

*Postmodern, then, would be that which, in the modern, refers to the unrepresentable throughout the represented, setting in motion a materialization that increases abstraction itself and thus breaks its ascendancy.*

*Eva Meyer\**

Were his pictures to fail to pass the state “art censors”, he would consider it a great success.<sup>1</sup> On this paradoxical note, David Reed concluded our first conversation about his work. It all began when, looking at the painting #252 (fig. p. 24), I was reminded of Robert Mapplethorpe’s flower photographs, particularly the various versions of *Calla* (fig. p. 25), and a discussion ensued about the corporal element in his painting and in the visual media of photography and film. What is that makes the picture so magnetic, evoking a kind of physical attraction, what gives it such an erotic quality?

Confronted with the illusionistic fictions – in both the spatial and narrative sense – of the Baroque, the viewer asks about the space in which the story is taking place; looking at David Reed’s works, the viewer asks about the story that the pictorial space – abstract, strongly colored and full of traces – renders absent. The painter offers a surface so smooth that the gaze bounces off it as if off a mirror that produces an image by giving it back. The paintings appear as reflecting reproductions: the mirror – which seems to have undertaken a perfect photographic, filmic operation – thus marks an aperture at the point where one perceives something that has the quality of an apparition, and where the question of the picture’s location arises, but is not answered. This has to do with the *uncanny* relationship between body and surface that characterizes pleasure, which shows itself as rambling and extravagant: It “may be claimed that the most figurative painting never represents (copies) anything, but only seeks a Name (the name of the scene, of the object)”, writes Roland Barthes, “but it is just as possible to say (although this is more scandalous nowadays) that the least figurative ‘painting’ always represents something: either language itself (which, one might say, is the position of the canonical avant-garde), or the inside of the body, the body as inside, or better yet: pleasure...”<sup>2</sup>

If Reed’s work plays with borrowings from Baroque drapery or Mannerist *figura serpentinata*, it is, at first glance, painting in the tradition of Abstract Expressionism. His painting departs from the latter, however, in that its surfaces are not presented as accumulations of painting material, the result of a impasto with a relief-like effect. There is no body of color that one longs to touch, to run one’s hands or at least with one’s eyes over. Greedily we regret the distance the painting appears to impose upon us so naturally – but why so naturally?



In the novel *The Man without Qualities* (1930/32), Robert Musil's protagonist Ulrich laments the great loss of eroticism that had occurred since the beginning of this century when women's clothing no longer infinitely enlarged the surface, the *skin* of the desired body with ruffles and pleats. The meager materiality of modern fashion could do no more than evoke (men's) superficial desire. David Reed maximizes the area under the picture's flat surface through folds and warps. Only then does this uppermost, unnameable layer appear, and only the beholder's experiences of looking at panel paintings allow him to perceive the layer's location as enclosed within a level parallel to the wall. Doubts about the picture's flatness do arise, however, where something *optically feels* as if it has been injected under the surface. There, it is experienced as a "film", a layer that must be removed: in order to see better, to perceive the "true" surface and, particularly, to get closer to what lies underneath, to the "real thing". Underneath, one believes, one will see the material traces of an *operation*, of what happened there, what must have unrolled there: the folds, ribbons and flourishes buckle like implants that will never be smoothed out, which, on the contrary, curl at the ends like scrolls or cursive letters. "The subject," writes Roland Barthes in "Flayed", "who is under the ascendancy of the Image-repertoire 'offers' nothing in the play of the signifier... If he writes, his writing is smooth as an Image, always seeking to reinstate a legible surface of the words..."<sup>3</sup> David Reed, in contrast, creates the cool smoothness of the picture in order to unravel the horizontal structure of the novel.

