The Anatomy of an Image
Painting in the Digital Age
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The expansion of digital media and technology is rapidly transforming our perception of the material world. Marginalising the tactile potential of an image to convey meaning, advances in new-media have emphasized speed and efficiency over weight and substance. In light of the digital paradigm, my research promulgates the concept of painting as a physical encounter. An encounter that negates the disembodied nature of digital technology and that initiates an important rupture within the established fields of visual representation and communication. In order to extend the relevance of painting within contemporary art and culture, this paper analyses the material dimension of painting; its potential to convey significant meaning through creating a visual experience that is both optical and tactile. As the invention of photography can be seen to have liberated painting from a mimetic, narrative role, the nature of digital media likewise offers painters a unique challenge – digital technology requires us to think about painting in a new way.

The concerns for ‘physicality’ and ‘media-specificity’ are already well mapped out in modernist discourse and, as Rossalind Kraus rightly points out, it is difficult to raise the term ‘medium’ in relation to visual art without evoking both the ideas and/or critique of modernist critic Clement Greenberg. Consequently, one of the challenges for my research is to redefine the role of painting and its ‘tactility’ beyond the confines of modernist debate and offer an alternate way to consider how painting may operate in the contemporary world. By examining the impact of digital technology on our perception, this paper analyses the specific historical and cultural context that confers paintings physicality with an important role. In expanding the concept of painting as a physical encounter, my research explores the aesthetic philosophy of Gilles Deleuze. I maintain that Deleuze’s writings offer a coherent and creative strategy for contemporary artists to consider the material dimension of painting as a ‘strategic zone’ for arts production. I consider both the production and reception of painting in specific relation to the material processes that engender the emergence of meaning. This is a meaning that is felt through ‘sensation’ – motivating us to think about the significance of an image beyond the regime of semiotics or communication. Paintings tactile dimension affirms a connection with the immanence of the physical world – an experience of art grounded in substance.
“This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any other university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.”

Miles S. Hall
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Introduction
‘Paradoxical though it may be, the problem for painting, for example, an art of images, becomes how to live as a thing in a world that has ceased to be a world of things and become itself a world of images’

Gilbert-Rolf
In the 1960s Guy Debord denounced Western society’s gradual transformation into a population of docile spectators in what he famously termed ‘a society of the spectacle’\(^1\). At the time, he was labelled a paranoid. Fifty years later, the affects of visual technologies on our patterns of perception seems to confer Debord’s prognosis with an uneasy verity. In a planet inundated with images, our relationship to the world and those around us, has found itself increasingly determined by the magnitude of our exposure to visual imagery and representation. Prompted by the growing power and proficiency of digital technology, the ‘flood of images’ characteristic of contemporary society is pro-

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1. First published in 1967, La Société du Spectacle is essentially a Marxist critic of what the author saw as a growing influence of consumerism and mass media in post war society. Central to Debord’s text is the denouncement of how modern capitalism has replaced authentic social life with its representation, referring to the dominance of imagery: ‘All that was once directly lived has become mere representation.’ Guy Debord, La Société du Spectacle, 4\(^{\text{th}}\) ed., (Paris: Gallimard, 1996).
gressively altering the way in which we perceive and relate to the physical world (Ill.1). Advances in new media have invariably emphasised speed and efficiency over time and complexity; our images are perceived predominately as instantaneous transmissions on a flat homogenous screen rather than an experience of articulated substance. Heaviness, tactility, smell, materiality and physical contact seem platitudinous concepts in the face of internet, plasma TVs, i-phones, GPS guidance systems, play stations, etc. Digital technologies provide interfaces that allow us to move without the need for a body.

In this environment, the material dimension of an image has become marginalised. It would seem that dominant ideologies give more value to speed and efficiency than to touch and sensuality. No longer a determining factor in the reception or constitution of an image, the tactile qualities that engage our experience of the real have been forsaken in favour of the virtual. As Régis Debray points out, the contemporary image has come from being a physical object that depicts, to a virtual simulation that performs2; matter is subsumed to the mathematical workings of a binary code. In front of our screens, we can travel, consult, shop, communicate, and establish new ‘contacts’ through information networks where we can indeed interact and respond emotionally. Yet, are these sentiments and beliefs the same when we meet someone in ‘real-life’ or experience physical contact with another body? As spectators, we believe in having choices and freedom: we can send an SMS to see its influence on the outcome of a ‘reality’ TV show; we can fall in love with an actor in a series; we can even romance and fornicate with a virtual partner on ‘second-life’. However, is this life? Is this reality? Whatever the response, the point is that our conception of the real has become blurred by new visual technologies. We have become accustomed to a world of appearances, where the image of a ‘thing’ is often more valued than the ‘thing’ itself (Ill.2).

Alberti’s 15th-century metaphor of painting as a ‘window onto the world’ has found itself replaced by the ubiquitous employment of the screen. Governed by the vested interests of techno-capitalism, poetically manifest à la Microsoft Windows™, screens have become a pervasive part of the everyday experience in our relationship to the world (Ill.3). As computer users, we spend hours of immobile time, in front of a glowing, two-dimensional, flat, homogenous frame. The screen creates an ontological separation between the materiality of spectatorial space and the immaterial dimension of what it presents. What distinguishes a collection of images on a screen is the evapora-
tion of texture and physical depth. No longer constrained by a material dimension, images can be manipulated and publicised in an infinite number of ways — often in movement to compensate for the physical immobility of the spectator. The ‘society of the spectacle’, denounced by Debord, seems alive and well considering the flux of images and information that, in constant movement, fight to gain the attention of our gaze. The recent ‘success’ of plasma screens has not only flattened the world further, but seen the moving image infiltrate into a whole new arena of public space — from restaurants, bars, public transport, to hospital waiting rooms, cars and sporting stadiums. A constant stream of image-fodder has become indispensable to feed the techno-capitalist machine of ‘information communication.’

In the last two decades, digital technology has assimilated cinema, television, video, and photography beyond their media-specific distinction into a powerful visual force that is transforming the face of contemporary society\(^3\). It is worthwhile noting that, until the mid 20\(^{th}\)-century, Western society was marked by a paucity of images. Watching any old documentary film is sufficient to realise the lack of imagery in both public and private life. Images were rare, in black and white; reproductions in magazines and journals were of limited quality. With few televisions, and even fewer stations, reportages were never direct, as film was used to produce them. Broadcast even stopped after a certain

\(^3\) I refer the reader to Anne Friedberg’s recent publication: Anne Friedberg, The Virtual Window - From Alberti to Microsoft (Massachusetts: MIT, 2006).
hour. This historical reality, just over half a century ago, seems peculiarly antique when we compare it to the infiltration that images have and the role that digital technology plays in today’s world.

The ascendance of new technology, notably the digital, has been governed and controlled in direct complicity with capitalist interest, this has resulted in what Gilles Deleuze refers to as a techno-capitalist society. Today, the dominant use of images finds itself at the service of financial diversion; advertising, television, internet, billboards and the majority of our audio-visual interaction is regulated in close proximity to capitalist ideology. The manipulation of imagery that inundates contemporary society shares a cosy relationship with capitalism, operational under the obsequious banner of ‘information communication’. The plight of an image, subordinate to the capitalist-machine, has seen the subsequent rise of art directors, advertising agents, public relation and marketing directors, graphic designers and best of all ‘image consultants’ — recent careers made possible by the rising dominance that the image plays in capitalist culture.

Thus, it is within the context of a techno-capitalist ‘information-communication’ culture that I wish to situate painting as a tactile phenomena. The physical tactility of painting seems at odds with our everyday experience of the screen and digital media. Painting is dirty; it makes a mess; it is slow and awkward; it smells and is difficult to manipulate into image. Yet, could painting be a necessary physical counterpoint to the immateriality of digital media? Can painting resist the disembodied dimension of digital representation? The resistance that I am concerned with is not one of nostalgic romanticism, nor a stubborn denial in the face of technical progress. My motivation to reconsider the physicality of painting is led by the belief that it is art’s responsibility to provide an intelligent and creative force in which to question the dominant ideology and technology
of our time. The material constitution of painting can provide an arena in which to sensitize our experience of an image, its potential to engage the spectator in an awareness of a shared physicality, an experience that is immanent to the material world. I argue that the tactile dimension of painting can engender the emergence of a physical encounter that resists the disembodied fate of digital imagery. By establishing a necessary rupture in representation, painting can explore new ways of seeing and thinking about the world. A reply to Deleuze’s provoking claim that ‘we don’t need communication but resistance to the present’

To consider the important role that painting can play in responding to the digital paradigm is to also reconsider the significance of painting within the realm of contemporary art. Coincidence or not, the marginalisation of the tactile by new media over the last thirty years has occurred simultaneously with the marginalisation of painting within the domain of contemporary art. With the changes that have marked the end of the 20th-century, the validity of painting’s raison d’être in contemporary practice has been questioned ad infinitum, notably to the point of being proclaimed dead by hopeful critics. While the shift from analogue to digital has seen the rise of photography, video and new media, recent exhibitions and biennales dedicated to contemporary art have been characterised by an absence of painting. A noteworthy example of this phenomena was Documenta X in Kassel in 1997 that finished off the last century with a somewhat confused message. Dedicated to the acclaimed painter Gerhard Richter, this internationally renowned event in the art world contained absolutely no painting’s by the German artist. Instead, observers were presented with a series of photographs taken by the artist, along with his collection of photographic archives. While the photographs demonstrated an important part of the artist’s process, and were no doubt justified by curatorial inter-

4. In reference to a paper delivered in 1987 to cinema students see, Gilles Deleuze, Qu’est-ce qu’un Acte de Création? (Dans le Cadre des Mardis de la Fondation Femis: Paris, 1987).
The complete absence of his paintings seems to demonstrate the confusion as to how contemporary art is positioned to address the impact of mass media imagery. As Robert Fleck remarked: ‘not to exhibit the paintings of Gerhard Richter, but only his photographic archives, otherwise seen as a substitute for the flood of media images, offers no solution. It is precisely the paintings of Gerhard Richter that propose an intense response to mass media’.

As Fleck has rightly implied, the radical submission of painting to the photographic image in the last two decades has had a lasting effect on the character of contemporary painting. My research considers that painting’s physicality needs to be re-evaluated in relationship to this trend, notably through the alterity of painting’s tactile and material constituency. I argue that painting can respond to the digital paradigm not through embracing photography, or responding to the ‘contemporary sublime’ of video and new technologies that writers such as Gilbert-Rolf have suggested, but through affirming a material dimension, felt and made present through touch – a sensual rupture in the horizon of the mediasphere. In a recent conference chaired by Robert Storr, ‘Thick and Thin – Painters and curators discuss the state of painting in the last two decades’, what becomes apparent is the way painters struggle to come to terms with their relationship to media and the impact of new digital technologies. Artist Lisa Yuskavage pinpoints the need for painters to find new avenues of inquiry beyond the use of dominant media:

Flipping through the recent book on new painting, *Vitamin P* (2002), what jumps out is not the diminishing returns of modernism, but the diminishing returns of copying photographs and the over-dependence on other media to make painting ‘vital’.

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6. American artist/theorist Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe challenges painters to respond to what he considers a new ‘sublime’ that is no longer to be found in nature but in the limitless dimension of new technologies, notably the digital. Whilst his ideas offer a reconsidered notion of where the ‘sublime’ might be situated, my thesis is essentially opposed to such transcendental enthusiasm. See Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime* (New York: Allworth Press, 1999).
In light of our constant exposure to digital media, my research is a significant attempt to maintain the pertinence of painting within contemporary art. My work endeavours to make painting ‘vital’, not though a dependence on the use of digital and photographic media, but through its very negation. I believe that a reconsideration of the role of the tactile, in both the production and reception of an image, is crucial for painting’s continuing pertinence in the contemporary world.

The concern for materiality and media specificity however, are nothing new to the history of art. As Rosalind Krauss rightly points out, it is difficult to raise the term ‘physicality’ in relation to painting without evoking modernism and, specifically, the ideas of New York critic Clement Greenberg9. It is necessary to acknowledge this fact, and to position my research accordingly, suggesting how my research differs from Greenberg’s renowned idealism. Through his writing, Greenberg promulgated the ‘media-specificity’ of painting and subsequently influenced a large generation of post-war artists. He promoted an ideology that encouraged artists to refine the specificity of their media in the pursuit of a transcendental ‘purity’ or a metaphysical ‘absolute’. As Richard Shiff notes: ‘no other essay of the 1960s had more impact than Clement Greenberg’s ‘Modernist Painting’10. Convinced by the vehemency of Greenberg’s arguments, painters exploited gesture and the material constituency of paint to imbue their works with what was considered an authorial identity and authenticity. This included the movement of ‘Gestural Abstraction’ or ‘Action Painting’ (‘Tachisme’ in Europe) which saw artists emphasise the physical process of painting itself as the crucial element of meaning. Modernist painters, who embraced Greenberg’s ideology, can be seen as pursuing a formalism that sought to give painting an ‘autonomy’ that negated the growing impact of mass-media, mechanical reproduction and popular culture. This saw painters, such as Jackson Pol-

lock, exploit the materiality of paint through an intense gestural application that confirmed an important use of the body (Ill.4). Pollock’s dripped abstract canvases can be seen as an attempt to move beyond the growing dominance of reproduction by emphasising the immediate, pictorial, physical presence of paint.

