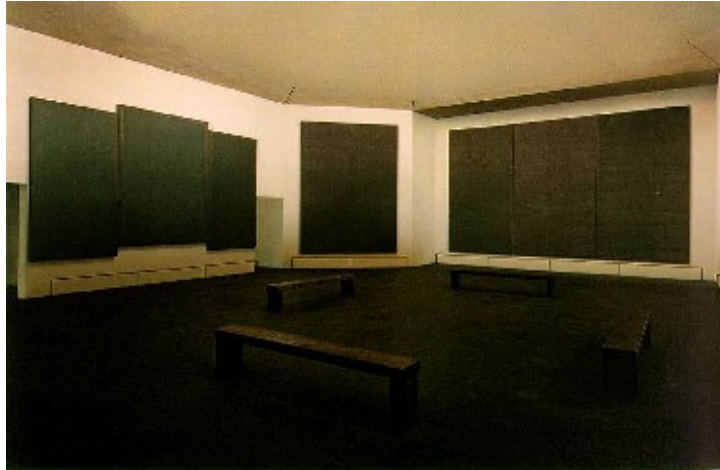


## A Religious Perspective on the Monochrome

*“In the beginning there was nothing.  
Then God said, ‘Let there be Light’, and there was still nothing.  
But, boy...you sure could see it.”  
-Anonymous*



Rothko's Chapel

It has long been argued that the existential Void - the ineffable Beyond - is inconsequential to the cognitive approaches of the Human faculty; that such a condition of total Void contains nothing which humans may use to relate to themselves in order to comprehend it.<sup>1</sup> However, the Void ‘in the Beginning’, so to speak, entices human comprehension to fill the expanse with the osmotic self-defining act of Creation. Otherwise it remains unknown; beyond the realm of human possibility. Likewise, the void of the canvas, regardless of its physical material, accepts the representations of human creation so that they too can reveal themselves unto us. We see ourselves in every act captured by and

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<sup>1</sup> In much modern academic theory, the Beyond does not in any real sense exist because human access to it does not exist. In a textual understanding of existence, the Void offers no text, and to call it a Void, or even a ‘parietal experience’ is to textualize it and bring it into the human realm of reflection. For this paper, the Void represents the Beyond, and the purpose of its description is not to gain access to the Void, but to realize the effect of such existential inaccessibility on human creative and cognitive processes.

reflected to us from the canvas. It is a mirror, in a sense, one that begins not only with nothing, but in nothing. Its space, its emptiness, strikes us in a manner unlike the finished composition; as infinite possibility rather than fossilized fact. Such a space invites the conscious objectification of ourselves unto it. In painting, we create an object which is our subject for a time, and in return it becomes the object by which we may make ourselves subject. It becomes an artifact that embodies our subjectivity, and we must then confront this subjectivity in the physical realm of creation, judging ourselves by what has been made.<sup>2</sup> And though it can be argued that all art functions in this particular manner, only one form of painting seems to function purely in this way; speaking to our being; presenting itself primarily to our immediate existence, more so than to the transcendent, reflective element of the intellect. One might say it speaks to our religious nature, and, indeed, that is the position of this paper.

Multiple canvases of solid black adorn the walls of Rothko's chapel. The canvases are blank, but they are not bare. They are the Void. Black, the traditional concept of nothing and/or emptiness, reveals ultimate possibility, and points to the moment prior to human articulation of God, prior to the psychic movement after revelation. It evinces the psychic void, the moment of religion before the devolution of reality into morals and metaphysics.<sup>3</sup> In other words, it stands opposite us, asking what we will be; what we will make of it, and

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<sup>2</sup> For the process of creating an idea through human understanding which we establish as an objective figure and then use in judgment of ourselves consult the philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach, an early 19<sup>th</sup> century German theologian and philosopher. Interestingly enough, in the philosophical content of Barnett Newman we see these ideas resurface. This can in part, no doubt, be traced to the fact that Newman was influenced by Martin Buber, who was in turn influenced strongly by Feuerbach. This is one way that religious philosophy found its voice in the object of art in terms of the monochrome.

