

PAINTING ON THE EDGE

ESSAY BY CHARLIE GERE



Alexander Cozens
Blot Painting, 1786



IN 2005, IN THE PERHAPS UNLIKELY SETTING OF Grasmere in the Lake District, a somewhat subversive art event took place. The often reactionary art magazine *Modern Painters* described it with great excitement.

GRASMERE HAS NEVER SEEN anything like it. Nine striped sails gliding across its slate-grey waters. Behind them the garden green hills of this spot made famous by the Lakeland poets. A stone's throw inland lies Dove Cottage, William Wordsworth's haven from the distractions of the fast-industrializing England of his age. But today, two centuries on, the shore-bound knot of onlookers is more interested in the approaching micro-Armada and its sundry colours gradually coming into view across the lake. (Oddy, 2005)

This was a staging of Daniel Buren's *Voile/Toile Toile/Voile*, which was first seen in Berlin in 1975. According to the artist Daniel Sturgis, who brought this important piece of conceptual art to the Lake District, it 'can be seen as one of Daniel Buren's most poignant laments on the status of painting, yet by its nature it remains a work imbued with a latent romanticism, a quality that Buren would perhaps hope to distance himself from. This specific showing wished to emphasise this reading'. After the staging, the sails, the originals from 1975, were installed by Buren as paintings in the gallery at the Wordsworth Trust, along with a newly commissioned wall painting. Though, as the report in *Modern Painters* suggests, this appears to be a yacht race, it is something very different, and though this is not entirely evident, the review concluded that,



'...[what] Buren has really done is launch a nine-fold Trojan seahorse of hard-nosed post-war theory into the sanctum of English romanticism' (ibid).

What Sturgis actually did organising this event was to revive a debate about the nature of painting that had been more or less dormant in Britain since the late 1970s, and did so in a particularly striking manner. Are the sails on those boats on the lake also paintings? And if so, what does that mean for how we understand painting?

Daniel Buren, *Voile/Toile Toile/Voile* (1975)
Regatta Grasmere 2 July 2005, Exhibition July-September 2005
Curated by Daniel Sturgis

By bringing the work to the Lake District, and staging it against its fetishized landscape with all its Romantic evocations, Sturgis also brings the question of painting into conjunction with that of landscape, which in turn cannot help but invoke that of abstraction. The genesis of this current exhibition, *Against Landscape*, can be found in this enquiry and in an on-going series of paintings, the 'boulder' paintings



that Sturgis began to make about this time.

To some extent, landscape painting is a precursor to abstraction, at least in painting, or abstraction is a continuation of landscape painting. Abstraction largely developed out of landscape painting, from Whistler's *Nocturnes*, to Sérusier's *Talisman*, and onto Kandinsky's shift from being mostly a painter of landscape to his nonfigurative work, or closer to home, Ben Nicholson and Victor Pasmore's eschewal of their early landscape work for abstraction. It is even possible to go back much further and find the origins of abstract painting in the extraordinary 'blot' drawings made by Alexander Cozens in the late 18th century, reproductions of which feature in this current exhibition. That landscape painting should be at the origins of abstraction is not surprising, given that the idea of 'landscape' is a massive abstraction out of the complex realities of the environment, as is 'nature', a phantasmatic construct that emerges out of what Bruno Latour calls the 'modern constitution' which emerged in the 17th century, and which puts politics and culture on the side of the human and science and nature on that of the nonhuman (Latour, 1993). Thus landscape and nature become seen as other to the human and thus to history and time, allowing them to become metonyms of the eternal, the infinite and the transcendent, a tendency that is continued with abstraction, with its 'paths to the absolute' to use Abstraction is also subtraction. Novelist Robert Gluck puts it well, writing about the 'eternal'.

The history of the eternal in the West is a tale of subtraction. The religious landscape of the Middle Ages teems with daily life. By the eighteenth century that landscape is idealized and depopulated (*Voyage to Cythera*); by Cézanne's time, the idealized atemporal content becomes eternal forms, forms latent in a landscape, modernism's rediscovery of the universal in form itself. (Gluck, 2016, 37)

But to think of abstraction as some process almost of dematerialisation in search of some putative Platonic form or forms is to miss the degree to which it involves and concerns labour. Subtraction and

abstraction both derive from past participles of words ending with *trahere*, which in turn comes from the proto-indo-european root **tragh-* 'to draw, drag, move, which is also the origin of words such as track and trace. Abstract comes from 'abstractus', 'dragged away', the past participle of *abstrahere* 'to drag away, detach, pull away, divert'.

