



Modernism and Abstraction

Discussion so far has considered Modernism as a period dedicated to the progression of abstraction in painting, but emphasis is rarely upon only formal or stylistic developments of course, usually these are taken as an index to social, political, economic and other factors. Then again, some versions recognise other styles to the period, for example Futurism, Dada and Surrealism and so place less emphasis upon abstraction, while equally looking to significant factors at their historical source.¹⁷³ But however one augments the breadth of works to the period, there remains a problem with its length and the problem starts from an understanding of abstraction. As shown in Chapter Nine, the problem is firstly a stylistic one, concerning the basis of depiction underlying an explanation of abstraction. Unable to accurately, or even coherently explain abstraction, the careless stretching of the period according to a supposed tendency to flatness then makes problems for an historical analysis. Works share too little that is distinctive, cover a period where too much is vital. To begin this revision of Modernism, the chapter first outlines why source also suffers under inadequate stylistics.

¹⁷³ The many advocates for Dada and Surrealism range from Andre Breton, *Surrealism and Painting*, (Paris, 1928) London, 1966, to Sir Herbert Read, *The Philosophy of Art*, London, 1964, to Dawn Ades, *Dada and Surrealism*, London, 1974, to Peter Bürger, *Theory of The Avant-Garde*, (Frankfurt, 1980) Minneapolis 1984, to Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, Cambridge/Mass., 1993 and Hal Foster, *Return of the real: the avant-garde at the end the century*, Cambridge/Mass./London, 1996, to offer only a brief cross-section. The movements are variously taken in opposition or alliance with abstraction. Read, for example, urges an underlying unity with abstraction and interesting parallels with Romanticism as an extreme version of the sublime. Bürger argues for them in support of a favoured social practice – ‘the avant-garde’. In as much as he concerns himself with painting, attribution rests on a meagre stylistic basis of collage and Duchamp’s readymades. A dubious distinction is proposed for the Modernist work, as a self-contained or autonomous object, opposed to the ‘avant-garde’ work as integrated with ‘life’. Some abstraction counts as ‘avant-garde’, such as Russian Constructivism, some counts as Modernism, such as the works of Kandinsky. Krauss and Foster argue for the importance of Dada and Surrealism as a response to intellectual trends of the time, such as psychoanalysis, (in Lacan as much as Freud), structuralism, as advanced by Levi-Strauss (in ethnographic studies and the appreciation of non-western depiction) and the criticism of Walter Benjamin, (especially on photography). However no advocate proposes the exclusion of abstraction from Modernism, or an end to Modernism with the appearance of Dada and Surrealism, and while mostly broadening the constitution of Modernism, attention to styles other than abstraction does not in itself remedy the inflated duration of Modernism at issue here.

The length of Modernism has interestingly tended to spread backwards, as art historians throughout the twentieth century sought to integrate more recent work.¹⁷⁴ From Alfred J. Barr Junior's starting point with the Post Impressionists, in his noted chart on the development of Abstract Art in 1936, the scope of Modernism has been variously redrawn to embrace Manet and Impressionism, Realism, Romanticism, Neo-Classicism, and as shown in Greenberg's version, even farther back.¹⁷⁵ Barr's history ends in two branches of abstraction for twentieth century painting by 1935, the geometric and non-geometric, while Greenberg's history ends in branches beyond traditional easel-scale and techniques by the nineteen fifties.¹⁷⁶ Modernism thus not only embraces more of the twentieth century with later versions but more of the past in order to do so. Modernism becomes a period of at least two hundred years by this, if it is also to embrace most of the twentieth century, as is generally accepted.