<sup>3</sup> This reference also points to a 19<sup>th</sup> century philosopher, Friedrich Schleiermacher, the teacher of Feuerbach. Schleiermacher sees this 'original' moment as the 'moment of religion'. Marvin Halverson, who founded the ARC, gave credit to Paul Tillich for giving birth to the ARC, due to his philosophical insights. Tillich gave a speech at MoMa addressing the relation between art and religion in 1959, called "Art and Ultimate Reality". Tillich was profoundly influenced by Schleiermacher.

thus of ourselves. The monochrome has the ability to penetrate and to return the look precisely because we recognize it as apprehending us as we apprehend it. It is an 'other' that stands apart. There is nothing to define on the surface of the canvas; no picture readily articulated; no lines to analyze nor shapes to comprehend. It turns the look of the viewer toward the inner locus of feeling and sensation.

Color links itself to us, not through the intellect but through intuition and impression. The void of black, the coolness of blue, the vitality of red, the buoyancy of yellow; our bodies react to their being, to their physicality in our presence as entities in themselves. Our feeling is developed out of our relationship with them, the infinity of black night, the blue sky and blue water, the warm yellow sun, the life red of our blood. We see them. We see ourselves. As Belz relates of Marioni's work in his visit to the painter's studio, we "come to them, as they come to us."<sup>4</sup> The monochrome allows us to engage this relationship, to bring it into the open. It allows for our inquiry and presents itself as a disclosive experience.

Nevertheless, it can be said that the monochrome is problematic when viewed only from such a narrow position. Surely, it may be argued, not all the paintings of singular hue are religious in nature. Perhaps they function as the end of a process of abstraction; the simple removal of shape or reduction of lines into nothingness. It could even be said that these paintings do not come from nothingness, but from highly representative reality which has been reduced to nothing, or to a simple color, a mean, an average of all existing colors within a work. And as such, the reading of the monochrome as an artifact which questions our being is nothing more than the ingenuity of one who needs to find something to talk about. Another proposition could be constructed to declare that the monochrome merely

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<sup>4</sup> Belz, Carl. "In the Studio", *Joseph Marioni: Paintings 1970-1998 A Survey*. Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University. Holbrook: Sixteen Color. 1998 p. 16

points to the logical conclusion of color field painting. Empowered by Matisse, colorists found reason to paint with the expressive capacities of color, creating relationships among colors through many different methods, finally culminating at a point where these colors are found only to relate to themselves. As a matter of fact, the question of what exactly counts as monochrome can be put forward. What qualifies? What empirical data defines the monochrome? In addition, questions of process help develop knowledge about the works. Texture, support, and shape also bring further variables to the table for the analytical process.

Fundamentally, however, all of these variables reveal two major foci concerning monochrome painting. First, the painting as an object, a reductive example of the limit to which one may take a painting, annihilating ‘picture’, yet reinforcing the physical manifestation of the painting as an object in the world which simply refers to itself<sup>5</sup>; the wooden supports, the type of fabric used for canvas, the viscosity of the paint, and the texture of the object. Secondly, the monochrome is presented as a large color field which evokes sensation and meaning; drawing the viewer into an “indefinite and indefinable volume”<sup>6</sup> which primarily presents the color as subject. It is a plenitude of communication subtly defined by its presence, engaging in its ability to promote a dialogue.

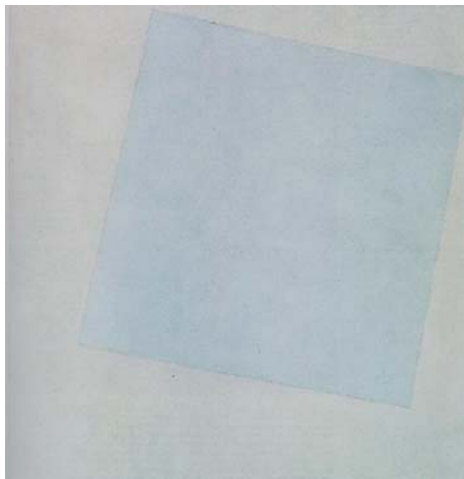
Indeed, both ways of understanding the monochrome are not necessarily distinct from one another, and both insist the viewer turn the dialogue inward to ask what these particular items mean. Otherwise there is no manner in which to approach them; no hook, no item to focus on in order to center one’s attention and use as a departure point into the work. They stand separate and ask to be taken as such. Even so, there are still fascinating questions about the monochrome which should be discussed and are potent in their capacity to expand

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<sup>5</sup> Fried, Michael. “Art and Objecthood”. Pp. 835-846. *Art in Theory: 1900- 2000*.