78

With sheer playfulness and pleasure they coil around themselves "under" this plane, the elegant twistings of color in a richly contrasted interplay of light – a technological light, as David Reed says – and shadow. To give the affair ever new twists: in most of these works, bright spots (an effect that earlier painting achieved through so-called highlight, i.e., an application of light colors) arise, paradoxically, where color has been effaced with brush and scraper and the priming colors are laid bare. Here, the skin of paint has been peeled back, permitting a view of the "inward", which is revealed as nothing more than an added, external form – particularly since individual priming colors also push to the surface, depending upon the means of overpainting. As if through a filter, one looks at the flow of color that, like desire, circulates unfixably. What is happening to the skin here? What is getting under the skin, that real and metaphorical boundary of the body? Color is "physical", David Reed emphasizes, the layer it creates has its equivalent in the desired surface of the human body, that "vesicle of excitable substance"<sup>4</sup>, forming orifices and organs capable of arousal – often in tadpole shape. But here there are injuries or at least high sensitivities: picture segments, intercut picture fragments (inserts) and macroshots (film stills) that analyze their own linear structure, fields colored like test patterns – interruptions in the flow of loops or their condensation in the form of artificial growths and synthetic deformities. Were it not for the simple broad brushstrokes, the spots and splashes of paint, the vocabulary that indicates the origins of the effects – in the gesture of



painting – we might conceive of this skin as “edited” immaterially on a screen. Cut on the one hand from the differently-colored, rectangular, and more rarely amorphous picture segments, confronted on the other hand with what is familiar to us from Abstract Expressionism as the materialized motion of painting, the optical attractiveness of the picture is not only increased, but we are also reminded of the principle of the panel painting, only to displace it towards another medium: David Reed paints on canvas, the German word for which – *Leinwand* – also means a film screen. In his earlier work, the event of painting frequently ran vertically (this is evident in the paint marks) like the projection of a film, but also in analogy to the film’s events, which can occur at all levels, for David Reed interrupted the rapid painting process at a certain point by laying the canvas out to dry horizontally – cut: film still, glossy as celluloid, the material on which, image by image, the spatial illusions that film is capable of producing are inscribed. Film, itself a tape, a ribbon, a strip is, on the other hand, comparable to brushstrokes, which are traditionally applied next to and over each other to create the illusionistic depth in visual representations.

David Reed applies – and removes – paint in three layers at most, not only adding to, but also effacing his traces again. An opaque layer forms the foundation, usually applied in parallel bands of differing chromaticity value. The last layer is a long, sometimes apparently endless sinuous line of more fluid and transparent color applied in a sweeping motion with a palette knife, or in varying short brushstrokes which may also aimlessly intersect and overlap – two frozen, highly artificial gestures signaling absence. The material dries flat, the colors, in their sum of layers and bands, yield an iridescence that belies the limited number of colors, and the motion is a calculated one, far removed from an accidental development influenced by the gravity and materiality of the mass of color.

Again: the ingenious loops and ribbons leave a tiny aperture in abstraction for figurative associations. They are reminiscent of flowers, fabrics or of close-ups of physical experiments (Harold E. Edgerton, *Milk Drops*, 1937, fig. p. 25), of the forms of Baroque ornament. But there is more than one possible association, the signifier is continually being displaced, since the individual elements belong to the realm of the index. In each work these elements, which exist in the high-contrast use of light and shadow, present themselves as brushstrokes, or better, perhaps: as motions with a house painter’s brush, which (as in the right third of the surface of #323, fig. p. 53) recall David Reed’s early line pictures (#72, fig. p. 27). In the mid-1970s he closely joined high narrow canvases like individual pictures into a sequence and rapidly painted parallel black horizontal strokes over the wet white priming coat. These strokes virtually stumble over the thin spaces between the canvases Reed hung vertically on the wall: on the margins they appear each time to anxiously hold their breath, while on the surfaces the two colors run together, causing the contours to slip – a more or less psychophysical descriptive pattern in which writing (labelling), film (a *procession* of