This far exceeds the length of any period since (and possibly including) the Renaissance, and paradoxically confers a unity or stability on the period at odds with preceding history and intuitions of accelerating change. Such intuitions are captured not only in the succession of lesser movements, such as Realism, Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Symbolism, Art Nouveau, Fauvism, Cubism and so forth but in the rapid transformation brought about by the industrial revolution, greater energy resources, new forms of transportation, greater democracy and education, the climax of colonialism, the spread of urbanisation,

¹⁷⁴ Taking the later eighteenth century as the cradle of Modernism is pervasive in recent art history. Michael Fried has pursued notions of Modernism in the eighteenth century in Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality*, Berkley/London, 1980. T.J. Clark maintains Modernism emerged in the mid-nineteenth century in Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers*, London/New York, 1985, and extends Modernism from 1793 to 1989 in Clark, *Farewell to an Idea; episodes in a history to modernism*, New Haven/ London, 1999. Other eminent authors of similar persuasion include Robert Rosenblum, Thomas Crow and Robert L. Herbert. By contrast, Richard R. Brettell, *Modern Art 1851-1929* Oxford/New York, 1999, argues for a shorter version, straddling the turn of the century, while including previously ignored work in eastern Europe and elsewhere.

¹⁷⁵ Alfred H. Barr Junior, *Cubism and Abstract Art*, New York, 1936. Barr does not strictly use the term Modernism however, and his chart tellingly ignores more concrete depiction of the period, such as the work of Ernst, Dali, Chagall, De Chirico and others. Yet in *Barr, Defining Modern Art* Irving Sandler and Amy Newman (eds.) New York, 1986, it is clear that Barr takes abstraction as synonymous with 'Modern Art' or Modernism.

¹⁷⁶ Greenberg's 'Modernist Painting' offers no canon of contemporary works, however essays such as 'The Crisis of the Easel Picture' (1948) and 'American-Type Painting' (1955-58) are consistent with this position and urge such recent inclusions. See Greenberg, 1961.

patterns of emigration and so on. Modernism conceals more than it reveals in such a sprawling version, strains the preceding structure of periods, or any single theme, such as socialism or capitalism. A remedy may seek either to start Modernism later than the eighteenth century, or to end it earlier in the twentieth century (or both).¹⁷⁷ As shown, earlier critics and historians were often intent upon demonstrating the validity of abstraction in painting through a close integration with its precedents, and as a result are caught up in a seamless transition backwards, from one precedent to another. Hence the difficulty in finding a starting point for Modernism. But the increasing lengths taken in history only alert us to a deep uneasiness with the stylistics of abstraction, as discussed in Chapter Nine, and which ultimately the length of Modernism can neither compensate, nor disguise. Stylistically, abstraction has problems, and it makes problems for Modernism, historically.

A remedy for Modernism must therefore rethink abstraction. While it is easy enough to point to where a complete or full abstraction first arises in painting, it is more difficult to say in what way it is complete or full, or to explain its basis in depiction. As shown in discussion of formalist criticism, the temptation is to exchange the picture plane (poorly grasped, in any case) with the picture surface, to assume a single, absolute picture plane for all objects depicted, all materials depicting. As also shown, this position cannot be sustained historically or stylistically. It fatally mistakes the basis of depiction and leads to a misguided intolerance. The task is therefore to say in what way full abstraction remains relative to depictive styles and to distinguish varieties of picture plane.

Of course none of this determines whether Modernism should be taken as the period leading up to or away from the emergence of full abstraction - and the term might usefully be adopted for the genre - but it will suffice to simply signal this

¹⁷⁷ Bernard Smith, *Modernism's History*, Sydney, 1998, introduces shorter divisions of period and puzzlingly renames Modernism 'The Formalesque', (although the etymology of 'form' is hardly less ambiguous or compromised than 'modern' 'modernity' or 'modernism') and actually signals an indifference to the problem of formal analysis for depiction and painting in the period. He is more concerned with introducing colonial and post-colonial contributions to accepted styles, and is content to gloss Greenberg, Fried, Krauss and others for stylistics, to inherit and compound the problems discussed in Chapter Nine. Other revisions to Modernism concerning ethnic, sexual, national and regional factors are not considered here for similar reasons. They too are concerned with tracing standard stylistics to such factors and often with thus extending Modernism through additional works, but not with the fundamental problem with depiction underlying the stylistics of abstraction. So, while the study addresses a popular topic in Modernism, concern with stylistics here presents a radical reversal of prevailing trends.

meaning for ‘abstraction’ here. Modernism in fact might as easily be divided into low and high periods, as with the Renaissance, with the appearance of abstraction marking the turning point. The merits of such an arrangement would then depend upon relations or relevance to adjoining periods. However this falls beyond the scope of even this broad study. What is needed here is a version of Modernism with which to frame just developments in the second half of the twentieth century, indeed this duration is chosen as a measure against such period frames, and so the convenient choice is for a Modernism that starts with the appearance of (full) abstraction and to leave questions of preceding periods to another study. Clearly the emphasis for this history is firstly upon period style, even at the expense of national, regional, school and individual styles, and the following account does no more than outline Modernism.