This brings to mind a work that is itself far from abstract, but can stand as an allegory of the relation between landscape and abstraction. *Quarrying* by Gustave Courbet is regarded as a canonical work of 19th century realism, a representation of common labour, without narrative or moral. It shows two men, one younger, one older, working the stone in a quarry. The older man, on the right is one knee breaking up the rock, while the younger, to his left, is carrying a basket of the broken rocks away from the viewer. Beyond its realist credentials the painting might also be seen as a prefiguring of both the future progress and crisis of painting itself. That this activity can be the subject of a painting is ironic in itself. For the labourers depicted therein the quarry is not a scene, not a landscape, to be looked at and enjoyed, whether as the source of beautiful or sublime sensation or as a possession to be valued or coveted. It is, rather, something to be worked, and worked against. They need to extract or even abstract what is valuable out of the hard earth.

The hard labour depicted in the painting is also the labour of painting, of labouring against that which is to be depicted. The result of the labour is no longer a representation of the landscape, but something tangible, a thing brought into existence from the encounter between painter and that which is painted, quarried out of that encounter. Courbet, the consummate realist, sets the stage for Paul Cézanne, another painter of rocks and quarries, among other things. Cézanne returns obsessively to Mont Sainte-Victoire and the Bibemus Quarry to mine or chip out the nuggets of painterly truth. He works the landscape, and, again, works against it. And if Courbet makes Cézanne possible, Cézanne prepares the way not just for Cubism, but also for Marcel Duchamp. It is Duchamp who, in a sense, makes explicit what all

Courbet and Cézanne's quarrying has implied, that the work of art itself is the thing and not merely the representation of something else. Duchamp thus incites the great crisis of representation that continues to work itself in and through art.

The idea of painting as a kind of quarrying is implied in a number of paintings in this exhibition and this lineage has haunted painting after Cézanne. One moment to think about this idea in relation to this current exhibition is think of some paintings made between 1961 and 1963 on the West Coast of the United States. Here a group of abstract artists worked through abstraction from various marginal positions. The abstract artist, Lorser Feitelson, made his *Mystical Boulder Series*, part of his *Magical Space Forms*. These hard, stark images do bear some resemblance to boulders, but they do so less as representations as such and more as images dragged or quarried out of the paint itself. Feitelson was one of the artists including in Jules Langsner's famous exhibition *Four Abstract Classicists* at the Los Angeles County Museum in 1959, which gathered these artists together, Karl Benjamin, Frederick Hammersley, and John McLaughlin. Langsner described their work as characterised as

...finite, flat, rimmed by a hard clean edge [...] not intended to evoke in the spectator any recollections of specific shapes he may have encountered in some other connection. They are autonomous shapes, sufficient unto themselves as shapes (Langsner, in Colpitt, 2002, 7)

This autonomy was intended as a West Coast reaction and riposte to the then-dominant mode of abstraction, abstract expressionism, which was also an East Coast phenomenon, based mainly in New York. For Langsner the AbEx artists were Romantics, concerned with expression and gesture, as opposed to the Formalism and Classicism of his quartet.

When the exhibition travelled to London, to the Institute of Contemporary Arts, where it was subtitled, by its curator there, Lawrence Alloway, as *California Hard-Edge*, thus turning Langsner's description in the catalogue essay into the name by

which such work would be known in the future. Hard Edge painting represented (and indeed represents) a different history or trajectory of abstraction to that of the story as it is normally recounted in contemporary art galleries and art-historical accounts, which normally culminate with the work of Pollock, Newman et al. Though mostly associated with California, Hard Edge would also be influential to British artists such as Robyn Denny and Bridget Riley, who to varying degrees misinterpreted their classicism for a type of graphic language. And perhaps this misreading also haunts aspects of this exhibition. The name 'Hard Edge' in this context refers obviously and immediately to the use of flat, clearly delineated areas of colour in the work of the artists connected with this movement. But, at another level, it can be seen to indicate something of the dangers associated with a way of painting that eschews expressivity and interiority and treats it as a negotiation with the material of paint itself. In his catalogue essay for *Four Abstract Classicists* Langsner quotes a statement by Frederick Hammersley which gives a strong sense of the process of painting in such a context.