<sup>6</sup> Rose, Barbara. “Man as Measure”, *Joseph Marioni: Paintings 1970-1998 A Survey*. Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University. Holbrook: Sixteen Color. 1998 p. 29

the knowledge about how the monochrome engages the viewer and instigates, if not directs, the viewer's internal dialogue.



Malevich – White on White

Let us begin by investigating the monochrome as a reduction of picture; as Rose argues, a part of the revolution of modernism, the defiance of illusionism.<sup>7</sup> Greenberg, in his article “Towards a Newer Laocoon”, outlines the development of the modern as parts of the evolving dialogue about art, and as the response to creating works of painting which are only about painting in themselves. In this strain of evolution, the monochrome is the ultimate rendering of flatness in the picture plane. The great fields of color fortify the openness of the picture plane.<sup>8</sup> Greenberg credits Clyfford Still with pioneering the way in the arena of the monochrome. However, it should be noted that Kazemir Malevich, who was quite the abstract artist early in the twentieth century, had already in 1918 displayed his *White Square on a White Field* and in 1921 Aleksander Rodchenko declared the death of painting with his *Red, Yellow, and Blue* set of paintings presenting the primary colors. In his words:

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<sup>7</sup> *ibid.* p. 26

<sup>8</sup> Greenberg, Clement. “After Abstract Expressionism”. *Art in Theory: 1900- 2000*. pp. 785

I reduced painting to its logical conclusion and exhibited three canvases: red, blue and yellow. I affirmed: it's all over.

Basic colors. Every plane is a plane and there is to be no representation.<sup>9</sup>

In his opinion, he had pushed the evolution of reductionism to its final possibility.

Rodchenko – Red, Yellow, Blue



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<sup>9</sup> [http://moma.org/exhibitions/1998/rodchenko/texts/death\\_of\\_painting.html](http://moma.org/exhibitions/1998/rodchenko/texts/death_of_painting.html)

Never fearful, Barnett Newman responded with his *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow, and Blue*<sup>10</sup> series. By combining all three colors in a composition on a single canvas, Newman brought the issue of drawing back to the monochrome by pointing out that the defining edge of a work functions much like the limits imposed by drawing. His works “put pressure on the framing edge as the boundary that replaces drawing within a field.”<sup>11</sup> Jules Olitski promoted this interpretation of edge saying:

What is important in painting is paint. Paint can be color. Paint becomes painting when color establishes surface...The development of a color structure ultimately determines its (the surface) expansion or compression – its outer edge. Edge is inescapable. I recognize the line it declares, as drawing.<sup>12</sup>



Olitski – Loveland

Olitski's best solution, which even by his own estimation did not eliminate the problem of edge, was to thin the paint so that it penetrated the canvas itself, infusing it with color, so as not to apply paint to a surface which must stop at the border of the work. Even in the face of

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<sup>10</sup> Rose, p. 32-33

<sup>11</sup> Rose, p. 33

<sup>12</sup> Olitski, Jules. “Painting in Color”. *Art in Theory: 1900- 2000*. pp. 796

Olitski's solution, Clement Greenberg insists that the successors of Still's first movements toward color field painting, namely Rothko and Newman, find "a more positive openness".<sup>13</sup>

Circumventing Olitski's point, Greenberg elides the problem of edge declaring that "the rectilinear is open by definition: it calls the least attention to drawing, and gets least in the way of color space."<sup>14</sup> Greenberg also argues for large surface areas with a color of equal density providing for the suggestion of indeterminate space. He goes on to discuss the importance of color, but for now, the purpose is to hold to the painting as object. The monochrome serves to focus the viewer on the material aspects of the work; the shape, whether it be rectilinear or some other form; the canvas, and its support or substitution for color, and the paint, its opacity and presence as the defining characteristic of painting.