Abstraction is generally taken to emerge around 1912 with certain works by František Kupka (1871-57), Robert and Sonia Delaunay (1885–1941, 1885-1979), Stanton Macdonald-Wright (1890–1973), and Morgan Russell (1886-1953) amongst others, variously identified as Orphists and Synchronists. Less generally acknowledged is that abstraction also coincides with striking developments in more concrete depiction. It parallels the transition in the work of Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) and Georges Braque (1882-1963) from so-called Analytic Cubism to Synthetic Cubism, as well as a shift in the work of artists including Giorgio De Chirico (1888-1978), Marc Chagall (1887-1985) and Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) toward a more complex use of perspective and its objects. These developments establish crucial relations with abstraction, channel its variety and restrict its influence, and together set the course of Modernism. However given the priority of abstraction to discussion thus far, this chapter is devoted to the revision of the concept. Competing styles are taken up in the following chapter.

As noted, abstraction is usually understood as a withdrawal from depiction, a dedication to schemes of non-depictive two-dimensionality, to formal or intrinsic properties of the medium. Here it is understood to remain depiction, and to picture only a sort of picture plane.¹⁷⁸ Abstraction to a lesser degree is familiar to depiction

¹⁷⁸ As with other instances of self-reference so far considered, while some parts or properties are sampled, others do the sampling. No paradox arises. The shape or sides of the picture plane are sampled for only those properties engaged by the pattern or ordering of its area, and not, for

in the sorts of objects and pictures discussed in chapter three under the issues of caricature and fiction. A picture of a young woman or a typical tiger are basically class terms or abstractions, and classing extends to fictive objects or null depiction and more elaborate arrangements of objects, to events and their necessary points of view, to their picture plane schemes, to genres and compositions. The object as a composition may then be sorted for global or general qualities, of light, motion, proportion or depth for example, so that the object then as light, motion, depth and so on, may in turn be classed as a matter of colour, line, tone, and other properties of depicting materials. In other words, the object is gradually assimilated to the picture plane and reduced to only an organisation of its sides or shape, the picture plane is as far or full as abstraction can go in depiction. Abstraction in depiction is hardly an idle exercise, of course. Establishing such patterns enables new and more complex or abstract reference, and prompts new directions in less abstract depiction, as shall be shown in the following chapter.¹⁷⁹

But an effective ordering to this end is not easily accomplished. It must negotiate constraints from established practices, within depiction and without. In Chapter Two, non-depictive two-dimensionality was acknowledged as pattern. Symmetry, repetition, alternation, progression, dispersal and so forth may be cultivated without depiction. Similarly, basic shapes such as a square or a circle resist more concrete depiction through entrenched use in a variety of practices, in fact may be considered as two-dimensional objects. An outline of a circle is therefore not necessarily a picture of a circle. Such practices suggest a way of avoiding depictive orderings but risk also avoiding the picture plane. Patterns establish geometric relations for a theme or *motif* that are theoretically boundless in extension. The framing of them is

example, their proportions to the width and height of the supporting wall, or their accommodation as whole numbers under a metric rather than imperial measurement. Self-reference is taken as always partial, and relative to reference scheme.