My research might be seen as an attempt to reconfirm the physical role of painting in a similar vein to Greenberg. However, while I seek to confirm the importance of painting’s materiality in response to the growing dominance of digital and information technology, I do not seek to sanctify the material components of painting as did Greenberg. Instead, I believe the tactile, physical experience that painting offers should be employed as an affirmation of the material world, in what Christine Buci-Glucksmann refers to as un athéisme pictural (a pictorial atheism) that is grounded in immanence. I believe that any serious painter working today is aware of the debt owed to modernism but, nevertheless, is motivated by a new set of values. My research promotes an affirmation of painting’s materiality through a gestural, corporal process; however, I consider that this corresponds to an altered historical context and necessity to that of our modernist counterparts (where the impact of the digital was still far from view).

Since the demise of modernist discourse, the search for a metaphysical truth, or a transcendent reality, through painting seems absurd - it is precisely this, I maintain, that we don’t need. Modernist painters were criticised for their idealistic pursuit of a formal ‘purity’–resulting in what many critics, such as Jürgen Habermas and J.M.Bernstein, saw as an ‘aesthetic alienation’ from society. Painting today cannot afford this. As my thesis establishes, the virtual, immaterial realm of the digital operates on a meta physical horizon, beyond the tactile dimension of the physical body and its sensorial

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complexity. As a negation of this paradigm, my research attempts to situate the tactile, sensual realm of painting as a physical encounter that confirms our immanence in the world – a materialist encounter. Painting today can no longer pursue the metaphysical
idealism dear to modernism. The challenge for contemporary painting is to establish a significance that is not beyond the physical world but situated precisely in it.

Despite its position on the periphery of contemporary art, some curators and critics have recently endeavoured to revive the validity of painting on various grounds with uncanny melodramatic justifications. Perhaps the most boastful and presumptuous example was the Saatchi Gallery’s recent series of exhibitions entitled ‘The Triumph of Painting’, which commenced in 2005 with a series of six exhibitions entirely dedicated to contemporary painters. While the attention given to painting in this way is indeed welcoming, exhibitions of this sort seem to obfuscate the actual reasons why painters paint behind the veil of sensationalist rhetoric. An engaged reading of the Saatchi catalogue (amongst other recent publications on painting), reveals very little in the way of what motivates artists to pursue painting, nor how a presumptuous title such as ‘The Triumph of Painting’ suggests a reconsidered role that painting may play in the contemporary world. Questions that concern artists, such as ‘what is the sense of creating a manual image in the face of digital technology?’, or ‘in a world of immeasurable choice, what is the significance of using paint?’, seem ignored by the writers of such catalogues. Painting continues, and for diverse and complex reasons difficult to summarise into a coherent and easily digestible theory to please the public. I feel it is important to question the preoccupation with definition and classification that still lingers on after modernism; to further the possibilities of painting without subjecting it to a rigid theory or fashionable postulation. Therefore, my research is guided, not by an attempt to define what painting is, but rather to investigate the physical possibilities that may engender the emergence of an art that resists dominant media. To advance the practice of painting in this way, is an attempt to catalyse new avenues of thought that open painting outwards towards new

relationships with the world, rather than a (modernist) idealism that seeks to dictate how painting should or must function.

In Chapter I of this thesis, I attempt to establish the critical dimension of painting in a digitalised world. By examining the historical paradigm of digital media’s immaterial configuration, I attempt to position painting as a physical encounter that urges us to participate in, what Heidegger referred to as, ‘being-in-the-world’. I define the differences between painting and the digital in terms of their anatomy or physical structure and outline how this effects our engagement with an image. Contingent to my argument is the notion of painting as ‘substance’ and its inevitable participation in the material world - a crucial resistance to the disembodied dimension of digital technology. This chapter outlines how the growing digitalisation of the world offers painting a unique ongoing challenge – a challenge that requires us to think about painting in new ways.

After defining the challenge that digital media poses for painting, Chapter II outlines a strategy for painting, positioning it as a form of critical resistance to the dominance of digital representation. Central to my research is the aesthetic philosophy of Gilles Deleuze. I argue that Deleuze’s writings offer a coherent and creative strategy for contemporary artists to consider the material dimension of painting as a ‘strategic zone’ for arts production. I employ Deleuze’s materialist ontology to explore how contemporary painting is able to create an important sensual rupture within the dominant horizon of representation and digital media through affirming art as a physical encounter — an experience that is at once visual and tactile.
By examining specific processes of a painting’s production, Chapter III extends the importance of painting as a physical encounter. In light of the growing ‘communication’ culture, where images have become reified to the status of ‘information’, I examine how the material and tactile components of painting can be used by artists to create an alternative kind of image. To support my analysis, I consider aspects of my studio practice — to demonstrate how painting can establish new meanings that emerge through the material dimension of their production. I argue the significance of painting is not to be found in a role of information or communication but in the production of new territories that challenge our every day experience of the world.
Chapter I
Chapter I  The Anatomy of an Image

“The whole paradigm of the sensory has changed. The tactility here is not the organic sense of touch: it implies merely an epidermal contiguity of eye and image, the collapse of the aesthetic distance involved in looking.”

Jean Baudrillard
A Disembodied Tale: The Arrival of the Digital

In his comprehensive work *Vie et Mort de L’image : Une Histoire du Regard en Occident*, Régis Debray claims that ‘the shift from analogue to the digital is as much a rupture in the evolution of our images as the atomic bomb was to the history of warfare, or genetic engineering to biology… The new regime of the digital is transforming the flesh of the world into a mathematical equation – such is the utopia of new media’¹. Whether we fully agree with Debray’s claim or not, it is clear that digital technology, and its favoured support the ‘screen’, is radically transforming the ways in which we interact with what we commonly call an image and, subsequently, the ways in which we interact with the world. Debray’s work highlights the immaterial nature of new digital technologies and the lack of any corresponding physicality; what we see is no more than a series of stabilised mathematical and electric signals. Debray’s ambitious project *Vie et Mort de l’Image* attempts to outline a history of the image using a newly-defined discipline he calls mediology². In order to better discuss the digital paradigm and its challenge for painting, I will briefly outline what Debray calls *les trois âges du regard* (the three periods of seeing) within Western history. These three periods are defined by the dominant technology of the time and its subsequent impact on the way an image is seen, experienced and disseminated.

Debray’s Table *Les trois âges du regard* (Table1) gives a comprehensive time-frame to situate the arrival of digital technologies. First, *Logosphère/Régime Idole* (after writing), the image is founded on a transcendent presence that is considered magic and clairvoyant, based on a connection with god. In the second period, *Graphosphère/Régime Art* (after printing press), the image operates as art, ‘seen’ through a logic of representation,

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². The discipline of ‘Mediology’ was initiated by Debray in the 1980s. It can be seen as a continuation of Walter Benjamin’s analysis of the ways in which technology influences the diffusion, production and reception of media. Other precursors include Paul Valéry and Marshall McLuhan. It was taught for the first time at the Sorbonne, Paris IV in 2007, concentrating on the study of the phenomena of transmission. The discipline has growing interest in the fields of continental philosophy and it maintains a larger audience through its journal *MediuM*. 
based on a relationship with nature. Third, in *Vidéosphère/Régime Visuel* (after audio-visual), the image is based on a simulation that is ‘viewed’, contingent to electrical communication. Pertinent to my research is the shift Debray outlines between *régime art* to *régime visuel*, as it elucidates the passage from an analogue culture to the digital culture that is central to my analysis. Looking at Debray’s table, we can infer that fundamental to this change from analogue to digital, the ‘referential element’ or what Debray calls *la source d’autorité* (the source of authority), shifts from being based upon *le réel* (the real) in analogue imagery to *le performant* (performance efficiency) in the digital. In other words, the paradigm of digital technology is shifting the ‘referential element’ of an image away from an intrinsic connection with the physical world, its *matière primaire*, where the image is a ‘thing’, to a system of immaterial virtuality where the image exists only in its perception. This difference is of critical importance in reconsidering painting’s contemporary *raison d’être*. I argue the tactile, physical components of painting, retain a coherent ‘referential element’ with the material world. It may be that painting’s analogue ‘archaic’ constitution can play an important role in the contemporary world.

While the change from analogue to digital, or *régime art* to *regime visuel*, cannot be clearly demarcated by a specific date, Debray titles an important passage of his book *La bombe numérique 1980* (1980 The Digital Bomb), this infers that the 1980s was a decade of intense change that saw the consequential rise of digital technologies and their expansion within both the public and private spheres of society. So why does Debray refer to this paradigm as a ‘bomb’? The response lies in what he considers to be digital technology’s reification of the material world into a series of simplified binary codes:
De voie d’accès à l’immatériel, l’image informatisée devient elle-même immatérielle, information quantifiée, algorithme, matrice de nombres modifiable à volonté et à l’infini par une operation de calcul….Une entité virtuelle est effectivement perçue (et eventuellement manipulé) par un sujet mais sans réalité physique correspondante.

With the means to access the immaterial, the computerized image becomes itself immaterial, an unlimited matrix of numbers infinitely modifiable by a calculated operation… A virtual entity is effectively perceived (and eventually manipulated) by somebody, but with no corresponding physical reality.³

I argue that this absence of a corresponding physicality has considerable consequences; these make it necessary to reconsider the role of the tactile. If we agree with Debray that, ‘in the new world of images the image itself no longer exists – only its perception⁴, then this shift signals an alarming threat to the affinity between touch, materiality and perception. As human beings we receive and communicate through the body – our gestures, our movements, our senses of smell, touch, hearing and vision. Situated in the impermeable flatness of the screen, the digital image limits our interaction to a retinal experience and denies the possibility of a more complex physical, sensorial encounter. I claim that the process of painting – both its creation and reception – confers a physical dimension to an image that resists this disembodied paradigm.

³. Ibid., p. 386.
The Historical Impact of the Digital on our Perception

The immaterialising effect of digital technology on culture has been of interest to numerous disciplines from philosophy, sociology, art and cultural theory, psychology and phenomenology. Discussions of the digital paradigm by urbanist cultural theorist Paul Virilio and the recent work of literary scholar Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, are particularly relevant in evaluating the impact of digital media on our perception.

Virilio has spent his entire career analysing the effects of technology on what one could call the ‘politics of perception’. Militant at all times, Virilio was early to criticise the effects of visual technologies on our perception. He holds that our vision of the world is more téléobjective than objective – inferring that the permeation of the screen is so intrinsic to our lives that it has altered our perception of the real world:

*‘Aujourd’hui, l’écran de la télésurveillance tend à remplacer la fenêtre’…

‘notre vision du monde n’est plus objective mais téléobjective. Nous vivons le monde à travers une representation qui, à la manière des photos au téléobjectif, écrase les plans lointoins et les plans rapprochés et fait de notre rapport au monde un rapport où se télescopent le lointoin et le prochain’… ‘L’optique ondulatoire véhicule des signaux (digital, video et audio) qui organisent un rapport au monde téléobjectif. Tout est écrasé sur une seule surface, l’interface du monitor ou du visiocasque.*

Today, a screen of télé-surveillance tends to replace the window… our vision of the world is no longer objective but téléobjective. We live the
world through a representation that flattens both background and fore-
ground and makes our relationship with the world, one where both near 
and far collide’… ‘An optical wavelength conveys signals (digital, video 
and audio) that organise a téléobjective connection with the world. Every-
thing is flattened on a seul surface, the interface of a monitor or video. 5

Central to Virilio’s critique of digital media is what he terms the ‘loss of the body’. Sub-
ject to the effects of recent media, he maintains that we have lost the grandeur of nature. 
We are in the process of losing our real bodies in favour of a ‘ghost body’, the real 
world in favour of a ‘virtual world’6. Virilio posits the question of le corporéité (the ac-
tive reality of the body), and the physical, as a crucial issue for contemporary society to 
confront - notably through art and dance. He argues that we need to reaffirm the physi-
cal dimension of the world through a rematerialisation of the body and its actions7.