slightly varied images) – stand-ins for the body – and lack converge. In contrast to the line, the fold must be materialized. To make the line to unfold, to let it bloom like a flower, could be called the paradox of David Reed's painting. But not without interruption, for the break is the most interesting counterpart to the fold, which can at best bend, but never break. Foldings belong to a topographic model. It is lines, however, that represent such a model in landscape painting: the horizon line, for example, which marks the limit of the gaze – a pure projection that – materialized in the picture – marks another border, that between the picture and reality. In film, this border is fluid. Reed's fascination with the "emptiness of the vast spaces"<sup>5</sup> is reflected in his extreme (wide) formats: The expression "as far as the eye can see" reads horizontally, as if inscribed by a camera's pan shot gliding along something, which, stripped of its delimitation, embodies the uncanny. The view from the window, from a cave onto a landscape reveals itself as something that appears, as it were, photographed or painted, an imaginary fixation, virtually separate from the viewer. The gaze, in contrast, which sheds light, comprehends, is exchanged, touches, reaches someone... That gaze sweeps over what is of interest, forming curves and ribbons, carefully probing the surface: David Reed's foldings are thus metaphors for the gaze in a double sense. After all, the phrase "as far as the eye can see", a spatial description, also conveys a sense of longing, of desire. One need only think of Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus* (ca. 1510, fig. p. 28), Palma il Vecchio's *Nymph in a Landscape* (1518–20), or Jan van Scorel's *Death of Cleopatra* (ca. 1522), representations in which the nude – like an insert – "blends" into the landscape and, stretched out on a richly *folded* draped cloth, breaks the notion of "as far as the eye can see" by drawing our gaze. Like a film, David Reed's paintings are composed of individual diffuse images and heterogeneous associations. Stroke and surface constitute the analogies: one may conceive of the individual film images as being like a continuously running line coming off the roll in the contracting tempo of being played back, and the surface of the paintings, alternating between transparency and density, as similar to the immateriality of the projected film image. "The outer edges of the screen", writes André Bazin, "are not... the frame of the film image. They are the edges of a piece of masking that shows only a portion of reality... A frame is centripetal, the screen centrifugal."<sup>6</sup> It is characteristic that David Reed, when asked about the significance of Abstract Expressionism for his painting, mentions two very different positions: Jackson Pollock and his attraction to the proverbial vastness of the landscape of the American West<sup>7</sup> (its representation in Westerns such as John Ford's *The Searchers* is of at least equal importance)<sup>8</sup> and a visit to the installation of Barnett Newman's cycle *Stations of the Cross* (1958) in the National Gallery in Washington, D.C.<sup>9</sup> These paintings are hung as a panorama around the room, so that the beholder loses an overview because he can only ever see one segment of the ensemble at a time, while the others glide out of sight. One must move in order to see them, something that David Reed incorporates into his formats, unlike CinemaScope, which takes on this task for the filmgoer.



In 1962, Max Ernst, whose studio in the Arizona desert David Reed mentions having visited,<sup>10</sup> painted a picture entitled *Le jardin de la France*. (fig. p. 28) Was he playing on the iconography of the *Garden of Earthly Delights* or the *Garden of Paradise*? He used a salon painting for the foundation, one presumably depicting an Oriental theme, perhaps a recumbant Cleopatra. Over this he layered a maplike projection of the French landscape of Touraine with the Indre and Loire rivers, so that all that is visible of the nude underneath are the erotic zones and, above all, one knee around which a serpent (like a line) winds itself. The pastose application of earth- and green tones in flowing forms represents the topography of the body to the outside, replacing body parts and skin, in order to restrict pleasure to the designated areas. The writing is characteristic: lines form the words *La Loire* and *L'Indre* in the sequence of individual characters, arrows indicate the (wrong) direction of the course of the river (as of desire) and the patterning turns the ribbon above the knee into a serpent – the symbol par excellence of seduction.

In David Reed's painting moments of the uncanny unfold in the gesture of execution. This characterizes the surface, which appears and disappears in the manner in which the brushstrokes are overlaid. The stroke, interrupted, breaking off, is indebted to the index, to expression, as the folding is to the index as well as to the icon, to representation – continuous, apparently endless and clearly only on two mutually exclusive levels of performance. The first of these levels is the slippage of the picture's edges in the attempt to fix the depth of the image and follow its windings: in the process, the surface becomes transparent (the penetrating gaze). The second of these levels is keeping the picture's delimitation in view, whereby the surface appears opaque, disappointing the impression that something lies behind it.

Robert Mapplethorpe's nudes were, because of their obscenity, to be prevented by "censorship" from reaching the public. It is unlikely that this prohibition was extended to his flower photographs. But aren't these single flowers and bouquets at least as *obscene*, when the photographer's lense shifts them from the iconographic context of the Baroque *memento mori* to the penetrating clarity of distanced corporeality?<sup>11</sup> Were it to become clear that the body is only one of those threatened and insecure liminal zones, then the explosiveness of the intimacy David Reed plays upon with his statement "I want to be a bedroom painter",<sup>12</sup> would not be confirmed by a misleading equation with the site of sexual activities, with nudity or even obscenity. The artistic process forced the recognition that photography, film and video have decisively changed painting: surfaces, orifices and permeabilities, top and bottom, focus and periphery, gestures and cuts prove to be deliberate designations for various media. They touch in the expansiveness that characterizes David Reed's paintings, and in the complication: in unfolding, and in explicating: plica, the fold creates ever new folds.