¹⁷⁹ Analysis of depiction *as* abstraction, or vice versa, surprisingly has received scant attention. Notable exceptions are Harold Osborne, *Abstraction and Artifice in Twentieth Century Art*, Oxford/New York, 1979, and Charles Harrison, 'Abstraction' in *Primitivism, Cubism, Abstraction*, Harrison, Francis Frascina, Gill Perry, (eds.) New Haven/London, 1993, pp. 184-262. Both offer rare precedents for the kind of study undertaken here. Osborne however does not proceed from a theory of depiction, and his distinction between *semantic* abstraction, derived from more concrete objects in depiction, and *non-iconic* abstraction, derived from a display of materials and techniques, while raising important questions of merit and criticism, begs closer attention to depiction (or the iconic), offers no clear history or engagement with more concrete depiction coinciding with abstraction. Harrison approaches depiction under a framework of intentional meaning, and of the concrete as mere resemblance, is more tied to a standard history of Modernism, less inclined to thoroughgoing revision.

therefore difficult to impose as a finite extension. Thus a square of polka dots is not generally seen as a picture of a given number of dots, or as a display of square-ness but rather as just a sample of the pattern. In such cases polka dots outweigh, or out-*project* the square or picture plane.¹⁸⁰ But ‘full abstraction’ is interested in precisely the picture of the pattern, or the pattern of the picture, and in a two-dimensionality that points *to* the picture plane rather than *through* it. For this reason abstraction does not initially adopt more obvious patterns, although later with its project more secured, it accommodates more of them in certain ways.

To start with however, the sampling of abstraction must carefully balance pattern against picture. Too little pattern may be too much picture or less than full abstraction. Success lies in finding how the frame may order basic elements without them amounting to an entrenched pattern, and what elements may be so ordered without falling into an obvious picture.¹⁸¹ It is not of course, without its grey areas and controversies. For example the detection of a figure/ground relation is sometimes held to offer a primitive scheme for depth and hence to amount to less than ‘full abstraction’. But an appeal to precedence of figure/ground schemes must also identify the object figured and its background. There is no depth without objects, so ‘depth’ cannot argue *a priori* for objects. More generally, ‘full abstraction’ does not rest upon the elimination of *any* resemblance between a two-dimensional ordering and a three-dimensional object, or of *any* version of depiction. Obviously that is impossible. Rather, its identity rests only with avoiding prior and prominent versions of depiction, using novel or unfamiliar versions of pattern. Works accepted as such moreover project their own resemblance and so rule out some options for less abstract depiction while attracting new versions of abstraction. No definitive list of features need be maintained, the grouping includes as opportunity allows.

Thus abstraction in depiction is taken as a sampling practice relative to established or entrenched pattern. If this view initially seems to trivialise or diminish the importance of abstraction, it is an impression to be quickly dispelled. As shall now

¹⁸⁰ Projection in this sense and projectability of predicates is dealt with extensively in Goodman’s writings, in particular Goodman, 1972, 1978 and 1983.

¹⁸¹ Thus anxiety with the decorative, noted in Greenberg, is rightly recognised as a failing of abstraction, but not as inevitable. On the contrary, the projection of abstraction steadily wins new object and meaning *from* the decorative, progressively converts the decorative with additional qualities of painting, or revised sampling. Threat of the decorative is not just allayed but diminished in further abstraction.

be shown, abstraction not only maintains most of its established meaning or interpretation under this view, but also offers considerable enlargement upon it and indeed promotes a greater respect and appreciation of pattern. Furthermore, this now allows the varieties of abstraction to be traced stylistically, properly to trace the projection of abstraction, without falling into the error of assuming there is the one fixed and final picture plane or of ascribing wayward notions of ‘flatness’, a notional depth or elemental material to it.

In outlining projection for abstraction, the crucial contest of styles is recognised. Importantly, works may be excluded from abstraction where stylistic affinity or projection outweighs even the seeming disintegration of object and depth. An example such as *Nude Woman* (1910) by Picasso (Figure 1) shows how a stylistic identity resists greater abstraction. Its use of line, tone and plane, favouring short parallels, and a distinctive facture in modulation of tone, its adherence to a warm, tertiary to grey palette, and a composition that directs detail or density to a central area against a neutral or darkened ground, all identify the work with those grouped as Analytical Cubism. Even though we may have difficulty accepting the depicted object as a nude woman, (and surely the point is that we do) we have nevertheless an object derived from a kind of disintegration of perspective, carrying in its wake a fragmentation of volume and tone. For it is notable that most examples of the style more or less maintain proportion, both anatomically, and between familiar objects, and that this governs the dispersal of parts. Here, the head, the eyes and nose remain especially proximate. The degree of disintegration while marked in this example does not therefore threaten its stylistic identity or achieve ‘full abstraction’.

