless of the medium what, exactly, defines or characterizes abstraction? It is not an 'ism' or style: abstraction is, instead, an approach to making art — a vision of what the artist wants from art and what s/he believes a work of art should be. This is a personal, not an art historical conclusion (although art historian Mark Rosenthal concurs in *Abstraction in the Twentieth Century: Total Risk, Freedom, Discipline*). That abstraction is not a singular style is demonstrated by the considerable difference in look and feeling of many abstract works created since the beginning of the 20th century — a Kandinsky, for instance, feels quite different from an Ellsworth Kelly, which in turn feels quite different from a Peter Halley, although they are all abstract. Common to all, however, is a belief in the autonomy of the work of art — its ability to convey meaning without reference to anything in the world outside. As Clive Bell expressed it in *Art*: "To appreciate a work of art we need bring with us nothing

from life, no knowledge of its ideas and affairs. . . . We require nothing but sensibility.”⁴

I distinguish between two types of abstraction: the first is based on the belief that a work of art is fundamentally metaphoric and that, as Ad Reinhardt said, “What is not there is more important than what is there;” the second is based on the belief that the work’s physical properties are all that matter, and that it neither has nor needs any metaphysical, emotional, or spiritual meaning – that, as Frank Stella famously said, “What you see is what you see.” It is the first type, which I will call Evocative Abstraction, that attracts me most strongly and has particular meaning for my own imagery: the work of the pre-WWI ‘pure’ abstract painters such as Malevich, Kandinsky, and Delaunay, and photographers such as Alfred Stieglitz and Otto Steinert; and the abstract expressionist painters (especially Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman) and photographers such as Paul Caponigro and Minor White in the late 40s, 50s and 60s. What attracts me to them is their desire to convey pure feeling, their conviction that art can express the ineffable and intangible, and their success in creating forms whose effect goes beyond the forms *per se*, as the work in the second group does not. The evocative abstract artists were at home with words like ‘sublime,’ transcendent,’ spiritual” and ‘immanence.’ Over and over in their writings one comes across phrases such as “Form is the outward expression of inner meaning” (Kandinsky) and “What is real is not the external form, but the essence of things” (Brancusi).

What strikes me repeatedly in the work of the evocative abstract painters is the blurred or softened edges of their forms, the effect of which is that the images seem to vibrate. The edges of Malevich’s forms in his iconic Suprematist works may seem at first glance to be straight, hard lines, but, looking more closely one sees they are not; they are slightly softened. This is true of Agnes Martin’s work as well, and many of Newman’s ‘zip’ paintings.

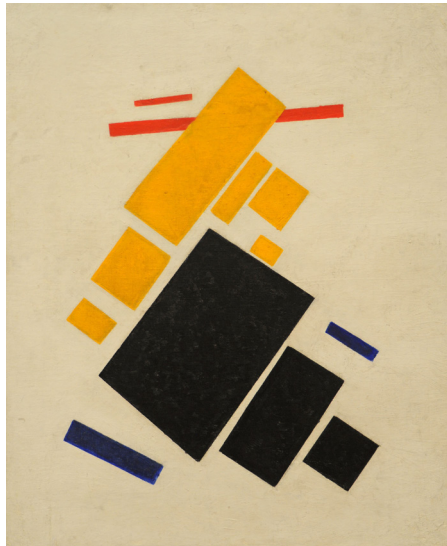


Agnes Martin, *Heather*, 1958



Barnett Newman, *Onement I*, 1948

Moreover, the colors are not solid and smooth; instead, they are subtly modulated so that it feels as if you can see into, or even through the surface, promoting a feeling of depth and vibration in space. There is also a sense of movement between Malevich's forms.

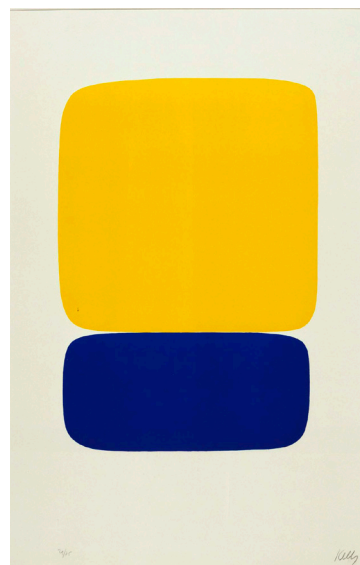


Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematist Composition - Airplane Flying*, 1915

By contrast, in the work of 'hard-edged' abstract artists, such as Ellsworth Kelly, both forms and grounds consist of smooth surfaces (Lawrence Alloway referred to them as "immaculate"), unmodulated, and solid, promoting a feeling of flatness; the forms themselves seem firmly fixed in place and monumental. Compare, for example, the effect of Kelly's *Yellow Over Dark Blue*, 1965 & Rothko's *Untitled (Black, Red Over Black on Red)*, 1964.



