

David Reed

In conversation with John Elderfield, September 2013

JOHN ELDERFIELD: Can you remember when you first saw de Kooning's 1980s paintings?

DAVID REED: Yes, I went up to Xavier Fourcade—I saw at least two of the shows. The paintings were especially striking there because it was a fancy uptown space and they were just jammed in, between the windows, floor to ceiling. In those elegant rooms the paintings looked cruder, rougher, and more outrageous. At first I couldn't get used to them. I argued and debated with painter friends. Those sanded, slick surfaces, that horrible phthalo green...

JE: And alizarin.

DR: And alizarin. Yes, really strange, artificial colors. The paintings seemed completely new, provocative. I also went with colleagues to argue and debate when I saw the show of the late paintings at the Modern [Willem

de Kooning: The Late Paintings, the 1980s, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1997]: Are they really paintings? What can he be doing? They seemed so stylized, so different from his earlier work. It's hard for me to go back now and remember all of the arguments, because I've gotten used to the paintings. Now I just love them. I see them as very accomplished, but at the time, they were very difficult to accept.

JE: We have been going through all the reviews of the Fourcade shows, and they're generally very favorable. And then what seemed to happen was that by the late 1980s, when it became public that he had dementia, the criticism shifted so people who had been uneasy about the pictures could blame it on that. And I think that one of the great services done by the show that Gary Garrels and Rob Storr did was,

first of all, to lay out in the catalog what actually happened in the studio, and that he did paint these pictures and that the studio assistant's work was no more than what studio assistants do, and really allow them to be seen as what the 1980s looked like. And that was really the basis we began with for the retrospective [*de Kooning: A Retrospective*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2011–12]. [We wanted] to take the next step and say, So what do they look like in the context of [his] whole career?

white paintings one could see how a projector had been used to transfer a drawing. The projection seemed to have slid a little to the side, and it was as if the image and the support were separating. I love that feeling, in those particular paintings. That's what happened to me as a painter. I wanted to make a gesture that was just directly about process and only that, to isolate that gesture and see what would happen. To my surprise, instead of staying physical and what it was, the gesture became an image of itself: an emblem of a

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DR: It was amazing to see them at the end of your recent show, because now I think they really fit there. The earlier retrospective at the Modern in 1969 [*Willem de Kooning*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York] ended with those crazy figurative paintings, which was really weird, and, again, hard to take. But that didn't seem like the right conclusion. It seemed like a strange, passing moment. The white paintings now seem to be the right conclusion. We spoke once in those last rooms of your exhibition about how in some of the

brush mark, even a reproduction. It kept doubling, turning into something more. I didn't expect that to happen, and I often wonder if it happened to me and to other painters because we're living in a time of media, of photography and film. Without our contemporary experience of media, would this have happened? My painting led me to the contemporary world. It doesn't seem logical to me that focusing on process and isolating the gesture would lead to this sense of the doubling in the image of a mark. In the '70s, when I started to make

isolated brush marks, I wanted them to be very simple, as flat and physical as possible. They refused to stay flat and physical. They turned into landscapes, made space despite my efforts. I don't understand where the idea ever came from that a painter could make things flat and physical—it's just such a crazy idea. If you make a brush mark, it immediately

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JE: It's interesting that, as we know from the setup of the studio, he not only worked very close to the pictures but also looked at them from way back, where any remnant of the tactility disappeared and the image remained. And that was of course true of the 1970s pictures, which now we think of in terms of materiality, which seems to be very prominent compared to [that of] the later ones.

DR: Yes. De Kooning also used optical devices to create this distance. When I was a student I

was told that, when he had a small studio and couldn't get back far enough from his painting, he used a reducing glass. It's a big lens that you hold up in front of the painting. It turns the painting upside down and makes it small, a test of the clarity of the composition. Needless to say, my friends and I all bought reducing glasses. And I was told that de Kooning also

used a "dark mirror" that reflects a reversed image of the painting simplified into essentials of light and dark.

JE: Yes, which Matisse used as well. And of course, de Kooning would regularly rotate the pictures as he worked on them.