The Orphists and Synchronists on the other hand are conspicuous as much for the way they depart from Cubism as achieve ‘full abstraction’. While they retain a geometric basis and an emphatic facture of short parallel strokes, they introduce a distinctly spectral palette, a more strictly two-dimensional geometry, generally to resolved or integral planes, filled but not traced in outlines, and virtually excluding tonal gradation. An example such as Kupka’s *Disks of Newton* variously dated 1911-12 (Figure 2) offers an especially strong contrast, with its dedication to circles, segments and ellipses, pointedly avoiding the straight lines of Cubism. The spectral colour range and spare geometry suggest perhaps a hybrid of Fauvism and Cubism,

but the combination cancels each other out here. Since Fauvism favours pure hues as values of light and Cubism favours basic geometry as values of tone and volume, when combined thus, colour strips geometry of its volume, geometry strips colour of its light. We have not spheres in light or spherical lights but simply curves and colour and since curves intersect and colours intersperse, colour comes in curves, or curves in colour.¹⁸²

Yet notice that while colours here are spectral, their division offers no simple or obvious geometric relation. The title *Disks of Newton* reminds us perhaps that it was Isaac Newton's formulation of a circular arrangement for the colour spectrum that first accommodated white at the centre, equidistant from all colour definitions at the circumference, and measuring chromatic intensity against a central luminosity, or brightness against lightness.¹⁸³ The circle also allows for any number of distinctions to be drawn around the circumference, to choose which hues are to be taken as primary, or at what point to draw the line at blue for example, as opposed to turquoise or purple. Kupka's geometry does not draw its lines between colours in quite a standard or predictable way. The example offers only the pinkest of purples, yet shifts in lightness of blue, blue to black and red to yellow, but only to lightness in yellow. Equally, circles, ellipses and intersections elude stricter system. A chromatic and geometric ordering thus acquires a formidable complexity, and is often interpreted in terms of the mystical, magical or musical. Ordering is furthered in their size and position within the frame. The red circle and radial variations to the upper right, and the black, white and grey variations to the lower left direct brightness against lightness, the mauve and green bands to the upper left are echoed by the pink and green bands to the lower right, while the simplicity of the left is contrasted with the complexity of the right.¹⁸⁴ Furthermore the actual size of the circles, bands and ellipses determines the degree of precision and facture to the

¹⁸² For standard interpretation of Orphism see Virginia Spate, *Orphism: The Revolution of Non-figurative Painting in Paris*, Oxford, 1979. Further footnotes indicating established interpretation for an artist, style or work is simply prefaced by 'On'.

¹⁸³ Newton's concern was of course with the additive mixing of colour in light, rather than the subtractive mixing of colour in pigment. John Gage traces the contribution of Isaac Newton to colour theory and to Kupka's version of a Newtonian colour chart, featuring ten hues and three levels of saturation, in Gage, *Colour and Meaning*, London/New York, 1999, pp. 134-153. He offers many other insights into the role of colour in abstraction, in Gage, *Colour and Culture*, London/New York, 1993.

¹⁸⁴ On Kupka, see *Painting the Universe: František Kupka, Pioneer in Abstraction*, Jaroslav Anděl and Dorothy Kosinski (eds.) Dallas/Stuttgart, 1998 and Serge Fauchereau, *Kupka*, Barcelona, 1989.

filling colours. Ordering is also in the casual and provisional quality of the filling, lightness of touch, intimacy of colour to curve, all announce an attitude or spirit. Ordering then extends not only to the shape of the picture but also to its size (49.5 X 65 cm, 19½ X 25¾”).