The impact of digital technology on our perception is carefully analysed in Virilio’s 
book Esthétique de la Disparition8 and closely follows Debray’s analysis of the ana-
logue-digital shift. Virilio reasons that, as a result of the disembodied nature of new 
technology, our visual culture is shifting away from what he terms une esthétique de 
l’apparition (an aesthetic of appearance) towards une esthétique de la disparition (an 
aesthetic of disappearance). Within the context of my argument, I situate the tactile and 
sensual realm of painting in relation to Virilio’s definition of apparition – something 
that allows form to emerge from a substrate of layers and textured surfaces. Here, the 
resulting form is dependant on the persistence of a physical support and its duration in 
space. Based on a logic of instantaneous transmission and detached from the perma-
nence of any support, Virilio situates the immaterial realm of new technologies within a

7. Virilio considers dance to be the most effective form of resistance in reappropriating the body.
logic of disparition. According to Virilio, the danger is that this esthétique de la disparition will replace the former – ‘at the moment painting and drawing are on the path of disappearance, as the written is at risk to disappear behind multimedia’ – and without sufficient resistance – ‘there will be no liberty in the face of multimedia and new technologies. There will be a tyranny of techno-science’9. I believe the consequences of Virilio’s analysis provides painters with a challenge – to resist the disparition of the material world; not out of a nostalgic romanticism for an unchanging past, but through an active engagement with the sensual, haptic, physical realm of creation, an emergence of art through the tactile. Through an awareness of this difference, the digital may enable painters to reinvigorate their practice

Virilio’s ‘loss of the body’ finds an echo in the writings of eminent literary theorist Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht. In his recent book Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey, Gumbrecht laments ‘the loss of the world’, he accuses Western culture of having lost touch with the human body and like Virilio, argues for what he calls the production of presence10. Gumbrecht’s fascination with ‘how different media – different ‘materialities’ – of communication affect the meaning they carry’11 is conducive to my research in maintaining that complex meaning can not be divorced from its medium specificity. The experience of a surface of painting and the flattened homogenized surface of a screen offer two completely different potentialities of meaning and experience.

According to Gumbrecht, the disembodied nature of digital technology is essentially a vehicle for, what he refers to as, the dominant Cartesian world view – where the separation of mind and body has favoured the immaterial spirit over the weight of the flesh12. Like Debray, Gumbrecht sees digital media as essentially an affair of the mind and, in

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12. I maintain that the digital is a sympton of our inherited Judeo-Christian world view, essentially platoninc in its separation of idea and matter. The carnal, sensual and corporeal aspects of the body have been historically repressed in Western culture in favour of the spirit - a metaphysical engagement with the universe. I argue that this has had a profound influence on our relationship with the image.
this way, a ‘Cartesian paradise’ – the image operates without a physical body, erased of any material depth or resistance; everything becomes fast, efficient and instantaneous. Gumbrecht maintains that the Cartesian influence is very much alive in contemporary society and, as a consequence, has ‘subordinated not only the human body but of all things of the world as res extensae of the mind’13. Parallel to Virilio, Gumbrecht’s ‘production of presence’ responds to what he considers is our need to experience the world physically in the face of this Cartesian dominance:

Once we understand our desire for presence as a reaction to an everyday environment so overtly Cartesian during the past centuries, it makes sense to hope that aesthetic experience may help us recuperate the spatial and the bodily dimension of our existence; it makes sense to hope that aesthetic experience may give us back at least a feeling of our being-in-the-world, in the sense of being part of the physical world of things.14

A Disembodied Response to Digital Media

Les Immatériaux, an exhibition curated by Jean François Lyotard at the Centre Pompidou in 1985, was the first major institutionalized response to the effects of digitalized technology. (Ill.5) Seen at the time as a seminal contribution to the emergence of ‘post-modernism’, the exhibition proposed that the electronic media revolution had initiated a fast growing immaterialisation and disembodiment of human life and this corresponded to the growing interest and concern from both artists and curators for the incorporeal nature of digital technology. Lyotard was inspired to present what he called une nouvelle

and provides me with a topic that I feel needs to be argued in the context of a much larger thesis. For a extensive analysis of our inherited Christian world view and the necessity for an alternative form of ethics, I refer the reader to Micheal Onfray’s Traité d’Athéologé: Physique de la Métaphysique, recently translated by Jeremy Leggatt for Melbourne University Press as Michel Onfray, The Atheist Manifesto : The Case Against Christianity, Judaism and Islam (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2007).

sensibilité in relation to new media. In an optimistic vein, the exhibition sought to sensi-
tise the public to the possibilities of new media and its creative potential within contem-
porary society.

Significantly, the rise of the digital cor-
responds precisely with the broader socio-
cultural changes that saw the role of art ‘break’ from modernist discourse, through post modernism, into the plurality of gen-
res understood today as ‘contemporary’. I agree with Lyotard in asserting that art’s re-
response to digital technology and the screen is essentially a post modern issue – it de-
mands a response from painting (among other disciplines) that is beyond the context of modernism\(^{15}\). Consequently, it is my belief that the digital offers painting the necessary challenge to re-affirm its role in the contemporary art.

While the *Les Immatériaux* was considered a landmark success, it tended to demon-
strate the confusion of how artistic practice can respond to the growing evolution of what is now called ‘new media’. In attempting to sensibilise the public to what the cura-
tors considered a new era of representation and technology (what I consider the digital paradigm), the exhibition was criticised for its actual lack of creativity. The most severe criticism came from Michel Carnot. In his review, he declared to have found nothing but ‘a festival of *déjà vu*’ and ‘a shop of naïve and macabre curiosities…One only has to look at the catalogue to realise that the works and objects exposed had nothing new’\(^{16}\).

What upset the critics was the mystification of how the ‘new’ of new technology con-

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\(^{15}\) The differentiation between modern and contemporary is particularly problematic in relation to paint-
ing and this demarcation assists my desire to place painting beyond a dominant association within modernism. For an intelligent evaluation of painting and the modern v’s contemporary paradigm, see Nathalie Heinich, *Pour en Finir Avec La Querelle de l’Art Contemporaine* (Paris: L’Echoppe, 1999).

ferred an inherent creative and experimental condition to the work, when the ‘visionary’ ideas behind them were in fact unremarkable. As Jean-Louis Déotte argued; ‘in the end Lyotard accepted that as art – it was only a techno-scientific production’17.

With the advent of what Debray calls the vidéosphère, the basis of our exchange of images is indeed dominated by economic capitalism and ‘techno-scientific production’. What Les Immatériaux, like numerous exhibitions to follow, have endeavoured to demonstrate is that the dominant use of digital technology by the mass media can be subverted for artistic purposes. This is an idea that has been largely supported by art institutions on an international level. While it is imperative that art initiates a response to new media, I perceive a substantial risk in a ‘digital art’, in its inability to remove itself from the very system it wants to subvert. As Debray points out: ‘there is a considerable amount of creation in the development of new technologies and a lot of new technology in digital art’18. I argue that the paradoxical drawback with digital art is its overwhelming dependence on new technologies. Technologies that are precariously subject to a logic of planned obsolescence and the constant need to upgrade, purchase, adapt, reconfigure, and ultimately conform to the parameters set by the manufacturer. In this way, the real challenge in using digital technologies is to establish a critical opposition that functions beyond the parameters of its technical constituency. I suggest that it is the intrinsic attachment to the obsolescent, or constantly changing nature of ‘new media’, that unfortunately tends (retrospectively),

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to demote digital art to the status of a relic. It speaks for a precise moment in history but nothing else. Therefore, my reasons for favouring painting as a crucial response to the digital lies in its tactile ‘archaic’ alterity – a materiality that is beyond the confines of a techno-scientific ideology19 (Ill.6).

In his recent essay The Cruelty of Numbers20, Stanford Kwintor has challenged artists to use electronic technology to engage in the ‘archaic intuitive sides of human nature’ in order to divert the dominant use of technology for more humanistic purposes:

Communications networks, computers, microprocessor control systems are socially toxic entities primarily when used ‘correctly’, that is, in their capacity to routinize interactions with people and processes in increasingly engineered, confined and deterministic spaces. It is our duty and mandate to refuse this new, pseudo-material space entirely, and to follow the ‘minor’, archaic path through the micro-chip, this is, to make the electronic world work for us to reimpard the rich indeterminacy and magic of matter out of the arid, cruel, and numericalized world of the reductionist-mechanical and the disciplinary-electronic.21

If artists are going to respond to Kwinter’s astute challenge, I argue that the key problem in subverting the digital is still that of Virilio’s corporéité, the role of the body. To experience what Kwinter refers to as the ‘archaic, intuitive side of our natures’, then surely the role of our body is paramount? As I have endeavoured to establish so far, the hazard of digital technologies is the way in which they reify the physicality of the world into a series of disembodied binary codes. Digital simulation and production, essentially an

19. The ‘archaic’ nature of paint in this sense differs critically to the ‘obsolete’ nature of digital technologies. The visibility of a digital artwork is dependant on a ‘player’ or an instrument of transmission that is subject to a logic of constant ‘development’ or what Marcuse aptly termed ‘planned obsolescence’. While painting is indeed ancestral to industrialisation and the modern world and, in this sense archaic, it is able to maintain a critical visual autonomy that is independent from any need to be converted or reconstituted as image.


affair of the mind, has left the body without a job; its rhythmic potentiality is confined
to a retinal conveyance. This leaves the body marginalised and, along with it, the organs
of knowledge, touch, sensitivity and movement that enable intuition to function crea-
tively. As Debray notes, without a corresponding physical reality, ‘we can not imply
ourselves emotionally in operations of calculus, of combinations of parameters that ex-
clude chance and neutralise the impulsive’. Therefore, I argue that Kwinter’s notion of
‘human nature’ seems already somewhat limited if we cannot circumvent the immaterial
basis in which we interact with the digital. It would seem a difficult project for artists to
respond ‘impulsively’ through Kwinter’s archaic microchip.

A Tactile Perception

In response to this digital paradigm, the tactile dimension of painting has a critical role
in perception. From the Latin *tangere* (to touch), ‘tactile’ implies a connection with the
sense of touch and the body. It operates as an adjective to designate something that is
perceptible by touch, or apparently so. Therefore, the tactile can be seen as crucial in es-
tablishing essential connections between subject and object, a condition that underpins
the basic ontology of our relationship to the world.

Prominent 19th-century German art historian, Alois Reigl was the first to emphasise the
significant role that the tactile played in perception. In his seminal work *A Historical
Grammar of the Visual Arts*, Reigl asks why our perception of artistic form should be
limited to our organs of sight, as ‘the optical sense alone does not suffice to provide us
with a true sense of form. The sense of sight is unable to penetrate objects…we must

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22. I refer the reader to the work of Henri Bergson, who saw the role of intuition as dependant on the
call on another sense, the sense of touch.” Riegl suggests that our understanding of form will always be limited to a two dimensional realm without the active participation of the tactile. He consequently establishes a co-dependant relationship between touch and vision by defining two types of perceptible surface: the objective surface (die objektive fläche) and the subjective surface (die subjektive fläche). The objective surface corresponds to our sense of touch (non pictorial); it is crucial to complete our visual perception of what he calls the subjective surface (that which vision cannot penetrate). In other words, our sense of vision is inherently subjective and relies on a more objective ‘tactile’ experience to complete it. According to Riegl, whether we’re looking at a sculpture or a pictorial image, these two surfaces coincide to complete our perception of form and are decisive in any experience of art.

The relationship between touch and vision was equally important for Merleau-Ponty’s research in the field of phenomenology. His work attempts to demonstrate that our perception of the world is dependant on the totality of our sensory capacities; our fundamental cognition of the world could not be achieved by a purely mental function, ‘but to the extent that I have a body, and through that body I am at grips with the world’.

Similar to Virilio’s plea for a rematerialisation of the body, Merleau-Ponty’s work operates as a doctrine of ‘embodied’ perception that I consider highly relevant to my research. According to Merleau-Ponty, embodied perception depends upon the totality of our body’s sensory organs working as a whole in the perception of phenomena. Vision cannot be isolated from touch. If the tactile surface of a form or object is essentially the first point of contact between our body and the world, then our sense of touch is crucial in informing all subsequent perception.

25. Riegl refers to vision being subjective in the sense that without having actually touched the surface of something (empirically), one has to make a value judgment about the surface qualities of an object based on memory and previous experiences (both essentially subjective).
In relation to an image, this has consequences for the way vision can be intensified and completed through our sense of touch, Merleau-Ponty affirms: ‘Not only do I use my fingers and my body as a single organ, but also, thanks to this unity of the body, the tactile perceptions gained through an organ are immediately translated into the language of the rest’\(^{27}\). Touch and vision are combined. Similar to Riegl’s \textit{objektive surface}, Merleau-Ponty isolated what he calls ‘surface tactile phenomena’ (\textit{Oberflächentastungen}), ‘where a two dimensional tactile surface is presented to the touch and more or less firmly resists penetration’\(^{28}\). This ‘surface tactile phenomena’ evokes a physical response from the body that establishes a union between touch and vision: ‘This property which, at first sight, draws an absolute distinction between touch and vision, in fact makes it possible to draw them together’\(^{29}\). I argue that this \textit{Oberflächentastungen}, is manifest in the tactile surface of all painting.

Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology considered that art could convey an experience of ‘the ‘flesh’ that bonds us with things’\(^{30}\). In the \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}, he highlights the work of Cézanne (Ill.7). He suggests that the value of Cézanne’s art lies in its ability to create a ‘skin’ that can illuminate our perceptual structure of the world. Merleau-Ponty believes the built-up layering of coloured mass and line in Cézanne’s paintings (\textit{substance}) is akin to the same structuring that underpinned the visible world and our own bodies. The tactile nature of this ‘skin’ conferred a sensual engagement between the painting and the observer. According to Paul Crowther’s’ reading of Merleau-Ponty, this engagement made us aware of the physical forces that make things become visible:

\begin{quote}
Our everyday engagement with the world usually immerses us in things which are, visually speaking, simply ‘there’. We have no time or incli-
\end{quote}

\begin{itemize}
\item \(^{27}\) Op.cit., p. 369.
\item \(^{28}\) Op.cit., p. 368.
\item \(^{29}\) Op.cit., p. 367
\end{itemize}
nation to attend to that rich visual texture of light, colour, shape, and so forth, which is inherent to all things and the visual background. Yet it is precisely this *texture* which enables the visible to be seen. Hence, in so far as the painting is a self contained portion of the world which invites us to contemplate its sensuous particularity, both it and the *texture* which enables it to be seen are given full manifestation. Indeed, one can even say that here *we see what it is to see*.31

In relation to the digital paradigm I have outlined, I argue that painting’s ability to confer such an embodied perception has never been more crucial in maintaining this union between touch and vision.

**Painting and Touch**

In a world saturated with images, it is often easy to forget that we are beings equipped, not with one sense, but five. Our sense of touch was considered by Aristotle as the cardinal sense, synonymous with life: I feel, therefore I am. A human being can survive without the senses of sight, smell, taste, and hearing, but we cannot maintain life successfully without the central nervous system maintaining a link with the world through the sense of touch. Touch is indeed the most essential of all the senses for survival. Yet, as Celeste Olalquiaga maintains, it is rarely valorised:

*Les commentaires d’Aristote sont particulièrement intéressants lorsque l’on pense à quel point nous sommes éloignés de la primauté sensorielle*

The ideas of Aristotle are particularly interesting when we think of how far removed we are from the sensorial primacy of the tactile. The touch is rarely valorised beyond immediate experience (the common gestures of everyday life, personal caresses and the intimacy of affection and sexuality), in this way, it is almost inexistnet in public cultural practice, where it could play a systematic and significant role.32

However, the history of painting has had a contingent relationship with touch. For the artist, this implies the physical and tactile gesture of transforming the inert materiality of paint or pigment into image. For the viewer, it corresponds with the unique capacity of simultaneously seeing a painted image and the indexical traces of its physical construction. In relation to Debray’s *Trois Ages du Regard*, painting as a technology can be defined as an analogue form of experience *par excellence*33. As established by Debray, painting’s ‘source of authority’ is through the pact it makes with the physical world. Any meaning that can be gathered from painting finds its basis in the material constituents of its construction. For example, the figure of Christ in a Byzantine icon cannot be divorced from the fact that is a series of pigmented lines and colours in tempera that operate together on a wooden support to create the pictorial figure – well before any metaphysical interpretations can be entertained. As Maurice Denis famously reminds us:

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33. The Oxford English Dictionary defines analogue as ‘adj. relating to, or being a device in which data are represented by continuously variable, measurable, physical quantities, such as length, width, voltage, or pressure’. Oxford University Press. http://www.askoxford.com
'Remember that a painting – before it is a battle horse, a nude model, or some anecdote – is essentially a flat surface covered with colours assembled in a certain order.' Thus, a painting’s meaning is inherently linked to its particular material constituency; a constituency that, I argue, is simultaneously both pictorial and tactile.

As opposed to sculpture, installation and recent forms of relational art, painting functions primarily as image, and thus shares a proximity or voisinage with all other images. While the notion of painting ‘as image’ has been transgressed and challenged since late modernism (notably by minimalism, land art and conceptual art), the pictorial dimension of painting has maintained its central role either through this negation or affirmation by artists. I argue that it is precisely painting’s proximity to the other images of the world which enable it to function critically against what we have come to call the ‘flood of images.’ As Deleuze remarked, somewhat cryptically, ‘Seulement des choses qui se ressemblent peuvent se differer’ (only things that resemble one another can differ from one another). Painting operates pictorially – whether abstractly or figuratively – and shares a place in the world with all other images (resemblance). However, as my research suggests, its physical tactility, confers painting with an embodied singularity (difference) that allows it to function critically in light of digital media.

**Being-in-the-World**

I maintain that the embodied singularity of painting can respond effectively to both Virilio and Gumbrecht’s ‘loss of the world’ and what I consider the marginalisation of the tactile and sensual within contemporary imagery. By positioning painting within the
ontological framework of Martin Heidegger’s philosophy of ‘being-in-the-world’, I believe we can enlarge the importance of painting’s physical dimension in light of digital technology; painting’s tactile specificity can reconfirm a sustained consciousness of the material world.

Opposing the Cartesian mind/body paradigm that promulgated a decisive interval between spirit and matter, Heidegger’s concept of ‘being-in-the-world’ affirms an inextricable union between consciousness and the ‘thingness’ of the physical world. Generally speaking, his motivation was to bring human self-reference back in ‘touch’ with the things of the world and, as Gumbrecht notes, to reaffirm ‘the bodily substantiality and spatial dimension of human existence’36. Opposed to the dominant belief, promulgated essentially by the ideology of the church, that saw human existence as a shadow of an eternal ‘truth’ that lay beyond earthly and bodily apprehension, Heidegger sought to challenge this metaphysical (mis)conception through an affirmation of our contact with substance or what he called the things-of-the-world37. It is our contact with the material dimension of the world that Heidegger argues, enables truth to emerge.

Heidegger referred to human existence as Dasein which, in German, literally means ‘Being-there’38. Gumbrecht gives a concise description of this: ‘Dasein is being-in-the-world, that is, human existence that is always already in – both spatial and functional – contact with the world. This world in which Dasein is in touch is ‘ready-to-hand’39. If we agree with Merleau-Ponty, that our experience of the world is determined by our body’s sensorial interaction with form, then Heidegger’s being-in-the-world re-affirms this dynamic as the basis of any meaning we can make of our existence.

36. Gumbrecht, Production of Presence, p. 47.
37. The split between the ‘spiritual’ and the ‘material’ establishes the origin of our Western epistemological structure that relies on the subject/object paradigm. The belief that the ‘truth’ lies in a metaphysical realm was maintained through the dominance of Platonic idealism, where earthly existence had its real ‘true’ nature in the world of ideas. Integrating and fortified by Judeo-Christian religion, this same world view informed Descartes’ mind/body split and continues today. This divergence of the material and the spiritual world has been criticised as having led Western tradition into an extreme state of alienation. The disembodied realm of the digital manifests a contemporary continuity of the denial of the flesh in favour of the idea. For a more detailed analysis of this I refer the reader to Michel Onfrays’ opus Une Contre Histoire de la Philosophie, Vols. I - IX (Paris: Grasset, 2006).
What does this mean for painting? Painting’s material constitution – the visceral, palpable modulation of a pigmented mass (paint) onto a physical support (canvas, wood, aluminium, the wall, etc.) – is a process of materialisation that transforms substance into a fixed and bounded surface; what I like to call an inscribed tactile surface. I believe that this surface has something uniquely close to the qualities of our own body; both are subject to the laws of gravity, light, moisture, heat, resistance, etc. Like Merleau-Ponty’s ‘skin’, painting and the spectator both participate in a shared physical order. I argue that the tactile surface of a painting can instil in the spectator, an awareness of the physical world that contributes to his or her experience of what Heidegger calls ‘being-in-the-world’. In his essay Constructing Physicality Richard Shiff eloquently articulates how I think painting draws us to participate in the immanence of the world:

They (paintings) address the interpreter as collaborator and equal, as if viewer and artwork possessed complementary physicalities (we too have bodies, faces, fronts, backs mirrorings). We tacitly recognize a natural affinity between bodily actions implied by the features of such paintings and actions as our own bodies can perform. As a result, the order of these paintings becomes more social and shared than individual. We can become part of their tactile pictorial order; it belongs not only to the works and their makers but to us, connecting us to the material world and engaging us in a consciousness of a common physicality.40

Painting can therefore be seen as a tangible experience for human vision, touch and interaction. Its ‘tactile pictorial order’ has an immediate impact on our bodies through an identification with what Shiff refers to as our ‘shared physicality’ – through a reciprocal

awareness, the painting’s body vibrates in the body of the spectator. Deleuze refers to this as ‘sensation’ – the way an art work impacts upon our central nervous system. I argue that it is precisely this physical dimension of painting which enables it to exceed the digital – by affirming a tactile order that resonates with our physical, sensorial, sexual selves. This is not to negate the importance of mind or spirit in our experience of the world. The problem that I am addressing is not the absence of the spirit, but the absence of the body.

Heidegger’s ideas come as a threat to any metaphysical dimension that can be conferred to art as he maintains that meaning can only emerge through the physical world – art is ‘being ‘grounded’ in being-in-the-world⁴¹. In his essay The Origin of the Work of Art, Heidegger further defines this notion of being ‘grounded’ in developing a concept he refers to as ‘earth’. ‘Earth’ is the vehicle that enables a work of art, a poem or a piece of music to ‘stand in itself’; it is ‘earth’ that enables a work of art to exist in space⁴². The material dimension of a work of art - its ‘earth’- is what carries meaning for Heidegger and his concept of ‘earth’ stands in radical opposition to the idea of art as transcendence. Truth is not somewhere ‘beyond’, but here in the earth, in the materiality of the physical world. Ultimately, Heidegger’s work promotes a materialism that, I argue, is needed in the face of the global extension of the virtual. It is my being-in-the-world, my existence in space and time, my corporeal body that touches, feels, smells, and sees, my relation to the physical world that ensures my existence. Painting can address all of these things.

Transmission

The material ‘substance’ of painting has an antithetical correspondence to what I consider a defining feature of new media technology – ‘transmission’. I believe this (anatomical) distinction between substance and transmission can provide a greater understanding of why painting’s physicality is so crucial in the contemporary world. In her recent publication *The Virtual Window*, Anne Friedberg outlines the hegemony of digital technology and the way in which digitalisation has blurred the media-specific boundaries of cinema, photography, video and sound. As I have ventured to establish, what unites these mediums in their digitalised form is the disembodiment of what Merleau-Ponty called the ‘flesh’ that bonds us with things, in favour of an instantaneous transmission. Painting is slow, digital media rapid.

Can this disembodiment be seen to function as a liberation for art? No longer with a need for physical ‘mass’, the digital image can be anywhere at anytime. New media presents us with a huge array of virtual possibilities that can be perceived through a video/computer screen in any part of the planet. We only need to look at the capabilities of digital modelling, where new spaces, landscapes, people, planets, and communities are made perceivable, albeit in a virtual realm. Science-fiction films, video games and

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virtual-interactive programs all rely on this access to an immaterial dimension to create virtual fictions that indeed transcend our shared physicality44 (Ill.8). It is the immateriality of the digital media that gives it the unarguable power of instantaneous transmission. As Gilbert-Rolfe observes: ‘we have gone from that which takes place in a recognisable duration to that which takes an instant’45.

By virtue of digital transmission, an image appears instantly upon the screen. With a child-like curiosity, one could very well ask: where is the image when we see it on a screen? The image is inseparable from the screen – both are continuous with each other, animated by an electrical pulse. Unlike Cézanne’s paintings that affirm the ‘flesh’ which binds us to the world, an image on a screen has no weight, no tactile specificity, no depth; it has no material thickness that subjects the image to the spatial conditions of a specific locale. A digital image and its support are fused; for video this infers the flat surface of a screen, and for photography (if ever printed), a surface so thin you cannot see it as a ‘thing’. The surface of digital media exists as a homogenous and continuous plane that offers no resistance to touch – a smooth insubstantiality. In his essay on ‘electric dematerialisation’, Gilbert-Rolfe offers an apt summary to the digital paradigm quintessential to my thesis:

The screen is a hard plastic surface with no discernable part to play in ones relationship to the ephemeral image it contains, substance subsumed into transmission. Video’s surface, made of plastic illuminated and animated by electricity, provides no way through which the image may return to the world.46

44. I refer the reader to recent phenomena such as ‘Second Life’, a ‘free’ 3D virtual world where users can socialize, connect and create a virtual existence. The ostensible freedom of these ‘interactive’ communities finds itself, paradoxically, under complete control of the program. Is not the users ability to function ‘creatively’, and situate their virtual body in space, under the complete authority of the technological apparatus that ‘manages’ this interaction?
Whether scanned, drawn, filmed or photographed, all visual form becomes reduced to a binary calculation. No longer tied to a specific place or time, the immateriality of a digital image allows itself to be endlessly modified, copied and altered at the service of transmission, and what has become known as, information communication. Everything is accessible, paradoxically, with the touch of a finger. Without a physical source of authority, what we see on our screen can be effectively perceived and manipulated by the ‘user’, but without any corresponding physical reality - everything comes in an instant. The efficiency of digital media to be here, there and everywhere is unparalleled in the history of technology.