I compose a painting by hunch. A 'hunch' painting begins by having several different sizes of canvas around. By seeing them every day I will for some unclear reason pick one up. Part of the time I have no idea to begin with. I like the size and shape in front of me and I try to put marks on it to go with it. It seems to be a process of responding and reacting to a particular 'liked' canvas.

At first I would paint a shape that I would 'see' there. That one colored shape in that canvas would work, or fit. The next shape would come from the feeling of the first plus the canvas. This process would continue until the last shape completed the picture.

The structure of making is of prime importance. Until this is right nothing further can be done. After the picture works in line the shapes 'become' colors. I answer the hunch as it comes. (ibid, 5)

This offers a new way of thinking about the relation between abstraction and landscape. Given the

location of the current exhibition it is perhaps appropriate to think about this in relation to different ways of engaging with the environment in the Lake District. The Romantic way is to regard the hills and mountains from a distance and seek in them a sense of the natural, the beautiful and sometimes the sublime and even the transcendent. This gives us the experience of the environment as 'landscape', a term derived from the Dutch 'landschap', meaning a painting of a natural or rural scene. Or perhaps one can treat the hills as summits to be conquered and from which one can enjoy the equally sublime experience of a Gods-eye view, like a figure in a painting by Caspar David Friedrich. A third way is to actually climb the hills, and to treat the climbing as an opportunity to engage with their material actuality and resistance. In this way one is no longer in front of, or looking down on, a landscape as such, but confronted with the complexities of negotiating with an environment. In contradistinction to the usually benign prospect of the landscape, the environment encountered through walking and climbing can be hostile, can appear to be against us, to resist our presence there. The most dangerous and hostile climb in the Lake District, and therefore in England, is probably Helvellyn, the most dangerous part of which is Striding Edge. This is described as a 'narrow arête and grade one scramble', which, translated into everyday terms, means a terrifyingly inadequate path with steep inclines of scree on either side. Every year people die on the mountain, despite which it remains an extremely popular climb.

The name 'Striding Edge' bears an echo of the term 'on a knife edge', meaning to be in a perilous situation in which the outcome is uncertain. To balance on an arête, a sharp mountain ridge, is somewhat like being on a knife edge, perhaps literally so. It requires taking care not to make the wrong decision at each moment, as you 'edge' along the ridge. This is similar to the perilous process of painting as described by Hammersley, a question of moving along a hard edge, or ridge, of artistic decisions through 'hunches', a narrow path with the possibility of failure on all sides, failure not just to succeed as a painting, to be a good work of art, but to be a painting at all.

This is perhaps a further hard edge that began to be negotiated by Hard Edge artists. Once painting goes beyond the confines of the canvas it becomes a question of whether what is produced is actually painting, and whether that actually matters. To fall either side of the straight and narrow path of painting may be as pertinent as to stay on that path. This can be understood as a legacy of Hard Edge painting. It is no longer a question of a single teleology or trajectory, as in Clement Greenberg's demand for an increasingly pure fidelity to the medium specificity of painting; a kind of single-minded ascent to a single goal. It is rather a question of continually negotiating and questioning the edge of painting, and to understand that what it is and what it can be, and what is has been is also negotiable. This is brilliantly caught in Katy Siegel and David Reed's important exhibition from 2007, *High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting, 1967 – 1975*. Though, as the title indicates, it concerns artistic practice on the East Coast, it reflects the aftermath of the kinds of doubts and questions that were already implicit in the work of the Californian Hard Edge artists. The work in the exhibition pushes the very idea of what painting is and might be to its outer edges and beyond. It includes work that involves pouring coloured latex on the floor, or take the form of painted pyramidal structures in the middle of the gallery, or painting performances. A notable aspect revealed by the exhibition is the amount of radical and experimental work done by women and people of colour. It also marks the degree to which the mid-1970s was the high point of this kind of radical questioning of painting. A high point that until recently had become obscured as the tensions between a rather more familiar history of recent painting was enacted, characterised perhaps by a blinkered confrontation between the critics and readers of the *Journal October* and a conservative return to modernist expression and figuration.