In addition to 'objecthood', there remains an inherent difficulty in fighting the ultimate "push-pull"<sup>15</sup> problem of painting, even in the monochrome. Frank Stella recognized this as being an effect of the color field itself. The color field, in his view, by its creation of indefinite space actually did not fully succeed in establishing the flatness of the surface. There was still the slight remnant of illusionism.<sup>16</sup> To counter act this unconscious tendency in the individual to affect the picture plane with three dimensional space, Stella designed his series of black paintings with geometric patterns which force the viewer's eye to the surface plane. From his perspective, "What you see, is what you see." This method of representing the picture plane did not provide an image of something outside the work, nor did it allow one to fall into the depth of an imagined space within the work. As he told it, "The solution [to the spatial problem] that I arrived at – and there are probably quite a few,

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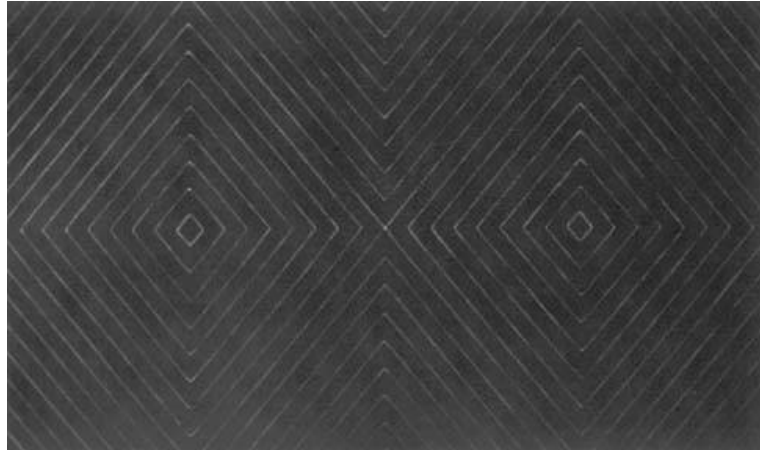
<sup>13</sup> Greenberg, "After Abstract Expressionism". p. 786

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.* p. 786

<sup>15</sup> "Push-Pull" refers to the 'indefinite' space created by color fields.

<sup>16</sup> Stella, Frank. *Pratt Institute Lecture. Art in Theory: 1900- 2000.* p. 821

although I only know of one other, color density – forces illusionistic space out of the painting at a constant rate by using regulated pattern.”<sup>17</sup>



Stella – Black Series II

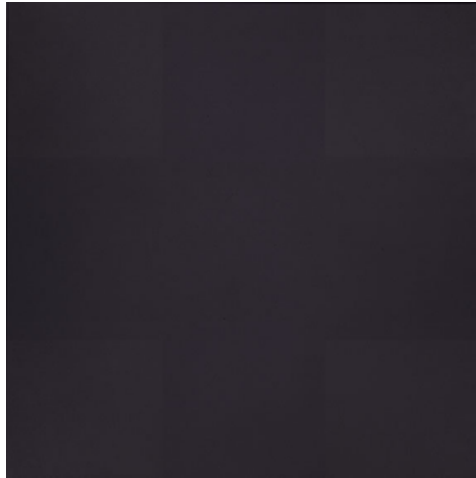
While wrestling with the problem of painting as an object, or to say it another way, painting as nothing more than painting; painting as the subject of itself, several artists found new forms of technique. Stella used a house brush, Olitski infused the canvas and, as we will see, Joseph Marioni permits the painting to paint itself. The endowment of object-ness comes as much from technique as from the materials. There is no escaping the painting as a man made thing, even indirectly. Thus the object, as an artifact, is a reflection of human engagement with existence. Ad Reinhardt emphasized this by creating deeply pigmented works that were unable to be sufficiently reproduced by mechanical processes.<sup>18</sup> The inextricable human consciousness is somehow, somewhere lurking in the object. Perhaps it is simply the nature of an artifact, anything made by a human being, to make us aware of

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<sup>17</sup> *ibid.* p. 821

<sup>18</sup> Hughes, Robert. “Approaching absolute zero” (Ad Reinhardt exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in Manhattan, New York) *Time Magazine*. July 15, 1991 <http://www.time.com>

ourselves in them. Or perhaps it is simply their success at independence. As Walt Whitman says best, “They bring [us] tokens of [ourselves]. They evince them plainly in their possession.”<sup>19</sup> And in this respect we may ask what these tokens are, and how it is that we recognize them in the possession of the ‘other’?