However, this efficiency of the virtual may be deceiving. The expansive force of digital transmission is also its weakness. What the digital gains in speed, it loses in mass – there is no flesh or substance that allows us to establish a physical connection with Heidegger’s being-in-the-world. Without weight, the speed and facility in which digital images can transform and multiply themselves has led to what Jean Baudrillard famously termed as:

A profusion of images in which there is nothing to see... They leave no trace, cast no shadow, and have no consequences. The only feeling one gets from such images, is that behind each one there is something that has disappeared.47

Subject to the possibility of constant circulation, transmission effectively detaches an image from a specific temporal and socio-cultural context and any complex meaning that this may carry. Debray believes this endless transmission of images heralds precisely the death of the image: ‘It’s a fact nevertheless, that too many images kill the image.’

Likewise the evolution of visual transmission is also the demise of our attention span: ‘we scan over paintings and photos like a news headline or a subway advertisement; we view a film like an advertisement; and our little screen like the footpath when we walk’.48

Unlike the digital, painting resists such transmission. A painting tends to be inert, it does not move or glow. I argue that this is its very strength – painting’s substance infers duration. Different to the immaterial ‘performance’ of digital technologies, a painting has a unique ability to present pictorial form through the manipulation of an intermediary material (paint) that is intensely tangible: a material that subsequently goes on to occupy its own place in the world, becoming itself a physical ‘thing’. It is this ‘thingness’ that I believe reconfers a tangible reality upon the image that effectively negates Baudrillard’s description of the world where images ‘leave no trace or cast no shadow’. Resisting transmission and disembodiment, painting’s tactile body confers a crucial sense of what is ‘real’ in our experience of an image. American painter Jonathan Lasker argues that this is historically pertinent:

At the moment, art is faced with a dilemma. Radicalism in art is dead, as its position has been usurped by the space of contemporary technology. In my opinion, the project for art today is to situate the boundaries of what is real, in a world where meaning, space and even (in theory) the effects of mortality have been neutralized by technology.49

With their potential for endless transmission, the digitalised flood of images have conditioned us to a world of ‘appearances’; the fictive image of a ‘thing’ is often more valued

than the ‘thing’ itself. At the end of Orson Welles’ film *The Lady of Shanghai*, the central character finds himself immersed in a maze of mirrors unable to distinguish the image of his killer from the real. Likewise, the contemporary viewer is confronted with a simulacra – where images are no longer bound to the reality of what they represent (Ill.9). In light of virtual technology, what Lasker articulates is a need for art to sensitise the viewer’s curiosity towards the immanence of the physical world and to challenge how we attach meaning to what we see. Lasker maintains that bringing our attention to the physical process that is painting can increase our awareness of this process:

> To encourage an empirical understanding of this medium (painting), will incite the spectator, hopefully, to pursue investigations into other media and to encourage also a relation with the objects and events of the real world that are less fictive.\(^5^0\)

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Gesture

As part of the process of a painting’s construction, the gesture of the artist’s body can also be harnessed to enlarge the physical dimension of an image. By gesture, I refer to the specific dynamic enabling a physical interaction between our body and form through a tactile relationship. The disembodied nature of the digital presents artists with an acute problem – the direct impact of their body is immobilised. I have already argued against Kwinter’s challenge for artists to respond intuitively through the microchip, as one cannot involve oneself emotionally in binary operations and calculus. Likewise, the parameters of software programs effectively neutralise any impulse, spontaneity or chance that may originate from the body; action and gesture become codified, subjected to the predetermined functioning of a machine. Random programs do exist but does our corporeal involvement have any influence on the result? I maintain that, without engaging ourselves physically through our body and its gestures, without a contact with substance, everything is kept at a distance, in a kind of remote-control relationship. There is, what I consider, a formalised cold-rationality that underpins the evolving mass of digital imagery. For example, a line drawn on a piece of paper is critically different to a line drawn on a computer screen. The line on paper is the direct, physical result of the gesture – it ‘is’ the gesture; whereas the line on a computer screen is the result of numerous computer processes that ‘represent’ the gesture, enabling its perception, albeit removed from the possibilities of any direct physical interaction with the body.

Crucial to my research is the recuperation of the tactile union between thought, action, form and vision and to re-establish this through an affirmation of gestural form. I argue the need to affirm this gestural realm, is not out of a romantic nostalgia for a return to
the hand un éloge à la main, it comes from a fervent belief that art must critically address the digital paradigm that I have sought to outline – through a affirmation of the physical tactile body. As Virilio states: ‘without the liberty to critique technology, there can be no technical progress, only our conditioning to it’\textsuperscript{51}. Paint retains the physical gesture of the artists’ body; his or her actions, impulses and movements are preserved in a palpable substance that once dried becomes fixed in a duration of time. As Lasker proclaims ‘in no other artistic medium is creation so intimately linked, and so permanently, to the movements of the body. Nowhere else does a human being have such a direct and immediate affect on the image of his world’\textsuperscript{52}.

\textsuperscript{51} Virilio, Cybermonde, La Politique du Pire, p. 12.
\textsuperscript{52} Lasker, Expressions Permanentes, p. 35.
Chapter II  Encounter, Sensation and Affect

‘Something in the world forces us to think. This something is an object, not of recognition but of a fundamental encounter’

Deleuze, Difference and Repetition
Painting’s tactile constituency presents an opportunity for artists to create an important sensual rupture against the immaterial dimension of digital imagery, to affirm a material experience at odds with the logic of representation that underlies the ‘flood of images’. This chapter develops the idea that painting can play an important role in responding to the digital paradigm by establishing an ‘art encounter’ that negates our structured patterns of image reception. Central to my argument is the aesthetic philosophy of Gilles Deleuze. I argue that Deleuze’s writings offer a coherent and creative strategy for contemporary artists to consider the material dimension of painting as a ‘strategic zone’ for arts production. In the face of dominant media and established codes of visual representation, Deleuze confers a materialist meaning to the process of art that can be used to promote painting as a decisive form of aesthetic resistance. Painting can be a pertinent force against the disembodied homogenous nature of digital imagery, but also against transcendence, metaphysics and the sanctifying ideology of modernist idealism. His ideas relate to both my studio practice and the written aspects of my research, providing an enriching dialogue between the two fields. Ultimately, I believe that Deleuze’s ideas offer an astute conceptual framework in which to reconsider the significance of painting in the altered context of the contemporary world.

Deleuze’s philosophical thinking was considerably informed through his relationships with artists; his work might be understood as writing with artists rather than about them. Painting is an important discipline in the eyes of the philosopher and informs a large part of his writings on aesthetics. An essential text in understanding Deleuze’s aesthetic philosophy is the book he dedicated to the work of English painter Francis Bacon – *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*. While this book is rich in content, I have also endeavoured to source a wider array of the Deleuze’s writings that I feel ne-
cessitate consideration in the context of my thesis, notably *What is Philosophy*, *A Thousand Plateaus*, *L’Abécédaire*, and the entirety of his university courses at *Université Paris VIII* that have recently become available on-line. Equally, I am in debt to Simon O’Sullivan’s recent work *Art Encounter: Deleuze and Guattari* for its succinct encapsulation of how Deleuze’s ideas can be extended into the realm of contemporary art. As O’Sullivan suggests: ‘Deleuze and Guattari’s increasing relevance, and indeed popularity, cannot be divorced from the switch analogue to digital that perhaps more than anything else characterises our contemporary world’¹. I will first outline what I consider to be the essential elements of Deleuzian aesthetics in relation to my research, and then go on to consider how these ideas can be further enlarged through the reception of the work of three contemporary painters: Pia Fries, Jonathan Lasker and Katharina Gross.

**A Materialist Ontology**

Deleuze positions art as essentially a physical encounter (*une rencontre*) – an event that brings two (or more) bodies in contact and precipitates the possibility of something new. Therefore, meaning is considered in relation to the material encounter between forces, or the expression of one force upon another. For the artist, this means the encounter between herself (and her own subjectivity) and the specific potentiality of her chosen medium, resulting in an object of encounter – the art object. Following this, there is an important secondary encounter, the encounter between this art–object and the spectator. Here, the spectator, like the artistic medium, also being an envelopment of potential. ‘Art’ is then the name for both of these encounters, and both have the potential to produce meaning.

Central to his aesthetic philosophy, Deleuze attempts to negate the dominant role that representation plays in sustaining our habitual patterns of perception through what he terms a *logic of sensation*. He affirms an experience of art that is located in the material, physical world – a field of immanence – that is felt rather than cerebral. Resulting from the encounter between the art–object and subject, *sensation* can be seen as an indeterminate zone between the two. The composition of the artwork, or what Deleuze calls a ‘bloc of sensation’, impacts upon the body of the subject (either artist or viewer); not through the brain, not through a series of signs or representations, but directly on the central nervous system of the body. As Elizabeth Grosz writes: ‘Sensation requires no mediation or translation. It is not representation, sign, symbol, but force, energy, rhythm, resonance’. Deleuze’s logic of sensation gives precedence to what we could refer to as ‘gut reaction’, where meaning is *felt* throughout the body and its organs, rather than being ‘understood’ linguistically or through a lexis of signs. Again, this resonates with the intention of my research to situate painting as a bodily experience that grounds us in Heidegger’s being–in–the–world:

Sensation is the opposite of the facile and the ready–made, the cliché, but also of the ‘sensational’, the spontaneous, etc. Sensation has one face turned toward the subject (nervous system, vital movement, ‘instinct,’ ‘temperament’ – a whole vocabulary common to both naturalism and Cézanne), and one face turned toward the object (the ‘fact,’ the place, the event). Or rather, it has no faces at all, it is both things indissolubly, it is Being–in–the–world as the phenomenologists say: at one and the same time I *become* in the sensation and something *happens* through the sensation, one through the other, one in the other. And at the limit, it is the

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same body that, being both subject and object, gives and receives the sensation. As the spectator, I experience the sensation only by entering the painting, by reaching the unity of the sensing and the sensed.3

Sensation is not maintained in the body of the subject but in the material constituency of the art–object’s composition. Deleuze maintains that through an encounter with matter, the artist attempts to fix a ‘bloc of sensation’ which gives duration and visible form to the invisible forces and ideas that underpin its creation: ‘What is preserved – the thing or the work of art – is a bloc of sensations, that is to say, a compound of percepts and affects’.4 Both ‘percepts’ and ‘affects’ become independent of those who experience them and give the subsequent art–object its own autonomy. This bloc of sensation engenders the composition of a work and fails or succeeds by virtue of its material coherency. As Grosz remarks: ‘Sensation can only emit its effects to the extent that its materials, materiality itself, become expressive, passing in to sensation, transforming themselves, giving themselves a new quality’.5 Therefore, the material dimension that Deleuze ascribes to an art work, particularly painting, is not at the service of visual representation but at the service of sensation. I argue that this offers painting an important path of resistance against the plethora of digital images that represent the world to us via the homogenized flattened screen.

Positioning art as a unique rupture in established codes of visual communication, the ‘art of sensation’ that Deleuze promotes, has considerable social and aesthetic consequences in negating representation. Operating through a system of recognisable forms, signs, signifiers and codes, representation communicates already-established roles, functions and understandings – manifested in what Deleuze refers to as an ‘object of recog-

5 Grosz, Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth, p. 74.
A sign, symbol or index, stands in for, or takes the place of, another subject or object and so must be commonly understood for it to function. For example, to interact with a web-site, we rely on a logic of representation to understand the content of its pages – a series of signs, codes, images and language that convey meaning and impact based upon these pre-established conventions. New representational technologies, notably the digital, rely on a constant stream of reproduced images that operate through logic of representation. Without representation, digital communications would cease to function – information communication would suffer an acute handicap. Representation can be seen as what enables us to establish culturally-specific meaning to the images that are sent and received between two or more parties. However, ‘art’ for Deleuze is what precisely negates such representation, and presents our perception with something previously ‘unrepresentable.’ As John Rajchman implies, to resist representation is also ‘to free the art of seeing from its subordination to prior concept or discourse.’