DR: In de Kooning's paintings, somehow, it seems that the size of the mark, the gesture itself, causes the size of the painting. It is a mysterious effect when a painter can do that, because of course it's the opposite. The size of the canvas has to be determined first and then the marks put on it. I really love paintings that give the sense that time has been reversed, that somehow making the marks

made the painting the size that it is. I've been puzzling for days over why de Kooning's '80s paintings are the sizes they are. Why are they 70 × 80 and 77 × 88 inches? It's a strange size, not standard, and each of these sizes has exactly the same proportions. In each, there is a buried square and a strip one-seventh the width of the square added to one side. It seems very peculiar. But then, it starts to make sense to me if I think of de Kooning rotating the canvases as he's working. This added strip, this increase of the area of the square by one-seventh, either goes to the side if the canvas is horizontal or to the top/bottom if it is vertical. Rotating affects the orientation of the marks but also the amount of space around them physically and mentally, because of the way we distort distances if they are vertical or horizontal. Somehow this rotating helps it seem that the marks are determining the size of the space around them. It makes sense to me.

JE: So how would that particularly help the gestured effect on the sides?

DR: A square canvas would be very stable. But this format stretches and squeezes the square either vertically or horizontally. It forces the gestures to move within that particular space. I can imagine that as he worked on a canvas in one orientation, de Kooning could assume what would happen in that space, but then when the canvas was turned, something else happened and he got a surprise, a particular contraction or release. John, you pointed out

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in your essay that there are sometimes forms that seem to be feet or arms pressing against the side or top or bottom of the canvas. I think this is an image of what I am trying to describe. Like those ghosts of arms and feet, the gestures are pressing against the sides, either being stopped or going over or stopping before. The physical edge of the canvas is no longer necessarily the real edge of the painting. The gestures distort the physical canvas to fit their particular shapes, meanings, and force.

JE: I think this seems to be good evidence that all of these began with some kind of figural motivation, whether figures were drawn on the canvas or whether figures

were the source of the little things he was using to project. And that he regularly talked about being in the picture, so there's a sense of this figure in the picture, what you were saying about the feet pushing to the side.

DR: I love the sense of transformation in these paintings. Nothing is static. The forms seem to be one thing and then turn into something else: flowing water, a nude figure, a hand reaches in, a smile, a moon. There is a sense of slippage in the forms and a transformation in the imagery and content. I think that's why it's fun to describe this slippage as being as if

everything is shifting in strange ways. We have to somehow negotiate how we imagine our lives because of our experiences with media and our real, physical lives. Traveling through these various spaces, we have to learn how to navigate and stay human. And painting turns out to be the ideal medium to deal with these new conditions. Rather than being old-fashioned, painting turns out to be totally flexible and contemporary.

JE: **We've talked about the white in terms of the space. But the whites are also really physical things.**

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the projector had moved, because the content does the same thing. Earlier I spoke about how, to my surprise, I realized that my gestures had a relation to media. "Media" is a big term, a part of our everyday lives, and it's constantly changing, faster and faster. Visitors at museums look at their phones and their faces are covered with flickering light. Yellow has been changed by digital technology. Identifications with TV characters have become more and more complex. We're in a world now where

DR: And also light. These are screen paintings. It's as if you're looking at a computer, a TV screen, a movie. The light is coming through the surface from behind, with the movements and the colors all existing in that light. There are stories of de Kooning drawing from the TV. I used to think that he was drawing the movement of the figures. Now I think that he was drawing the way the light came from the screen. For some reason, I imagine a black-and-white TV.

JE: **I'd never thought about this, about the TV drawings. You're right—it's the light.**

DR: In New York School painting there's often a sense of light coming through from behind the canvas. This light is in these paintings by de Kooning and also in the paintings of Newman, Pollock, Rothko, [Arshile] Gorky, [Milton] Resnick. Their paintings put human scale and size into that light. I don't think the New York School painters thought about media at all, but it turns out that this light that they used can be related to the media. It's a great legacy to have human size and scale to fit into this media light, through the New York School.