Reinhardt – Black

Let this paper suggest that the vehicle of these tokens is transferred in the nature of the color itself. Surely Matisse would have agreed. In his own discourse he tells us that “the chief function of colour should be to serve expression as well as possible”<sup>20</sup> and that, “the expressive aspect of colours imposes itself on [us] in a purely instinctive way.”<sup>21</sup> Matisse, as a master of color and pattern, describes the rendering of his colors as sensations; each sensation inspiring a color worked out intuitively. Consequently, his remarks point toward new developments in color theory, and pronounce the theory of complementary colors not absolute. Matisse, himself, worked under this intuitive process his whole life. Inspired by

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<sup>19</sup> Whitman, Walt. *Leaves of Grass*. New York: Airmont Publishing. 1965 p. 59

<sup>20</sup> Matisse, Henri. “Notes of a Painter”. *Art in Theory: 1900- 2000*. p. 73

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.* p. 73

Degas<sup>22</sup>, Matisse focused on color and its boundaries, and in the end, found in the color fields of such works as *The Snail*<sup>23</sup> his ultimate contentedness.



Matisse – the Snail

From sensation we make the leap into the monochrome as a color field. Exploration of the color field allows the all important paint to speak directly. While the paint is evocative of the painting as an object, it is, as Olitski said, the color that establishes a surface. It is the color that demands physical response from the viewer. And it is the color, and the nuances of the color, isolated and independent of other hues, independent of light and darkness, shade and shape, that establishes the monochrome as that peculiar form of painting that is more than painting, more than an exercise. It is the color that seems to establish its own self-determination with respect to the viewer.

As a product of the reductive evolution of painting in the early twentieth century, the flatness of the picture plane was immediately valued. One method of achieving this, as already stated by Frank Stella, was through color density. Greenberg comments on this in the negative, speaking against weak color density. “Unequal densities of paint become, as I

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<sup>22</sup> Matisse owned Degas’ *La Coiffure* and was intrigued by its red tones. See Gruitrooy, *Degas*. Todri Books. 1994

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/arts/main.jhtml?xml=/arts/2001/10/13/bamg13.xml>

have said, so many differences of light and dark, and these deprive colour of both its purity and its fullness.”<sup>24</sup> It is here that the return to Greenberg’s thoughts on the importance of color comes to bear. Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman are held up as the heirs of the color field. “Both Rothko and Newman take their lead from Milton Avery, who took his from Matisse.”<sup>25</sup> A genealogy is established from Matisse endowing Rothko and Newman with the authority to stretch the meaning of color. Rothko’s color fields, however, appear driven not by Greenberg’s idea of history, but by an internal dialogue, an internal locus of assessment.



Rothko – Black Untitled

In his article “The Romantics were prompted...”<sup>26</sup>, Rothko defines his views on the importance of escaping the familiar in order to find transcendence. The pilgrimage into the unknown is, for Rothko, the first step in the disclosive experience. His paintings are gateways to such an internal pilgrimage for each viewer. Nevertheless, his paintings can not really be said to be monochrome except perhaps on very few occasions. In general, Rothko focused on fields of color within color, setting up relationships of color and boundary. He

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<sup>24</sup> Greenberg, “After Abstract Expressionism”. p. 785

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.* p. 786

<sup>26</sup> *Art in Theory: 1900- 2000*. Harrison, Charles, and Paul Wood, eds. New Edition. Oxford; Blackwell Publishing. 2003 pp. 571-573

used shapes to establish tension and provoke a sense of sacred geometrical shape somehow never quite coming into being.

Barnett Newman develops Rothko's pilgrimage in his article "The First Man Was an Artist."<sup>27</sup> The pilgrimage becomes internal and resonates as a search for the first man, the 'original' human. Denouncing modern science and its closed circle of possibility, Newman asserts the aesthetic self-revelation of the 'original' human. In his works, Newman provides allegorical works; his monochromatic paintings often bearing Biblical names or having religious subject matter. A solid white painting holds the title *The Name*,<sup>28</sup> alluding to the god whose name cannot be named, the Tetragrammaton. The god of this name is all encompassing, a mystical holistic being, which is all being, and is like the white that contains all colors, indeed is all colors, and yet holds its own identity. *Eve*<sup>29</sup> bares herself in the red blood that will be used as redemption for her original sin. And the pitch of *Canto IV*<sup>30</sup> echoes the words of Dante:

In truth, I found myself on the brink of the sorrowful valley of the abyss, which gathers in the thundering of infinite woes. Dark and deep it was, so clouded that though I probed with my sight to the bottom, there was nothing there. "Now let us descend down here into the blind world."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> *ibid.* pp. 574-577

<sup>28</sup> Barnett Newman, *The Name II*, 1950. Gift of Annalee Newman, in Honor of the 50th Anniversary of the National Gallery of Art. 1988.57.4

<sup>29</sup> Newman – Eve - Tate Gallery. Oil on canvas, support: 2388 x 1721 x 50 mm painting. Purchased 1980

<sup>30</sup> Newman - Canto IV- Tate Gallery 1963-4 Lithograph on paper , image: 378 x 320 mm on paper, print. Presented by Mrs Annalee Newman, the artist's widow 1972.

<sup>31</sup> Alighieri, Dante. *Inferno*. Durling, trans. New York: Oxford Press. 1996 p. 71



Newman – Canto IV

Newman proposes that man's first speech was an aesthetic upsurge. Indeed, for him, it was the moment of falling from grace, and silence, in the attempt to become a creator by describing the world. By articulating existence, the 'original' human takes conscious control over Being, and sets up the antagonism of intellectual and existential presence. Pilgrimage, in Newman's view, seeks to find this 'original' human, in his state prior to the fall, whom he sees more appropriately in art than in science.

The unique capability of the monochrome, in the area of a religious or intensely personal internal dialogue, if these are not in fact one-in-the-same, is to appropriate the depth of one's self and hold it up to be seen and examined. Unlike representational work, which for this paper is absolutely anything other than monochrome, the solidarity and integrity of a color field monochromatic painting justifies itself, not through image, but through direct exposition. It can evoke mood, elicit feelings, and draw out the unexamined.

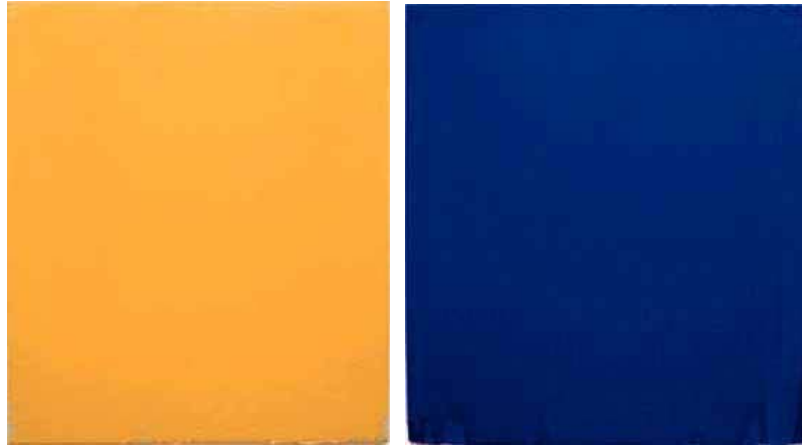
In the latter half of the twentieth century, Joseph Marioni has pushed the limits on the monochrome, not simply as a color field painting, but also as an object in itself. His successful works stress the sensation that Matisse found so important, the richness which Greenberg enjoyed, and yet stress the objecthood of painting which Rodchenko, Reinhardt, and Stella found so essential. In contrast to Newman, however, Marioni does not entitle his works with names that lend to their interpretation. In an effort to uphold the paintings' independence, Marioni only designates them by their color. Also, the paintings are not hand-painted but are achieved by allowing the paint to run autonomously down the surface. In this way the liquid color "grows up to be the shape that it is,"<sup>32</sup> and accentuates the painting as an object. Marioni says, "I do not want the painting to document the physical act of painting...I don't want to put myself in the way of the viewer's direct experience with the painting."<sup>33</sup> The color field demands our attention, and Marioni knows this. His monochrome works stand looking mutely back, yet forcing discourse. In Marioni's words, "At its origin it is primordial sensation structurally related to a parietal experience.... Of essential experience within a relationship of the viewer with the painting. The radical painting is an object whose function it is to visually engage our ego as a specific conscious act."<sup>34</sup> His works are bent at that internal pilgrimage to the 'original' human, toward that original moment within each person that, in 'parietal experience', apprehends itself in the Void.