At about the same time a certain limit or edge of painting is reached with the work Buren, which, as in the work shown in Grasmere, largely consists of striped works, awnings, often displayed in non-artistic and public environments. In his 1981 essay 'The End of Painting' in *October* Douglas Crimp gives an account



of the anger Buren's work invoked in art critic Barbara Rose in her response to an exhibition at MOMA, in which Buren was exhibiting (Crimp, 1981). Rose cannot understand why Buren is being exhibited in a gallery, especially one as prestigious as MOMA, and thus why it is being presented as painting. She can only think of the work as 'vaguely resembling [Frank] Stella's stripe paintings' (ibid, 72). As Crimp puts it 'if Rose is myopic on matters of painting, blind to those questions about painting that Buren's work poses, this is because she, like most people, still *believes* in painting' (ibid).

Rose's continued belief in painting manifested itself in her 1979 exhibition, also at MOMA, *American Painting: The Eighties*, a proleptic, or 'oracular' title, as Crimp puts it, given the date of the exhibition (ibid, 73). For Crimp, as for many critics, the exhibition was filled with, in his words, 'hackneyed recapitulations of late modernist abstraction', without even the inclusion of figurative painters or other non-abstract forms of painting (ibid). The exhibition sought to demonstrate Rose's conviction that painting 'is a high art, a universal art, a liberal art, an art through which we can achieve transcendence and catharsis' (ibid, 75). Crimp quotes a number of statements from the catalogue supporting this claim but points out that the exhibition was 'reactionary' in that 'it reacts specifically against all those art practices of the 1960s and 1970s that abandoned painting and worked to reveal the ideological supports of painting, as well as the ideology that painting, in turn, supports' (ibid, 74). Despite, or perhaps because of this, it was a 'resounding success' and 'proved that faith in painting had been fully restored', restored, perhaps, to its straight and narrow path (ibid, 73). Similarly in the late 70s and early 80s exhibitions such as *Zeitgeist*, at the Martin-Gropius-Bau in Berlin in 1979, and *A New Spirit in Painting*, at the Royal Academy in London in 1981, may have appeared more radical in their understanding of what painting might be, but still remained generally wedded to the idea of the painting as consisting of an object involving paint on canvas on a wall in a gallery. They were also, as critics pointed out, largely white and male.

Ironically perhaps, in what came to be known as the 'post-medium condition', a position championed by October and one which was to become an institutional and academic norm, the medium of painting was no engaged with critically or even debated. In a sense this was a triumph of conservative curatorial taxonomy over the unruly process of making and thinking about art, with each genre and medium, painting, sculpture, performance, photography, video etc... each carefully placed in its appropriate niche, with no regard for the radical questioning of that placing the work involved.

However the question of painting always returns. Daniel Sturgis has returned to the Lake District, the scene of his staging of Buren's *Voile/Toile Toile/Voile*, to open it up once again. The context of Grizedale Arts as a partner is an inspired one, as it locates the debate for both painting and any contemporary idea of 'landscape' once again on the rough terrain between culture and the order of painting or the natural world. Grizedale Arts with its progressive socially engaged view of art is at first seemingly at odds to, but hosting an exhibition of paintings which wish to bridge, represent, or articulate this dichotomy. That Grizedale Arts has constructed a hanging system for the works, to enable them to be shown in Coniston Mechanics Institute, whilst nodding to earlier radical modernist display systems, for showing paintings in non-traditional settings, only heightens this tension. The works in this exhibition, whether in its smaller form in Coniston, or an expanded version in Glasgow, all engage in the question of painting, especially in relation or perhaps against landscape, whether they are actually paintings or not. Some are, though they often push at ideas of what a painting can be. They are photographs with painted abstract shapes in the landscape, or paintings showing 'landscape paintings' or they appropriate both the language of painting and images of landscape paintings. Perhaps some of the most apparently conventional paintings are those by Sturgis himself, inasmuch as they take the form of original acrylic painting on stretched canvas. Yet Sturgis' works are also inquiries into the very nature of painting, and attempts to question its limits, language and possibilities through the medium



itself. Among Sturgis' recent work are a series of paintings of 'boulders', rock-shaped forms the hard edges of which are juxtaposed against each other. They subversively allude, deliberately or otherwise to Feitelson's Boulder Series from the early 1960s (though without their 'magical' implications). Perhaps they are contemporary readings 'through' the mis-readings of Robyn Denny and Lawrence Alloway. Sturgis' paintings remind me of a characteristic sight in the Lake District and the North West of England of rocks, known as 'erratics', which have been deposited by glacial activity far from their point of origin. The name of Sturgis' series is, of course, a pun, a reminder that the artist must always be bolder, and indeed bolder, in negotiating the edges of painting.

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