Mark Rothko, *Untitled (Black, Red Over Black on Red)*, 1964



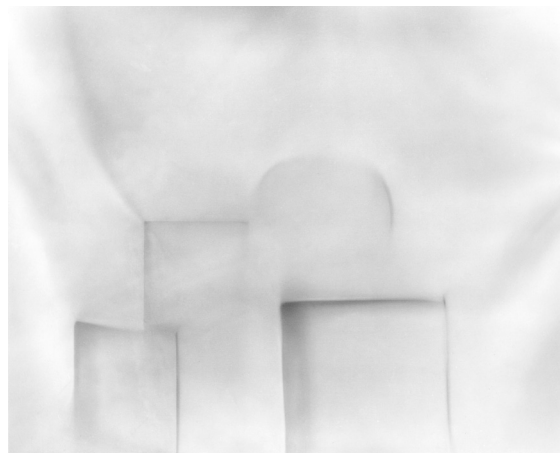
Ellsworth Kelly, *Yellow over Dark Blue*, 1965

Another way of describing the difference between Kelly's 'hard-edged' work and Rothko's 'soft-edged' paintings might be to say that Kelly works with shapes, and Rothko with forms: shape, as defined by Webster, is "the *surface* configuration of a thing.... Something distinguished from its surroundings by its *outline* (italics mine). In other words, shape is flat. Form, on the other hand, is "the structure of something" (Webster), and "an element of art [that] is three-dimensional and encloses space." For Kandinsky, such form will "advance or retreat and make of the picture a living thing, and so achieve an artistic expansion of space."⁵



Vasily Kandinsky, *Landscape with Rain*, 1913.

Furthermore, as Rosenthal notes, Kandinsky maintained that such form "originate[s] in authentic feeling, and [is] therefore filled with inherent content... *Something* is always being represented."⁶ It is interesting to note that, while it's impossible to define precisely such 'significant form,' as Clive Bell termed it, it has been described in very similar ways over time to indicate form that feels, not only three dimensional, but also *alive* – whether it be Kandinsky's form that "vibrates", Rothko's, 'plastic' form that gives the "tangible sensation of recession and advancement,"⁷ Arthur Dove's forms filled with "movement, space and, above all, light"⁸ or my own 'charged form.'

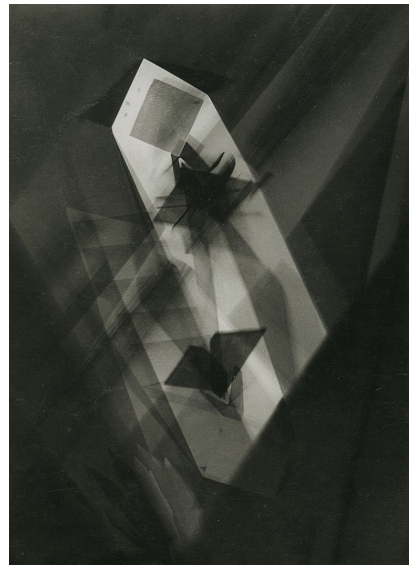


Lynn Stern, *Quickening #19-51a*, 2019

The concept of four-dimensional space, which was first proposed at the turn of the 20th century, was propounded a decade later by the artist Max Weber and the poet and critic, Guillaume Apollinaire. In his article, “The Fourth Dimension From a Plastic Point of View”, published in 1910 in Stieglitz’s *Camera Work: A Photographic Quarterly*, Weber referred to the “fourth dimension, the dimension of infinity.... It is the space that envelops... any solid; or the intervals between objects or volumes of matter if receptively beheld. It is somewhat similar to color and depth in musical sounds. It... stirs emotion. A form at its extremity still continues reaching out into space if it is imbued with intensity or energy.” Using the same language in “La Quatrième Dimension”, which became a chapter in his 1913 book about Cubism, *Les Peintres Cubistes*, Apollinaire wrote of “space externalizing itself in all directions... space itself, the dimension of the infinite.”⁹ It is always noted that the forms in analytic cubist paintings are seen from many different angles at once, but beyond that, they seem to me to be constantly moving in space – vibrating in space. Or, more accurately, vibrating *with* space, for there is no separation whatsoever between figure and ground. Frequently, the clustered volumes seem to project powerfully toward us as if they might explode from the canvas, bringing the space with them.