As indicated, concern with two-dimensionality and pattern promptly leads to consideration of three-dimensionality, firstly to facture, or the texture created by application of paint to the supporting surface, but increasingly to more sculptural means. Alternatively, pattern may be measured against denotation, or one-directional two-dimensionality. Then again, two-dimensional geometry need not remain basic, but offers more complex versions. This leads of course back to three-dimensional geometry, or to two-dimensional schemes for depth, and firstly to works such as *Contrast of Forms* (1913) (Figure 3) by Ferdinand Leger (1881-1955), to patterns of cylinders, segments and cubes, and beyond that obviously to more concrete objects, which we shall leave for the moment. But more complex two-dimensional geometry may simply group irregular lines and shapes for more elusive qualities. In this respect, the work of Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944) is of interest, since he initially favours a complex repertory of lines and shapes derived from figurative or concrete objects, but progressively transformed through a redistribution of colour and tone and the adoption of an orthogonal or map-like picture plane¹⁸⁵.

Untitled - First abstract watercolour, (variously dated 1910-13) (Figure 4) offers a crude but instructive example. A narrow range of colour is assigned to a variety of shapes, with varying angles and curves and ranging from the more compact or lump-like, to the elongated, and to mere lines of various lengths, curve and angularity. This morphology in turn shares various relations or combinations, yet the distribution typically approaches an all-over or field structure, and serves to highlight the restricted range and distribution of colour. In this case red and blue are prominent, and form a central elliptical area, and like many of the works of this period, this

¹⁸⁵ Depiction contrasted with ‘full abstraction’ is often termed figurative or figuration and while this serves to contrast the literal two-dimensionality of ‘full abstraction’, unfortunately it also suggests a metaphoric relation for other depiction, which is misleading. Where a square depicts a cube for example, it is not figuratively or metaphorically a cube. It is literally one side of a cube. Figurative or metaphorical reference is better understood as expression. Since some such a term is nevertheless useful, the term *concrete depiction* is adopted, with some reservations.

ellipse assumes a subtle diagonal axis, from lower left to upper right. As with Kupka, the basis of such colour ordering is not a simple or obvious matter and is often interpreted as a metaphor for states of mind, reflected in the manner and degree of resolution to the ordering or pattern. Yet this cumbersome morphology also confined Kandinsky to works of an elaborate, even epic conception. Significantly, he later adopted basic geometry and simpler compositions.¹⁸⁶

Kupka also pursued complex two-dimensional geometry in works of a crystalline and botanical derivation, such as *Irregular Forms – Creation* (1911). Yet the degree of abstraction is less certain here, and as with the more abstract works of Georgia O’Keeffe (1887-1986) such as *Lake George – Abstraction* (1918) works balance a use of depth against scale of object, allow colour and shape striking latitude, to render even motion or time, but also recall the increasing use of the photographic close-up and so tend to appeal to the picture over pattern. But related biomorphic forms devised by Surrealist artists such as Joan Miró (1893-1983), Hans/Jean Arp (1886-1966) and Andre Masson (1896-1987), can sometimes pick out only a family of curves and shapes and identify the organic or living with merely a pattern. In works such as Miró’s *Painting* (1933) (Figure 5) and certain of his later *Constellations* series (1941) a more effective version of Kandinsky’s field composition is formulated. The narrowed family of lines and shapes, the restriction to flat or single colours, hard or sharp edges and a uniformity in size enable a greater flexibility of composition, from many elements, as in the *Constellations* series to fewer, as in *Painting* (1933).¹⁸⁷

The structure of pattern balances number of elements against variation. More elements but less variation is accommodated in a field pattern, while less elements but more variation allows for a ‘figure’ pattern, as in the works of mid-period Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian (1872-1944). Interestingly, the monochrome paintings of Kasimir Malevich (1878-1935) such as *White on White* (1919) (Figure 6) are figures rather than fields under this arrangement even though variation of colour all but disappears, because variation between squares becomes not simply of scale or size but also of angle to frame and of location within frame. Shape, in other

¹⁸⁶ On *Kandinsky*, see Rose Carol Washton Long, *Kandinsky: the development of an abstract style*, Oxford/New York, 1980. Hans K. Roethel and Jean K. Benjamin, *Kandinsky*, New York, 1979, Francois Le Targat, *Kandinsky*, New York, 1986/7

¹⁸⁷ On Miro, see Roland Penrose, *Miro*, London, 1985.