\* Eva Meyer, "Distanz: Eine kalkulierte Reserve," in Eva Meyer, *Architexturen* (Basel – Frankfurt am Main: Stroemfeld/Roter Stern 1986), p. 17.

1 The prohibition of several exhibitions, for example of photographs by Andres Serrano or Robert Mapplethorpe which were considered blasphemous or obscene, and the banning from school libraries of books addressing sexuality unleashed a debate on the freedom of the arts and education in the United States in 1989.

See Marjorie Heins, *Sex, Sin, and Blasphemy: A Guide to America's Censorship Wars*, New York: The New Press 1993.

2 Roland Barthes, "Réquichot et son corps," in: Roland Barthes, Marcel Billot and Alfred Pacquement, *Bernard Réquichot*, (Brussels: La Connaissance, 1973), pp. 11–31, p. 25.

3 Roland Barthes, "Flayed," in: Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), p. 96.

4 Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" (1920), in: *Sigmund Freud, Studienausgabe, Frankfurt am Main 1975, Bd. III, S. 236*

5 David Reed, "Media Baptisms," in: *Abstrakte Malerei zwischen Analyse und Synthese/Abstract Painting Between Analysis and Synthesis*, Galerie Nächst St. Stephan, Rosemarie Schwarzwälder (Vienna and Klagenfurt, 1992), p. 129.

6 André Bazin, "Painting and Cinema", in: André Bazin, *What is Cinema? Essays selected and translated by Hugh Gray* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1967), p. 166.

7 Jackson Pollock also emphasized his strong feeling for the American West, for the immeasurable horizontality of the land. See Irving Sandler, "Abstrakter Expressionismus: Der Lärm des Verkehrs auf dem Weg zum Walden Pond", in: *Amerikanische Kunst im 20. Jahrhundert. Malerei und Plastik 1913–1993*, ed. Christos M. Joachimides and Norman Rosenthal (München, 1993), p. 94.

8 Recalling the film and its locations, David Reed recounts an anecdote about a *déjà-vu* experience in the desert. Reed, "Media Baptisms", pp. 129–130.

9 David Reed, letter to the author of 3 November 1994.

10 David Reed, "Media Baptisms", p. 129. Why Max Ernst? One of the Surrealist's most important works from his time in Sedona, Arizona, the 1943 *Vox Angelica*, is divided into rectangles as a lexicon is divided into terms, or a film into frames. The windings of a twist drill play a role in this encyclopedia as does the *Tree of Knowledge* with Eve and the serpent and fantastic landscapes produced by the method of decalomania which have something in common with exposed nerves and

blood vessels out of which body parts seem to form suddenly before our eyes. One imagines one sees petrified primeval forests, a sky full of comets. It is more certain that there are monochrome planes, segments in grattage that look like wooden inlays, or fields of abstract network structures framed by a grid. There are parallels to David Reed not only in the suggestive painting technique, the division of the picture, in which some segments appear to have been photographed with a zoom lens, enlarging some detail, etc., but especially in the painting's creation of systems, which multiply the pleasure of seduction, open systems in which one can lose one's way, or oneself, because they consist of fragments and layers of meaning.

11 Robert Mapplethorpe in an interview with Janet Kardon:

RM: I think that the flowers have a certain –

JK: Are sexy?

RM: Not sexy, but weird. I don't want to use the word 'weird', but they don't look like anyone else's flowers. They have a certain archness to them, a certain edge that flowers generally do not have.

JK: Do you think they're threatening?

RM: That's not the exact word. But they're not fun flowers.

JK: No, they're not.

RM: I don't know how to describe them, but I don't think they're very different

from body parts. "Robert Mapplethorpe Interview," in: Janet Kardon, *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment*, exhibition catalogue with essays by David Joselit and Kay Larson (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 1988), pp. 23–29, p. 25.

12 David Reed, *Two Bedrooms in San Francisco*, exhibition catalogue, Walter/ McBean Gallery of the San Francisco Art Institute 1992, unpaginated.