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<sup>32</sup> Goetz, Sammlung. *Monochromie Geometrie*. Munich. 1996 "Joseph Marioni". p.20

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.* p. 20

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.* p. 21



Marioni – Yellow

Marioni – Blue

Obviously, the monochrome may offer itself as a vehicle toward self-awareness, but is it fair to say that this is the only way to engage the monochrome? After all, we are familiar with Gary Kennedy's use of the monochrome as a clever and humorous critique of the "average" painting; each painting's colors blended to form some singular hue, almost invariably grey. Though somehow, his monochrome works do not possess the same power as Marioni's, Newman's or Klein's. Perhaps this is due to the surrounding information, the placement of the work as intended for some other purpose among the predicates of Kennedy's humor. Another problematic artist for viewing the monochrome in the manner this paper suggests is Ellsworth Kelly. Many of Kelly's works are without a doubt monochrome, but questions about what qualifies as monochrome come attached to many of them.

Does the monochrome have to be isolated? If it is presented within the visual range of another, can it count as an independent entity? If individual monochromatic pieces are juxtaposed do they simply become a single extended multiple colored work, losing their individual status? Shape comes to mind as well. Can monochrome paintings have shape,

other than rectilinear, if they are to function as Marioni or Newman envisions them? The shapes of some of Kelly's monochrome paintings do help emphasize the objecthood of the painting, but it also seems to confuse its purpose. Is the shape meant to be separate from the color field, or should it direct the experience of the color in some way? Kelly forces the issue, and his works make one aware of the seen yet unseen shape of the rectilinear form, and demand to know if Greenberg's view of the rectilinear as open by definition is *prima facie* correct.



Ellsworth Kelly – Blue and Blue

Kelly's and Kennedy's works are not easily dismissed, yet in the disposition of this paper, they appear to have some form of contamination to their pure forms, be it shape, gimmick, humor, or inclusion of juxtaposing objects. After all, if one provides a predetermined point of reference for a work, or some other form which creates its own dialogue with the monochrome, then the monochrome loses its innate ability to force us into our own internal dialogue, and the relationship between the painting and the other factor(s)

takes immediate precedence. In fact, it must be said that the author is prone to take Yves Klein's position that, "two colors juxtaposed on one canvas compel the observer to see the spectacle of this juxtaposition of two colors, or of their perfect accord, but prevent him from entering in to the sensitivity, the dominance, the purpose of the picture."<sup>35</sup> Klein also notes that not only do colors within sight of each other produce the need to juxtapose them but that the public even often compiles the exhibitions of monochromatic works "out of habit into the components of a polychromatic decoration of an interior space."<sup>36</sup>

Klein's article, "The Evolution of Art Towards the Immaterial", asserts his position that deep blue is the most profound of colors, and its power affirmed by its solidarity. So much does he believe in this monochromatic effect that he tells us, "I precisely and categorically refuse to create on one surface even the interplay of two colors."<sup>37</sup> In contrast with Greenberg's idea that the rectilinear is open by definition, Klein identifies the color blue as a metaphor for openness, for the expanse of sky and the depth of the sea. Quoting Bachelard, Klein finds the articulation for his feelings about blue. "First there is nothing, next there is a depth of nothingness, then a profundity of blue."<sup>38</sup> These words echo the text of Genesis 1:2, "The Earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters."<sup>39</sup> Such words take us back to the original departure into existence, and attempt to indicate that moment before creation.

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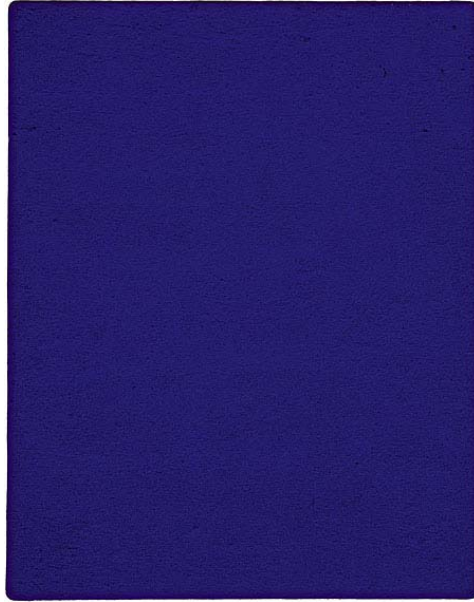
<sup>35</sup> Klein, Yves. "The Evolution of Art Towards the Immaterial". *Art in Theory: 1900- 2000*. p. 818

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.* p. 818

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.* p. 818

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.* p. 819

<sup>39</sup> Metzger, RSV.