Georges Braque, *Violin and Candlestick*, 1910

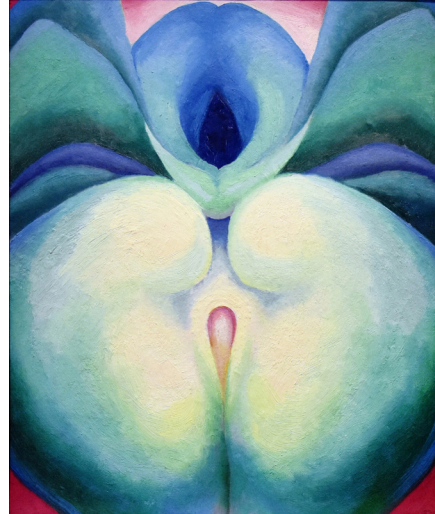


László Moholy-Nagy, *Photogramme*, 1922-1923

While later evocative abstract artists such as Georgia O’Keeffe and Arthur Dove, as well as the Abstract Expressionists, did not, to my knowledge, refer to a fourth dimension, space itself continued to be of great importance in their work. In addition to the tremendous sense of depth in O’Keeffe’s work—of forms opening outward—the edges of her forms are nuanced; the color doesn’t ‘sit’ next to another color, but rather, it shades into it, moves into and around it, so that the entire image feels alive. This is accompanied, as in the work of Arthur Dove as well, by a radiant luminosity and a sense of quiet but intense energy emanating from the forms.



Arthur Dove, *Waterfall*, 1925



Georgia O'Keeffe, *Series I White and Blue Flower Shapes*, 1919

These same qualities characterize the work of certain abstract expressionist painters—Rothko, for example, spoke of “a permeating tactile medium in whose essence all objects participate”¹⁰ – though the emphasis on movement and the vastness of space – ‘the infinite’ – took on a more emotional or spiritual connotation; this is clearly reflected in the works’ titles, such as Barnett Newman’s series called “Onement” as well as in Rothko’s writings, wherein he called art “the language of the spirit,”¹¹ and said it “must provide the implications of infinity to any situation.”¹² While much has been made of the flatness of Jackson Pollock’s work, visual perception differs from individual to individual, and, to my eye, Pollock’s drip paintings – some more than others – read not only from edge to edge but also back and forth in space. The tension alone between the thickest drips, which stand out almost in relief, and the less heavily painted or unpainted parts of the canvas, creates a feeling of spatial vibration. I see these works as exploding OUT as well as across.



Jackson Pollock, *Blue Poles (Number 11)*, 1952

If Abstraction is not a style, but rather, an approach to making art, the rigid distinction between abstraction and representation no longer obtains. I would argue that the opposite of ‘abstraction’ is not ‘figuration’: it is ‘literalism.’ The objective of abstraction is to move away from depiction / description of everyday reality. An abstract work can have elements of figuration and still be abstract – consider, for example, Willem de Kooning’s “Woman” paintings. Indeed, showing remnants of figures, or distorting figures and objects, can be very powerful tools of expression and subjectivity. In this regard, I would cite the work of Francis Bacon and the “Deep South” photographs of Sally Mann. While neither of these artists is considered abstract (Bacon actually disliked abstraction), their work departs from realism in order to express pure feeling – a desire Bacon cited frequently.



Francis Bacon, *Study After Velasquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X*, 1953

Additionally, Bacon’s work has many of the previously cited visual characteristics of evocative abstraction: the powerful sense of three-dimensionality, the movement through space, the tremendous energy emanating from within the image, and the blurred edges that seem to merge into one another —indeed, many of his forms seem to be dissolving into space before our eyes. Mann’s luminous “Deep South” images are, I would argue, abstracted. With their



Sally Mann, *Deep South, Scarred Tree*, 1998

blurring, soft focus, chemical alterations, and other distortions, they are far from depictions of the actual landscapes: instead, they are evocations of ghostly spaces, imbued with Mann's feelings about the land, its past, and her involvement with it.