If Deleuze’s aesthetic philosophy encourages artists to consider how art may operate beyond the horizon of representation, then this calls for a shift away from what the philosopher terms ‘signifier enthusiasm’ to an engagement with matter and its expressive potentiality. We need to think about the sign differently. Thus, Deleuze’s concept of ‘affect’ and ‘percept’ can be seen as an attempt to replace ‘the signifier’ and to readdress this physical dimension of an artwork. For Deleuze art ‘thinks through affects and percepts’; and that this image of thought is composed as a ‘bloc of sensation’ within what he terms a ‘plane of immanence’. Deleuze’s plane of immanence opposes any transcendental belief – whatever exists within this plane of immanence exists only to itself and not to ‘something’. As soon as a composition is immanent to something, transcendence is involved. Therefore, the immanence of an artwork is not immanent to substance but

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8 Deleuze’s ‘art of affect’ can be seen as an attempt to affirm a pre-linguistic significance to an artwork, as approaches to the image in its relation to language are incomplete if they operate only on a semantic or semiotic level. For Deleuze and Guattari ‘Percepts are no longer perceptions; they are independent of a state of those who experience them. Affects are no longer feelings or affections; they go beyond the strength of those who undergo them. Sensations, percepts, and affects are beings whose validity lies in themselves and exceeds any lived. They could be said to exist in the absence of man, as he is caught in stone, on the canvas, or by words, is himself a compound of percepts and
immanence in substance. In resisting representation, where the image (idea) is always immanent to something, art must establish its own autonomy where meaning remains within the material consistency of the composition, maintained as a bloc of sensation.¹⁰ It is precisely the role of affects and percepts that, tied to the material dimension of an oeuvre, enable sensation to emerge. The sensation (meaning) of a work is therefore inherent to its very material constitution and has nothing to do whatsoever with a reference from outside or any meta physical dimension. Deleuze argues that it is the material plane of immanence, specific to an art encounter, where meaning resides. This is critically opposed to transcendence that Deleuze infers is governed by religious and ideological interests: ‘Whenever there is transcendence, vertical being, imperial state in the sky or on earth, there is religion; and there is philosophy (art) whenever there is immanence’.¹¹ Deleuze’s material immanence stands in opposition to any metaphysical, transcendental idealism one can confer to a work of art (notably Greenbergian discourse) and questions the capabilities of semiotics to fully grasp complex meaning.

For Deleuze, an object of encounter (art) is therefore fundamentally different to an object of recognition. The encounter that is issued from a creative event challenges our habitual modes of seeing and interpreting the world, disrupting established patterns of representation. As Simon O’Sullivan states:

> With such a non–encounter (representation) our habitual way of being and acting in the world is reaffirmed and reinforced, and as a consequence no thought takes place. Indeed, we might say that representation precisely stymies thought. With a genuine encounter however the contrary is the case. Our typical ways of being in the world are challenged, our systems

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⁹ Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, p. 66.

¹⁰ Here, the definition of ‘autonomy’ differs significantly to that made popular by modernist formalism. Based on experimentation, rather than an aesthetic self-referential essentialism, for Deleuze, art is not a self-contained process disconnected from the world, or a representation of the world, but a rendering of its forces and qualities (rhythms, harmonies, colours, forms, etc.) into an autonomous composition that establishes new connections and new possible becomings. A contrast to modernist discourse that, according to Greenberg, ‘criticizes from the inside rather than from the outside.’

¹¹ Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, p. 43.
of knowledge disrupted. We are forced to thought. The encounter then operates as a rupture in our habitual modes of being and thus in our habitual subjectivities.\textsuperscript{12}

Therefore the art-object establishes a rupture within the presiding field of representation; a crack or space occurs here that brings about the possibility of something new. In relation to painting, my research argues that the tactile specificity of painting can be exploited by artists to effectuate a distinct rupture within the dominant field of digital technology. I argue that our daily experience with the immaterial, flattened, sanitised, two-dimensional nature of today’s screen imagery, its implicit use of representation and reproduction, can be momentarily breached by the physical sensuality of a painted surface.

**A Sensual Rupture: Pia Fries**

The Swiss painter Pia Fries exemplifies the way painting can operate as a creative encounter that disrupts our habitual interaction with representation and advances painting in new directions. I explore two concepts of Deleuze that I feel are visibly manifest in Fries’ paintings: the ‘rhizome’ and the ‘haptic’. Important to my analysis is how the physical processes operating in Fries’ painting break away from any metaphysical or transcendental concern and situate painting in a field of immanence – a critique of digital’s virtual immateriality.

The paintings of Fries strike us by the opulence of their physical sensual form (Ill.10-

\textsuperscript{12} O’Sullivan, *Art Encounters*, p. 1.
Merleau–Ponty’s call for an art that makes visible the ‘flesh’ of the world finds itself answered in the corporeal, tactile palpability of Fries’ painted surfaces. Few contemporary artists have endeavoured to emphasise the physical, material nature of painted form as she. Neither ‘expressionist’, ‘geometric’ nor even ‘gestural’, Fries’ paintings seem liberated from the confines of any authoritorial discourse. This liberty is perceived in the thick, densely-pigmented forms that spread across her surfaces achieving an intense formal diversity – a ludic encounter with painted substance. The ‘spread’ of painted form on her wooden support would appear at first to have no established rational. When we look at Amanat (Ill.10), we struggle to perceive any underlying visual logic or theoretical starting point to the image. Paul Good admits to the difficulty one has responding to these paintings:

How are we to deal with the astonishing diversity of colour and form in the paintings of Pia Fries? There is so much going on in the paint. As though unfettered sensuality were running riot. As though there were no attempt at creating order by any rational means. Her painting does not bow down to any theory, let alone to any metaphysical notion of colour. Here is an artist who has abandoned herself to a fetishism of the material itself.13

Fries intriguing composition and employment of paint I believe, is subject to a form of nomadic thought. Such nomadic wanderings in paint can be seen as operating within a type of connectivity that Deleuze labels a rhizome. Based on the biological structure of a root system, Deleuze’s rhizome is a system without any centre or hierarchy where ‘lines of flight’ connect nodal points within the rhizome and establish a series of con-

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13 Paul Good “Multiplicity Must Be Made”, in Paul Good, Dieter Schwartz and Iris Wein eds., Pia Fries (Dusseldorf: Richter Verlag, 2007) p. 11.
nected locations and events. Looking closer at the surface of Amanat, the rhythmic, tactile manipulation of paint and the way in which it interacts physically (as event), can be seen as forming connections between differing milieus and registers of painted form. These connections are not subject to any programme of representation but instead go on to produce new realities and new relationships within the world – what Deleuze refers to as ‘new becomings’. This process of connectivity between the differing parts of Fries’ composition is where, I argue, meaning lies. Instead of looking for a metaphysical meaning beyond the material – as is often the case in modernism – I believe that meaning circulates in Fries’ painting via the connections and events that are inscribed in its
tactile surface. ‘Art’ can name an object but, as Deleuze maintains, it can also name a process. When looking at Fries’ pictorial universe, it is precisely this process, the way these energies fixed in material form interact, that conveys meaning. As Good remarks:

This painting is not subject to transcendence. And so it cannot fall from grace. It does not put itself at the service of form and representation, of reference and reproduction. Instead, it produces maps – a cartography of energies. These maps differ from a copy of the world in that they are entirely orientated towards an experimentation in contact with the real.14

I argue that it is precisely our difficulty in describing what is happening on the surface of Fries’ paintings that demonstrates the rupture they produce against representation: ‘Evidently, the conventional language of art criticism has proved unequal to the task of describing her paint-laden works’15. The surface of *Amanat* is an unfolding of interrelated, interconnected coloured and textured bodies that give form to the complexity of forces that have operated in and upon the oil paint. Our experience of this painted encounter subjects our own eyes to a nomadic way of seeing. Unable to rest on a fragmented detail of paint for too long, we are forced to constantly move our eyes – exploring paints’ protean-like capacity to be transformed into strange and visually exciting forms by the artist. In constant movement, our eyes jump from one island of form to another, discovering new painted territories and surfaces, new connections and new lines of flight between fixed points. With no centre to the image, our nomadic movements of perception are forever in flight, there is no pause, destination or formal hierarchy to the composition. I believe the *rhizome* like experience of Fries work corresponds to Deleuze’s definition of a plateau – a *rhizome* can be seen as being made up of plateaus – ‘a continuous, self vibrating region of intensities whose development avoids

15 Dieter Schwarz “Matrix of Painting”, in *Pia Fries*, p. 75.
any orientation toward a culmination point or external end. It is this anti-hierarchical nature of the composition, its refusal to present pre-existing structures, that demonstrate Fries painterly explorations into new possibilities of thought beyond representation. New ways of painting and new ways of thinking I argue, are constructed along the same lines.

**Haptic**

In stark opposition to a screen, the magnified tactility of Beringer (Ill.11) engages us in a close-up encounter with substance. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze develops an aesthetic concept around the notion of the *haptique* that helps elucidate the rich visual experience we enjoy with Fries’ surfaces. Haptic originates from the Greek âptos – to touch. As mentioned in Chapter I, the term was first employed by the 18th-century art historian Aloïs Reigl to position the important role that surface texture played in our perception of an artwork. In debt to Riegl, Deleuze distinguishes two types of vision – optical vision (*regard optique*) and haptic vision (*regard haptique*). Our optical vision is determined by light, the way it renders form visible and allows us to perceive distance – what can be considered as standard retinal perception. However ‘haptic’ vision is a concept Deleuze develops to explain our perception of something in close proximity – a space of immediate contact that allows vision to palpate an object or surface and to become completely immersed within it. Deleuze presents the idea of ‘haptic art’ as the antithesis of optical art. ‘Haptic art’ is determined by a close-up engagement with the tactility of a surface – its ‘thingness’ in the world. In contrast an experience of art through optical vision is based on a physically distanced retinal perception. As I have argued, the critical difference between painting and other media, notably the digital, lies

in painting’s ability to convey a haptic and optical dimension to an image. Of considerable interest here, is the reason why Deleuze employs the term ‘haptique’ over ‘tactile’. ‘Haptic’ is preferred because it infers that the eye can perceive texture without necessarily having to touch: “Haptic’ is a better word than ‘tactile’ since it does not establish an opposition between the two sense organs but rather invites the assumption that the eye itself may fulfil this non–optical function”\textsuperscript{18}. In the context of my thesis, I maintain the term ‘tactile’ as it considers the role of touch not only during the reception and perception of a painting, but importantly also its artistic production\textsuperscript{19}.

In looking at \textit{Beringer}, one immediately experiences a rich sensuality that seems to engage all the senses, particularly touch and vision. The visceral, palpable textured body of her painted surface is reminiscent of other sensual encounters that we share with things, such as food, skin, bodies, cakes, cream, mud, sand, etc. The polymorphous perversity that interested Freud seems manifest in the way that paint has been erotically caressed and manipulated by the artists’ hands. Good identifies this viserality when he writes:

Looking at many of her works, one has the impression that this is an artist who not only paints quite literally by hand, but who seems to touch and feel the material itself: all the senses, including smell, taste and hearing are fully alert. Each and every colour can seem either quiet or loud. It is by no means the visual alone that governs the flow of material here.\textsuperscript{20}

Pia Fries’ paintings are a unique affirmation of Deleuze’s ‘haptic art’, which I believe, advance the tradition of painting in an important way. The sheer volume and palpable

\textsuperscript{18} Op.cit., p. 543.
\textsuperscript{19} I develop the important role that touch plays in the production of an art-object in chapter 3.
\textsuperscript{20} Good et al., \textit{Pia Fries}, p. 13.
mass of Fries’ paint, gives the image a veritable presence that, in turn, influences visual effect; a spatial depth of palpable tactility is established by the relief-like nature of her surfaces. In stark contrast to our experience of digital imagery, the textured surfaces of her images provide an important connection with the physical, tangible world. This *haptic* dimension, so prevalent in Fries’ oeuvre, directly encroaches upon the viewer’s space and draws our awareness towards what Richard Shiff refers to as a ‘shared physicality’. Her paintings effectuate a sensual rupture in the Cartesian world. The sensual, erotic, material body, that Gumbrecht suggests has been subjugated by Cartesian rationalism, finds itself re-affirmed in Fries’ material and immanent sensuality.