Klein – Blue

De Kooning's writings tell us that there is no doubt that God acted upon the void; that lost in such a space one must fill it, and do so precisely because "one cannot help it".<sup>40</sup> The procession that is order is the only possible act, the unavoidable consequence. Similarly, Barnett Newman reminds us that the 'original' human acted out of awareness of "his own helplessness before the void."<sup>41</sup> Simply put, emptiness demands a response. It forces one to see oneself as unknown, to recognize the self as 'other'. Perhaps because we somehow recognize in it a pseudo-sentience; the realization that we cannot project ourselves into it; it stands alone. The Void allows no identification, and directs the human being toward that 'original' person in each of us. That is, it points directly toward that moment of 'intuition of the universe',<sup>42</sup> that religious moment, before the multitude becomes ordered by our minds; before our true selves are supplanted by the images and relations of images impressed upon

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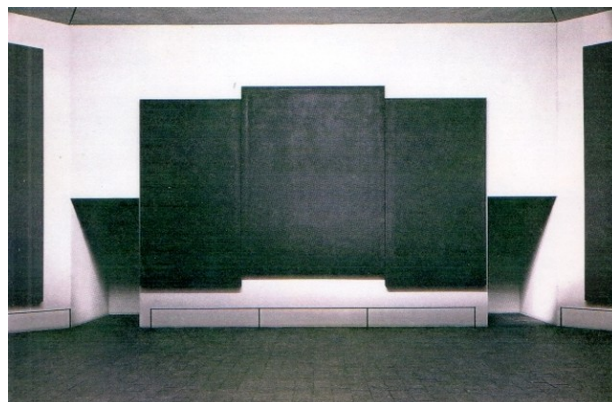
<sup>40</sup> De Kooning, William. "A Desperate View". *Art in Theory: 1900- 2000*. p. 583

<sup>41</sup> Newman, Barnett. "The First Man Was an Artist". *Art in Theory: 1900- 2000*. p. 575

<sup>42</sup> This turn of words is the translation of Schleiermacher's vocabulary that is the human apprehension of being.

us. In this light we can look again at Rothko's chapel, taking into account the philosophies of the artists, given of their own accord.

The black panels of the chapel fit their environment. A religious setting hints at the possibility held within the works. There is possibility for one to realize the works as a vehicle for disclosing the ultimate nature of the self. One can find the 'original' person within them. Distinguished from Robert Ryman's white paintings, which are the product of limitation and a movement within minimalism, Rothko's works are, on the other hand, faithfully intended as sensuous, to provoke feeling as a direct form of communication, prior to articulation, viewed here as an indirect middleman. Ryman's white monochrome works may seem, like Newman's *The Name*, to be more representative of God and religion, but we recognize Rothko's black paintings as precisely the Void. While whiteness connotes purity, and in Newman's aim, God himself, the limitation of white is that it is somehow still representational in this manner. Whiteness, defined by such a title, brings to mind the idea of a thing, a representational thing, namely God, which is laden with human baggage and does not seem to fit with Rothko's chapel, at least in the vein of his own philosophy. Instead, the blackness denotes not a thing, nothing, exactly no-thing-at-all, specifically the idea of the Void and yet void of idea; that which defies the image, the truly transcendent.



## Rothko Chapel Triptych

Blackness, as the Void, like the emptiness of space and mind, stands apart even in a way that God cannot, and in so doing brings meaning to Rothko's chapel by presenting the religious before its devolution into the subjects which would normally be found on such panels in any representational religious atmosphere; before the creation of religious morals and doctrinal metaphysics. Perhaps in the monochrome we find a path unto ourselves in the ultimate meaning of the second commandment, "You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in Heaven above, or the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth."<sup>43</sup> Certainly, Dante's words are echoing, "Dark and deep it was...that though I probed with my sight to the bottom, there was nothing there." And through the monochrome, perchance, we can recognize ourselves paradoxically as formless, and at the same time in perpetual spontaneous creation of ourselves, filling the Void in our attempt to relate to the world.

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<sup>43</sup> Metzger, RSV. Exodus 20:4

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