It should be stressed that the early proponents of abstraction – both the advocates of pure abstraction in painting, such as Kandinsky, Malevich, and Mondrian, and the Pictorialist and early modernist photographers such as Stieglitz, Steinert, and Man Ray – all viewed their work as revolutionary, as did the mid-century abstract expressionist painters. For Stieglitz, what constituted the 'revolution' was to divorce photography from realistic, uninflected depiction and embrace subjective, expressive imagery; for Kandinsky, Malevich, and Mondrian, the revolution was spiritual (many artists in their circle were influenced by mysticism and the occult), and they believed, as Kandinsky wrote, that "Form is the outward expression of inner meaning"¹³ and a path to transcendence; while, for Barnett Newman, the revolution was specifically social and political: "If my work were properly understood, it would be the end of state capitalism and totalitarianism" he said in a 1970 interview.¹⁴

It is ironic, then, that today abstraction is considered by many to be, at best, irrelevant, and at worst, frivolous. It is thought that art must be 'socially conscious' to be of any value, and that that such consciousness must be literal, in that it should address specific issues. Often, as with artists such as Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger, while the work is visual, it has a very significant verbal component that gets the message across. While I don't mean to denigrate this work, I believe that actual condemnation, no matter how satirical or graphically sophisticated, is not the only, or even the most effective, way for a work of art to oppose materialism or social injustice.

A different option is to offer a strictly visual experience that exists in a different realm, precisely the way music does. As Herbert Marcuse writes in *The Aesthetic Dimension*, "Art's power lies in the estranging...images which make perceptible that which is not perceived in everyday life..."¹⁵ By offering an alternative from a completely different realm, 'authentic art,' he argues, constitutes an indictment of the established reality and is thus revolutionary. "The more immediately political the work of art, the more it reduces the power of estrangement and the radical, transcendent goals of change."¹⁶ For a confirmation of this, view the scene in the film "The Shawshank Redemption" when Tim Robbins locks the guard in the bathroom and puts on a recording of the extraordinarily beautiful duet from Mozart's "The Marriage of Figaro," 'Su l'aria Che soave zeffiretto,' which is broadcast over the loudspeaker outside. The extended moment is pure magic. Every prisoner in the courtyard stands still, absolutely transfixed, staring in the direction of the sound. "To this day, I don't know what those two ladies were singing about," Morgan Freeman says in voice over. "Truth is, I don't want to know. Some things best left unsaid." THAT is the power of art, and that is the goal of abstraction.

I have written out these thoughts in order to better understand the aspects of abstraction – both formal and spiritual / emotional – that attract me so strongly and constitute

the wellspring of my work. As importantly, I want to argue that abstraction is not a style, but, rather, an approach to making art; and that photographers have the same access to that approach as artists working in any other medium. We are as free to use light in the service of abstraction as painters are to use paint.— *Lynn Stern*

Notes:

1. *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 58, Issue 4, Oct. 2018, p. 390.
2. Arturo Schwarz, Man Ray, *The Rigour of Imagination*, (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1977, p. 228.
3. W. Rotzler, *Photography As Artistic Experiment from Fox Talbot to Moholy-Nagy*, part of a series, *Photography: Man and Movements*, ed. by Romeo Matinex and Max Wyss, (Garden City, NY: American Photographic Book Co. Inc., 1976).
4. Clive Bell, *Art*, no publisher or date, p. 9, p. 36 (first published London: Chatto & Windus, 1914).
5. Vasily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1977), p. 45.
6. Mark Rosenthal, *Abstraction in the Twentieth Century: Total Risk, Freedom Discipline*, (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 1996), p. 37.
7. Mark Rothko, *The Artist's Reality: Philosophies of Art*, ed. by Christopher Rothko (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 55.
8. Balken, D. B., *Arthur G. Dove: Pastels, Charcoals, Watercolors*, exhibition catalogue, February 6 – March 13 1993, Terry Dintenfass Gallery, New York, p. 6.
9. Quote by Guillaume Apollinaire, “La Peinture nouvelle: Notes d’Art,” *Les Soirées de Paris*, no. 3 (April, 1912): p. 90; and *Les Peintres Cubistes: Médiations esthétiques* (Paris: Eugène Figuière, 1913), p. 16, as quoted in Linda Dalrymple Henderson, “Mysticism, Romanticism, and the Fourth Dimension,” in *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890 – 1985*, ed. Maurice Tuchman (New York: Abbeville Press and Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1986), p. 220.
10. Mark Rothko, *The Artist's Reality: Philosophies of Art*, p. 32.
11. Mark Rothko, *Writings on Art*, ed. by Miguel López-Remiro (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 39.
12. Rothko, *The Artist's Reality: Philosophies of Art*, p. 95.
13. Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, p. 29.
14. Barnett Newman, “Interview with Emile de Antonio” (1970), in John P. O’Neill, ed., *Selected Writings and Interviews* (New York: Knopf, 1990), pp. 307-308, as quoted in Rosenthal, *Abstraction in the Twentieth Century*, p. 122.
15. Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), p. 72.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. xii –xiii.