While Fries’ paintings share a common concern for painting’s ‘medium specificity’, so dear to Greenbergian modernism, they nevertheless advance the process of painting in new ways. What is interesting in Fries’ technique is the absence of any industrialised element; she only uses traditional methods of paint application – brush, palette knives and hand-made spatulas. In a strange way, her approach can be seen as somewhat conservative. Yet, I believe this ‘hands-on’ tactile involvement does not confer the work with the ‘authorial’ dimension so dear to say abstract expressionism or action painting. Fries charges her composition with a constant dialogue between the intentionality of her gestures and the ‘facticity’ of paint itself. When Fries applies her paint as ‘paint’, it retains the trace of the tool that put it there, however, sometimes the paint dribbles or splashes and this randomness contrasts with the intentionality of the artist’s gesture. As Iris Wien states: ‘the event character of so many of Pia Fries’ paintings owes much to this dialectical factor that blurs the boundary between the aleatory and the consciously deliberate’  

The paintings are so intrinsically related to their material genesis that they almost appear as natural formations. Wien continues:

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21 Wein, I. in op.cit., p. 52.
The references to nature as a creative force, as *natura naturans*, do not result from any representational portrayal, but from the fact that the pictures themselves are so deeply rooted in the material that they almost appear as a natural aspect of earthly reality.\textsuperscript{22}

While Fries’ brushwork is evident, it merges with the material density of the paint in a unique union that radically opposes any representation or pre–meditated thematic. Unlike the painting of her once-teacher Gerhard Richter who, as Good argues ‘uses paintings, for instance, as a way of expressing a certain irony in a theme’\textsuperscript{23}, Fries’ work is only concerned with the *haptic* potentiality of paints physical becoming. I believe there is no meaning beyond the material dimension of her painted surface. The material immanence, so manifest in Fries’ paintings, provides a refreshing rupture against the immaterial realm of the digital and situates painting beyond the *cul–de–sac* of modernist idealism.

### Multiplicity

If the tactility of painting can infer a critique of digital media and the dominant fields of representation, then it must also guarantee an alternative experience. The strength of Deleuze’s aesthetic philosophy is his insistence that any rupture art produces must also contain a moment of creative affirmation – a means of thinking and seeing the world differently. Deleuze opens up a way of readdressing painting, particularly abstraction, that is essentially outward and inclusive to multiplicity, in stark contrast to late modernism’s *via negativa*. John Rajchman has argued that a Deleuzian approach to contem-
porary abstract painting is crucial in challenging this via negativa – in other words, the modernist pursuit of a painterly ‘essentialism’ by defining what painting should avoid or cannot do (no illusion, no transparency, no narrative, no figuration, etc)\textsuperscript{24}. Instead of the sanctifying ‘clearing-away’ and ‘stripping-away’ demands of modernist formalism, Rajchman promulgates a Deleuzian model for abstract painting that is connective and inclusive. His model establishes new links and encounters with divergent disciplines and rhizomic networks between differing milieus of thought and intensity. For Rajchman, a Deleuzian response confers an ‘abstraction that consists in an impure mixture and mixing-up of forms; a reassemblage that moves towards an outside, rather than a purification that turns to essential ideas or in toward the constitutive ‘forms’ of a medium’\textsuperscript{25}. The Deleuzian rhizomic model for painting articulated by Rajchman, suggests that painting establish connections between things previously considered incompatible in modernist discourse – a more open playing field.

\textbf{Jonathan Lasker and the ‘Thingness’ of Painting}

In a deliberate reworking of the formal language of modernist vocabulary, American artist Jonathan Lasker can be seen as a perfect example of this ‘impure mixture and mixing up of forms.’ For Lasker abstraction operates as a system that enables him to synthesise various structures and components from divergent milieus into a unique pictorial composition – notably through a sustained engagement with oil paint. Like Fries, Lasker’s

\textsuperscript{24} Deleuze’s ideas on art were largely informed by his interest in modernism, notably painting, but also in conceptual and minimalist practice. His regular interaction with artists during the 1970s and 1980s, and the writings of Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried, serve as points of reference. Therefore, a large challenge for artists and theoriticians has been how to re-situate his ideas beyond modernism - in specific relation to contemporary art. The publications of Simon O’Sullivan, John Rajchman and Simon Zepke are significant attempts to outline the validity of Deleuze’s philosophy in light of contemporary practice. For a more informed understanding, I refer the reader to the upcoming publication, Stephen Zepke and Simon O’Sullivan, \textit{Deleuze and Contemporary Art} (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010). It is also worth noting the contempt that Deleuze held towards his ideas being ‘applied’ to any discourse, (in the sense that artistic ‘form’ could be seen as a ‘representation’ or ‘illustration’ of his thought); rather, he sought his philosophy to be ‘used’ in a pragmatic experimental way – a ‘tool-box’ of enquiry. While his ideas were expressed through the investigation of modernism, they are by no means limited to a modernist context.

pictorial thinking is *rhizomatic*, where differing forms and textures are brought together to form new encounters. *Reasonable Love* (Ill.12) operates as a kind of puzzle, an encounter between heterogeneous elements that conflict and combine into a bloc of sensation. Unconscious doodling, akin to a surrealist automatism, is graphically opposed to broad, densely-applied impastoed horizontal and vertical lines that form a modular grid suggestive of minimalist practice. Likewise, colour is combined in a disharmonious manner – the ‘essentials’ (blue, green, red) are offset by a strange mix of tertiary greens,
mauves and browns. The resulting composition is precariously situated between a desire for pictorial unity and the artist’s insistence on the independence and autonomy of the painting’s parts.

Lasker’s practice can be seen as a Deleuzian encounter in two differing ways. Firstly as an encounter between conflicting formal registers. *A Sentient Picture* (Ill.13) is a fine example of how Lasker’s practice combines two ostensibly incompatible components of modernist painting, notably gestural expression with hard-edge abstraction. Areas of gestural energy created with organic line are intermingled within formalised structures of rigid geometric definition. The opposing energies become strangely co-dependent. The second encounter involves Laskers employment of divergent creative processes. Unlike the encounter that Fries establishes through an essentially direct, intuitive unmeditated use of paint, Lasker’s approach is a distinct combination of an unconscious and conscious process. All of Lasker’s final works are based on small, quick ‘unconscious’ doodling (produced with markerpens, biro and oil paint), that are later recomposed and carefully enlarged as finished works. What imbues these paintings with such an idiosyncratic energy is this tension between the immediacy of the initial sketch and the carefully rendered coolness of its finalised composition. Here the encounter is one between the subjective impulse of the automatic drawing and its rational, ordered, objective transcription. The importance of Lasker’s work is the way in which these encounters are given form through a controlled yet exuberant use of oil paint; the palpable surface of Lasker’s paintings demonstrate the process of painting in an extremely extroverted way. The divergent forces that drive these encounters are made visible, enveloped in the material dimension of the paint (a bloc of sensation); as spectators, we become part of their pictorial and tactile order. This is an experience that heightens our
perception of the image, its immanence in the physical world, and affirms an important material dimension to the image so marginalized in contemporary society.

If we consider *Reasonable Love* or *A Sentient Picture*, we remain perplexed by the ambiguous nature of the marks and their refusal to signify any recognisable meaning. Lasker is indeed guilty of committing a rupture in our established field of representation. While we may struggle to make ‘sense’ of these forms, we are nevertheless drawn into the physical complexity of their material dimension. In an interview with Hans–Michael Herzog, Lasker voices a concern that his painted forms be read more as ‘marks’ than signs or signifiers echoing Deleuze’s definition of an ‘object of encounter’: 

Illustration 14. Detail.
Herzog: You said before that you would call some of the gestures in your painting ‘marks.’ Marking is pointing out something, as I take it. Would you say that these marks could be called signs, and if so, what might their significance be for you?

Lasker: That is interesting, because when we use a sign we are referencing a known meaning. On the other hand there is an ambiguity in marks which cannot be clearly resolved. A mark is something about which the only thing you know is that it is a mark. It is neutral in the sense that it doesn’t yet have a specifically assigned meaning. I think there is a range between signs and marks in my work, a certain frontier where you exit the realm of the sign and enter that of the mark. You don’t yet know what the signs are for those marks, so you’re confronted with the task of determining what those marks mean, both their specific significance and the grammar of how they work together. The most exiting paintings for me are the ones where you cannot really specifically discuss the sign, but you know that you are dealing with something which marks something. It denotes something, yet at the same time you cannot really specify its exact significance.26

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What Lasker’s statement illustrates is a desire to situate experience away from the
dominance of a signifying regime to an experience of the physicality of the marks them-
selves – their sensation. The artist seems conscious of painting’s critical alterity to other
media – the ability of painting’s physical properties to convey meaning. If we consider
the surface of one of Lasker’s paintings at closer range (Ill.14), the thick application
of paint forces us to confront the material dimension of the painting’s construction, its
‘thingness’. Pictorial depth is established within the composition through the visual
interplay of line and colour and the layering of form, what Deleuze would call optical

vision; however the physical density of their rendering engages us in an haptic experience that is crucial to Lasker’s work. The tactile application of paint, isolated on the flat monochromatic green ground on which they are placed in *When Dreams Work* (Ill.15), confer Lasker’s ‘marks’ with a unique individuality – a ‘thing’ to be examined, experienced and interpreted. As Richard Kalina comments on Lasker’s forms: ‘you sense that they are something, but you can not put your finger on exactly what that might be’.27

The ‘thingness’ of Lasker’s painted forms play an important part in the artist’s desire to confront the spectator with an experience of art that is grounded in the physical world. Not only does Lasker rupture the codes of modernist ‘purity’, he demonstrates how the physical dimension of painting can operate critically in light of virtual technologies. As the artist himself notes:

> Painting has a unique capacity to enlighten the knowledge of objects in the real world, because painting, while alluding to a recollection of objects and experiences of the real world, transmits this recollection through the intermediary of an intensely palpable material. A material which occupies it’s own space in the world, becoming itself a thing. This is different to other medias such as television, cinema or photography, where the image is disembodied and nothing obstructs the path of the image towards the memory of the spectator. These medias function on a purely fictional level.28

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Materialist Meaning

In order for painting to operate critically in light of the digital paradigm, I believe the materialist ontology Deleuze outlines for art is necessary in reconsidering the contemporary relevance of painting. As I have argued, Deleuze’s call to replace representation with sensation, infers that we must not expect the meaning of painting’s ‘affect’ to be given as a ‘signifier’, but the result of physical forces inscribed in matter. Meaning is not to be interpreted through rhetoric or linguistic logic but in terms of causes and events. The semioticians approach to art, seen as a series of signifiers working to create a system of meaning, can limit our understanding of painting’s significance, as it fails to consider the material complexity that may convey meaning. I argue, Deleuze’s materialism rescues painting from such an enclosure and enables us to consider painting from a more pragmatic and experimental point of view; one that is more connected with the material processes that produce ‘art’ than a concern for definition and judgment. If ‘signs’ play a role in painting, then it is their affective potential as sensation that drives their meaning. In his introduction to *A User’s Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia: Deleuze and Guattari*, Brian Massumi summarises meaning for Deleuze as ‘a network of enveloped material processes.’ Meaning might be the name to describe the process of an ‘event’ or the encounter we have with an artwork, perhaps ineffable during the encounter, yet nevertheless real in its effect.

In thinking art away from the horizon of signifier, Deleuze and Guatarri develop a concept of art based on a machine in *A Thousand Plateaus*. An ‘art–machine’ or ‘abstract–machine’ that functions as an ‘event’ – the expression of one force upon another – and synthesises Deleuze’s desire to shift our encounter with art away from representation

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towards new processes of seeing and thinking art. This machine paradigm can help us move away from the concern for definition and labelling that lingers on from modernism and questions our habitual experience of art. As O’Sullivan observes:

Another way of thinking this change in approach to art is as a move towards a more machinic understanding, one in which we are less involved with questions of definition and more with notions of function. We no longer ask the interminable question: ‘what does art, what does this art work, mean?’ But rather, ‘what does art, what does this art work do?’ Thinking art as a machine in this way, literally and not just as a metaphor, side steps many of the problems and cul–de–sacs of aesthetic and art theory.30

Katharina Grosse : Painting-Machines

The large-scale works of German artist Katharina Grosse can be seen as art–machines that generate new spaces and expand the tactile dimension of painting in new ways (Ill.16-19). Transforming architectural space into an arena of intense chromatic encounter, Grosse’s work questions the established codes of image production, immersing the viewer within a powerful experience of colour and gesture. Likewise, her practice challenges notions of institutional power. Located in an architectural context, her sprayed jets of colour disregard the habitual rules of conduct within a built environment. I believe that Grosse’s practice positions painting as a performative act; a painting–machine that brings colour, movement, gesture, form and architecture together in a physical encounter that aims to explore (rather than define) what art can do.

Unconcerned with the production of a specific object or resolved work, Grosse’s practice openly explores the possibilities of how painting can alter the way in which we experience space by producing new worlds, new pictorial becomings, within established contexts. The event–like nature of the works’ construction, completed over a series of days using spray guns and industrial machinery, presents us with a visual record of the works’ production. Like the artist, we are forced to engage with the work from multiple viewpoints and become immersed in the chromatic and physical dimension of their production. If we consider *Cincy* (Ill.16), we are no longer tied to the immobile recep-

tion of a flat image. Sprayed paint is applied throughout various areas of the gallery, on differing supports and surfaces, creating a multiplicity of painted forms. Grosse’s piece confronts us with a process, an ‘event’ that disrupts our controlled reception of an image. This type of painting forces the viewer to respond physically through a three-dimensional investigation of painted space. As spectators, we are forced to experience the work from various angles and points of view, to compose the piece through movement and memory, through both the mobility of the eye and the body.