words, steers abstraction, asserts figure rather than field. The biomorphic field or figure by no means exhausts the range of lines for a pattern of a picture. Examples by Klee such as *Table of Colour (in Grey Major)* (1930) (Figure 7) or *Green on Green* (1938) (Figure 8) find a subtle range of line and shape as much by technique and materials as geometry. Here, rough hewn and casual qualities, as with the Kupka example, add to the ordering or pattern and sample a stiffness or brittleness of the material and techniques, or express a patience or tolerance in the attitude of execution.¹⁸⁸ In later abstraction materials and technique take on more vigorous and unusual forms, and further govern degree of field and figure in pattern.

The Abstract Expressionist, Tachiste and Informel groups all arrive at pattern structures according to distinctive materials and techniques.¹⁸⁹ Jackson Pollock (1912-56) and Bradley Walker Tomlin (1899-1953) for example arrive at fields through contrasting techniques, while Clifford Still (1904-1980) and Mark Rothko (1903-1970) maintain figure patterns, according to distinctive viscosities and applications of paint. Equally Jean-Paul Riopelle (b.1923) and Jean Bazaine (b.1904) develop fields according to conspicuous techniques, while Wols (1913-1951) arrives at a figure structure in works such as *Composition* (1947) (Figure 9) where line and plane now share no simple family of lines according to drawing, but result from successive techniques of brushing, rubbing and scratching. Indeed the distinction between line, plane and colours all but dissolves here. Yet a figure emerges upon a pale ground, its parts discerned, proportions gauged. The work accordingly offers metaphors for indecision or impatience, spontaneity or improvisation, or some combination, and then again for the sobriety of red, the subtlety of brown, the relativity of line and tone. Yet beyond the variety of techniques adopted, the figures and fields developed, two-dimensionality also operates in notation, most obviously in writing, but also with music, dance, mathematics and various sciences. Such notation also holds a prospect for abstraction from pictures. Hieroglyphs and pictograms occupy a kind of middle ground, but abstraction seeks not the substance of notation or the sound of writing, but only the picture of the pattern.

¹⁸⁸ On Klee, see Marcel Fransiscono, *Paul Klee – his work and thought*, Chicago, 1991, and Gualtieri Di San Lazzaro, *Klee*, London, 1964.

¹⁸⁹ On these and similar styles, see Michel Seuphor, *Abstract Painting: fifty years of accomplishment from Kandinsky to Jackson Pollock*, New York, 1964, Marcel Brion, *L'Art abstrait*, Paris, 1956, Anna Moszynska, *Abstract Art*, London, 1990.

Notational abstraction occurs in a variety of Surrealist or Surrealist-inspired works. Together with the impulsive, automatic or spontaneous approaches to technique, abstract notation occurs prominently in the figure-like patterns of Jackson Pollock in works such as *Male and Female* (1942) as well as later more fluent and fluid fields. By contrast the intricate ‘calligraphy’ of Mark Tobey (1890-1976), offers notation-like elements in more discrete and discreet fields, in works such as *Universal Field* (1949). Since notation is one-directional, following sounds and sequence, notation is necessarily linear, not strictly tonal or chromatic. An abstraction of fictive notation however may toy with multi-directional fields, tonal or chromatic coding. Yet notational abstraction is not drawn only to fields. Works by Wols, Hans Hartung (1904-1989), Franz Kline (1910-1962), or Pierre Soulages (b.1919) with their predominantly black and linear elements, look not so much to a textual structure even with a textural approach, but to an alphabetical one, to figures rather than fields, and the ‘big’ variations between elements of line and shape, or notationally, between time and one-directionality. Yet the one-directional linear pattern cannot be pursued by depiction any further. It is the end of the line for one branch of abstraction.¹⁹⁰