Credits

Agnes Martin (1912-2004), *Heather*, 1958, oil on canvas, 70 x 70 in. (177.8 x 177.8 cm). Private Collection. © 2020 Estate of Agnes Martin /Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Barnett Newman (1905-1970), *Onement I*, 1948, oil on canvas and oil on masking tape on canvas, 27 1/4 x 16 1/4 in. (69.2 x 41.2 cm). Gift of Annalee Newman, MoMA, New York. © 2020 Barnett Newman Foundation /Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Kazimir Malevich (1878-1935), *Suprematist Composition: Airplane Flying*, 1915, oil on canvas, 22 7/8 x 19 in. (58.1 x 48.3 cm). MoMA, New York

Mark Rothko (1903-1970), *Untitled (Black, Red over Black on Red)*, 1964, oil on canvas, 80 7/10 x 76 in. (205 x 193 cm). Centre Pompidou, Paris. © 1998 Kate Rothko Prizel and Christopher Rothko /Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ ADAGP, Paris

Ellsworth Kelly (1923-2015), *Yellow over Dark Blue*, from the Suite of Twenty-seven Color Lithographs, 1964-1965, color lithograph on paper, 22 1/2 x 15 1/2 in. (57.1 x 39.3 cm). © 2020 Ellsworth Kelly. Image: Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington DC.

Vasily Kandinsky (1866-1944), *Landscape with Rain (Landschaft mit Regen)*, 1913, oil on canvas, 27 3/4 x 30 7/8 in. (70.5 x 78.4 cm). Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. © 2020 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris

Lynn Stern, *Quickening #19-51a*, 2019, archival inkjet pigment print, 38 x 45 in. (96.52 x 114.4 cm). © 2019 Lynn Stern.

Georges Braque (1882-1963), *Still Life - Violin and Candlestick (Nature Morte -Violon et Compotier)*, 1910, oil on canvas, 24 in. x 19 3/4 in. (60.96 cm x 50.17 cm). SFMOMA, San Francisco. © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York /ADAGP, Paris

László Moholy-Nagy (1895-1946), *Photogramme*, 1922-1923. © 2020 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

Arthur Dove (1880-1946), *Waterfall*, 1925, oil on hardboard, 10 x 8 in. (25.4 x 20.32 cm). The Phillips Collection, Washington D.C. © The Estate of Arthur G. Dove, courtesy Terry Dintenfass, Inc.

Georgia O'Keeffe (1887-1986), *Series I White & Blue Flower Shapes*, 1919, oil on board, 19 7/8 x 15 3/4 in. (50.48 x 40 cm). Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, Santa Fe. © 2020 The Georgia O'Keeffe Foundation /Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Jackson Pollock (1912-1956), *Blue poles [Number 11, 1952]*, 1952, enamel and aluminum paint with glass on canvas, 83 1/2 x 192 1/2 in. (212.1 x 488.9 cm). National Gal-

lery of Australia, Sydney. © 2020 Pollock-Krasner Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VISCOPY, Australia

Francis Bacon (1909-1992), *Study After Velásquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X*, 1953, oil on canvas, 59 7/8 × 46 3/8 in. (152.1 × 117.8 cm). Nathan Emory Coffin Collection of the Des Moines Art Center. © 2020 Estate of Francis Bacon / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / DACS, London

Sally Mann (b.1951), *Deep South, Untitled (Scarred Tree)*, 1998, gelatin silver print, 38 × 48 in. (96.52 × 121.92 cm). © 2020 Sally Mann