As noted, scrutiny of two-dimensionality also directs attention to three-dimensional qualities of a medium, firstly to texture, to novel applications and unusual materials, then to greater spatial considerations. Hence the common merging of painting with sculpture, in the painted bas-reliefs of Hans Arp (1886-1966) or Ben Nicholson (1894-1982), the wall constructions of Vladimir Tatlin (1885-1953), Lazar El Lissitzky (1890-1941), or Ivan Puni (alias Jean Pougny) (1894-1956), the mobiles of Alexander Calder (1898-1976), many of the plane-like carvings of Barbara Hepworth (1903-1975), the Perspex sheet constructions of Naum Gabo (1890-1977) and the painted constructions of August Herbin (1882-1960) or Georges Vantongerloo (1886-1965), for example. Discerning abstract two-dimensionality becomes a way of appreciating the surrounding three-dimensionality, and vice versa. Yet conventions of three-dimensionality do not deal only in picture planes and are

¹⁹⁰ However it is a branch usefully retraced by the Paris-based *Letteriste* group and offshoots throughout the fifties, where greater notation converges with poetry and the emphasis shifts to printing and even textiles. This tendency also emerges in the ‘layouts’ in painting and collage by the Situationist group. For a brief account of Letterisme and Situationism see Tony Godfrey, *Conceptual Art*, London, 1998, pp.58-61 and pp. 75-79.

not exemplified only by the exclusion of a dimension, obviously, but by attention to the versatility of mass in materials and related presentational practices.

The painted wall-construction or bas-relief offers one way of testing such practices but abstraction in sculpture also seeks distinctive qualities of a given material, firstly a 'truth to materials' that resists the traditional demands of depiction, then forms and arrangements held to be definitive of the material, then combined materials and construction held to be definitive to an object or function, then to an arrangement or construction held to telling to a situation or context. This broadening concern finds two distinct strategies. On the one hand Modernist sculpture is drawn to larger issues of design, to architecture, even engineering or industry. It integrates the work within a larger context and abandons the pedestal, so to speak, on which to place work. The Russian Constructivists, the Dutch de Stijl group and the German Bauhaus, amongst others, pursue this tendency.¹⁹¹ On the other hand Modernist sculpture also isolates the overlooked material or construction, places it on a pedestal, so to speak, in order to appreciate otherwise ignored qualities. This tendency is pursued in Duchamp's ready-mades, and in various collage or assemblage practices.

So, one strategy integrates while the other isolates. The pedestal has either no role or a bigger role in Modernist sculpture. But the two strategies also feed off one another, some integrations make some isolations more interesting, and vice versa. The fate of Modernist sculpture does not therefore lie in just the farther reaches of civic planning or industrial design. 'Pedestals' find new applications and variety and in general the flow between categories makes for more rather than less categories. Similarly, abstraction in depiction and painting is strengthened rather than weakened by the pull toward sculpture. Persistent fears for the demise of depiction and painting mistake the dynamics of such developments, which conform somewhat to Newton's third law of dynamics, whereby for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.¹⁹² Categories of painted sculpture, assemblage and construction, refine rather than replace sculpture and painting and help to highlight

¹⁹¹ On Russian Constructivism, see Camilla Gray, *The Russian Experiment in Art 1863-1922*, London, 1962, Nicholas H. Allison (ed.) *Art into Life: Russian Constructivism 1914-1932*, New York, 1990. For De Stijl see Nancy Troy, *The De Stijl Experiment*, Cambridge, Mass. 1983. On The Bauhaus, see *Bauhaus*, Jeanine Fiedler and Peter Feierabend (eds.) Cologne, 2000.

¹⁹² This is of course offered only as a simile, and as a 'law' for reference, rather than history.

new or overlooked properties for non-sculptural painting and non-painted sculpture. This development in part measures the course of Modernism. But to understand this course more fully, the study must also look to how abstraction in painting influences and responds to developments in more concrete depiction. This is the task of the next chapter.

The task here has been to explain abstraction as the sampling of two-dimensionality and the relation between depiction and pattern. It has provided an analysis of the development of abstraction along four axes, firstly between basic and complex geometry, secondly between field and figure structures, thirdly between notation and pattern and fourthly between two and three-dimensionality, or materials. These comprise the stylistic features of abstraction, and might suggest a realignment of styles with established sources in a longer study. It is enough here to distinguish these features from their standard interpretation and to show how abstraction reconceived makes for a more comprehensive and comprehensible history.