Grosse’s practice challenges received ideas as to how an image should function. It would not be unusual to ask ourselves whether her paintings are in fact images? The sheer scale and dimension of her chosen support suggests that the work exists outside the boundaries of what we commonly call an image. Our habitual exposure to the flood of imagery, bound and contained within a stable surface, is momentarily thrown into doubt and questioned. As Leonhard Emmerling notes: ‘The impossibility of taking in the whole work in one glimpse leads to a destabilisation of the viewer’s possibility of understanding’31. The habitual ‘frame’ of an image finds itself stretched to such an extent that the pictorial dimension of the work becomes difficult to define or contain. Yet the artist is adamant that her painting works as image, embedded in the pictorial tradition of painting’s history. I believe that Grosse’s painting questions not so much ‘what is an image?’, but our conditioned response as to how we consider an image should function. As spectators, Grosse’s work forces us to reconsider our relationship with an image outside the familiar format of the screen (advertising, television etc.) and the very tradition of painting itself. Against modernist structure and containment, her painting gives precedence to physical and visual experimentation; an ‘art–machine’ that advances the pictorial possibilities of painting in an important way.

To shift the emphasis away from the ‘thingness’ of painting’s surface, Grosse’s paintings allow me to demonstrate how the tactility of paint can be employed in an alternative way. While these works are an encounter of extreme visual strength and force, they have a ‘soft’ touch that results from the way vaporised pigment settles on the specific
surface of an object. Here the tactility of paint, removed from any immediate contact with the artist’s hands, is subordinated to the rhythmic gestures of the spray gun. While the painted surfaces of Grosse’s works may not share a magnified tactility of Fries’ or Lasker’s paintings, I consider that the artist’s employment of paint operates as a tactile extension of her own body – a means to explore the physical dimension of her immediate environment. If we consider *Final Cuts* (Ill.17), the sprayed nature of the pigment interrogates the spatial dimension of surface in an extremely tactile way, fusing vision and touch. Like hosing a rough concrete wall with a fine mist, Grosse’s vaporised pigment produces millions of individual chromatic particles that come into contact with her targeted surface – whether it be the wall, window, ceiling, floor. Having witnessed the artist produce *Picture Park* at the Gallery of Modern Art Brisbane, (Ill.18), in situ, what struck me was the gentleness of the work’s production. A slow and intimate relation is established between artist and image that was akin to a blindfolded person exploring their way around an unfamiliar room – such was the artist’s dependence on touch in locating herself physically in space.
In this way, Grosse uses paint to touch surfaces and bringing divergent objects into contact to form new meaning; a ‘haptic’ encounter of form and colour. As Deleuze maintains in *The Logic of Sensation*: ‘One might say that painters paint with their eyes, but only insofar as they touch with their eyes’\(^32\). The tactile qualities of sprayed pigment act as a projection of Grosse’s gaze, atomized particles encounter the surface of objects and the surrounding architecture, ignoring any predefined boundaries (both symbolic and physical) of form. Like the artist’s gaze, the sprayed paint brings divergent milieus and textures into contact. If we consider, *Untitled* (Ill.19), the sprayed application of paint upon a set of bookshelves not only reveals their physical structure in an unfamiliar way, it transforms their fixed identity by visually smudging their contours with overlapping paint and colour. The relationship between the window, wall and bookshelf are recomposed into a new conglomerate of meaning or, for Deleuze, a new ‘plateaux’ of encounter.

Despite the contemporary magnitude of Grosse’s work, there is an unembellished directness to her marks that share a consequential relationship with the archaic drawings left by our ancestors. Whether we consider the early European paintings in Lascaux, or the red ochre images of the central desert people in Australia, the coloured traces left by Grosse share an aesthetic dimension determined by the inscription of pictorial form within the confines of a shelter. Interestingly, Grosse’s work celebrates a certain primordial (not primitive) instinct – the compulsion to leave a trace in order to position oneself in a spatio temporal context – a context that is also culturally determined. Grosse affirms an important visual force that is rarefied in our world of predetermined and reproduced images, a force that attempts to locate new spatial territories that are yet to be named or coded. The rawness of Grosse’s pictorial marks confers her work with a certain disrup-

\(^32\) Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, p. 125.
tiveness in the face of our familiar, clean, ordered, photoshoped ‘fidelity’. The artist’s use of paint I feel, is an incarnation of the ‘bothersome’ potentiality of art that Deleuze’s contemporary Jean–François Lyotard defined as being essential to art’s *raison d’être*. Given the growing concern for what Deleuze referred to as ‘control societies’, that operate through ideological coding, Lyotard preached the importance of an artistic disruption:

Indeed, for the philosopher it is precisely an artwork’s ‘non–fitting’ into any given system that constitutes its interest. This amounts to a certain evasive or what we might call bothersome quality of art that makes any given system ‘malfuction’.

As individuals, our way of ‘looking’ is indeed determined by the technical evolutions that modify the format, scale, materiality and reception of an image in a socio-historic context. An enormous Book of Hours in the 18th-century was not read as a paperback in the 20th-century, an altarpiece in a Gothic church demands a different approach to looking than a cinema poster. Likewise, the presence of digital media is changing our reception of an image; an evaporation of texture in favour of visual ‘performance’. Sharing a conscious concern for painting’s physical properties, the three artists I have considered confer our reception of an image with an important tactile distinction – a sensual rupture in the horizon of digital representation. By exploiting the material dimension of their practice, these artists demonstrate how painting can be positioned to critically resist dominant media, by establishing a material confrontation that situates the spectator in the physical world. The less an image maintains a singularity through its medium-specific physicality, the easier it becomes mediatised – the more it lends

itself to an assimilation into the network of information technology. Painting’s ‘bothersome’ nature – its refusal to move, adapt, glow and perform – maintains an important aesthetic dimension in our experience of the world. It is an experience of reality that is not beyond our tactile grasp, or at the service of the techno–capitalist machine, but an experience grounded in sensorial immediacy of the here and now.
Chapter III
Chapter III  New Territories, New Meanings, New Becomings

‘What is the relation between a work of art and communication? Nothing. Nothing, a work of art is not an instrument of communication. A work of art has nothing to do with communication. A work of art does not contain the slightest amount of information. However, there is a fundamental affinity between a work of art and an act of resistance.’

Deleuze
Extending the significance of painting as an art-encounter, this chapter considers the process of painting’s ‘production’ and suggests how painting can engender the emergence of a physical image that functions critically in light of dominant media. Contingent to capitalist ideology, the recent expansion of digital technology has resulted in the emergence of an ‘information communication’ culture, where the dominant use of images has become governed by their role in ‘communication’. In a number of important publications, Deleuze with his collaborator Felix Guattari, expound the concern that communication is in fact antagonistic to creation and propose that art develop strategies to resist its growing hegemony. In analysing the physical dimension of painting’s production, I respond to Deleuze’s claim by demonstrating how painting may resist ‘communication’ through establishing new territories, new meanings and new becomings. I outline how the material processes involved in painting’s production can be exploited to generate a physical experience, or what Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht calls the ‘production of presence’. In doing so, I continue to define the art-object as a compound of ‘affect’ or ‘sensation’ that resists representation; a system of forces made visible in matter rather than a series of images functioning under a regime of signs. To support my analysis, I introduce relevant aspects of my studio work to demonstrate how the material processes of painting can create an aesthetic experience that dominant media are not capable of offering us.

Art Against Communication

With the ascendency of digital media and the ubiquitous presence of the screen, an image’s capacity to impact, manipulate and influence the identity of a society has become

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1 I use examples of my painting (visual research) to support my argument. However it is not my intention here to give a comprehensive outline of their meaning. In respecting the autonomy of studio research, this paper functions as an independent body of knowledge – indeed a companion to my painting, but in no ways an explanation. It is my aim that both studio and written research work together, albeit as independent entities; distinct forms of enquiry that generate new connections and correspondences of meaning between them. This methodology is founded on Yve-Alain Bois’ essay Resisting Blackmail, where the author maintains that painting must operate as an autonomous form of enquiry – that ‘one does not apply a theory to painting’. Far from anti-theoretical, Bois outlines a crucial need for theory to situate painting within a specific field and context, however the production of painting is never the illustration of a theory, nor dependant on theory for its significance. See Yve-Alain Bois, Painting as Model (Massachusetts: MIT, 1998).
acutely amplified. We need only consider the modest state of visual media from as little as fifty years ago to realise the magnitude of how digital technologies have transformed the role that images play in contemporary culture. Fundamental to the digital paradigm, techno-capitalism has embraced the inarguable impact that images have on our attention and engendered their use in the widespread phenomena of communication technologies. Since the close of the last century, the combination of computer technology with telecommunications has benefitted from a miniaturisation of components that has seen the explosion of affordable ‘multifunctional’ devices. For example, internet and television are now all available on mobile phones – phones that double up as digital cameras. The combination of image and information has become the new doxa of modern communication. Without image, nothing sells. Journalism has disappeared behind an influx of the audio-visual: CNN operating 24 hours a day can only ‘break a story’ if the images are ‘eye catching’ – the better the image, the better the story. As Regis Debray maintains, ‘the image itself has become information’\(^2\). Digitalised into a series of binary codes of quantified information, images along with text and sound find themselves together – reunited under the banner of ‘information communication.’

In *What is Philosophy*, Deleuze and Guattari raise the problem of the intrinsic relationship that capitalism has forged with communication. They outline a concern that the creative roles of philosophy, science and art have been marginalised in society, subsumed by the new ‘creative class’ of image consultants, advertising and PR agents that make ‘communication’ their primary business. Deleuze and Guattari argue that creativity has become dominated by an interest in ‘information’ and ‘opinion’, rather than in the production of new meanings and experiences. The two philosophers entail a demand for an art that resists communication, they affirm the need for sustained creativity against the

dominant ideology of an ‘information culture’: ‘We do not lack communication. On the contrary, we have too much of it. We lack creation. We lack resistance to the present’\textsuperscript{3}. In response to the plethora of ‘information’ that we are subjected to on a daily basis, I believe Deleuze and Guattari’s assertion provides contemporary artists with an important provocation.

Given Deleuze’s dismissal of communication, it is important to firstly outline what he infers by ‘communication’ and why art should endeavour to resist its influence. For Deleuze, communication is the transmission and propagation of information. Here, information is a controlled system of watchwords and pre-established opinion that holds sway in a given society\textsuperscript{4}. If creativity is the affirmation of new worlds and new becomings (beyond established representation and \textit{doxa}), then the coded order of information is something art must endeavour to resist. In an interview with Toni Negri in 1990, Deleuze outlines the reasons why he is wary of communication, he argues that the centrality of information and communication technology to capitalist ideology is such that speech, expression and communication are thoroughly permeated by money and vested ideological interest. So, rather than art develop a line of inquiry through communication, better it resist through a certain ‘creative non-communication’: ‘We’ve got to hijack speech. Creating has always been something different from communicating. The key thing may be to create vacuoles of non-communication, circuit breakers, so we can elude control’\textsuperscript{5}.

For the painter, it would seem a difficult path to compete with the visual capabilities of new technologies – a fact that might explain the growing profusion of ‘new media’ art. To create an image that grabs one’s attention like a large plasma screen glowing in the


\textsuperscript{4} Gilles Deleuze, \textit{Qu’est-ce qu’un Acte de Création?} (Dans le Cadre des Mardis de la Fondation Femis: Paris, 1987).

dark with Dolby surround sound is a considerable request. Living in what Debord de-
scribed as a ‘society of the spectacle’, conditioned by a constant stream of audio-visual
animation and the hypnotic presence of screens, it is indeed a difficult task for painters
to imbue a fixed image with such diversionary potential. So how can painting react in
the face of dominate media? I believe Deleuze’s assertion that ‘We lack creation. We
lack resistance to the present’ encourages painters to produce an alternative kind of im-
age. Perhaps painting does not need to ‘communicate’ or to compete with digital media
in a battle for attention or sensationalism à la Saatchi’s Triumph of Painting. I argue that
painting must resist by establishing alternative encounters, something that our everyday
experience with technology is not capable of offering us. Painting can produce an aes-
thetic experience that is distinctly apart from communication, representation and infor-
mation – an image without recourse to language.

Yet, to resist communication is not to resist meaning, quite the contrary. In a world filled
with the noise of constant information, I believe there is something very subversive in
not wanting to ‘say’ anything. Instead, the artist produces, he or she creates something
(an encounter or an event) but one that is not in the order of language. As Debray as-
serts:

_Si l’image était une langue, elle serait traduisable en mots, et ces mots à
leur tour en d’autres images, car le propre d’un langage et d’être passible
de traduction. Si l’image était une langue, elle serait ‘parlé’ par une com-
munauté, car pour qu’il ait language, il faut qu’il y ait groupe._

If the image was a language, it could be translated into words, and then
these words in turn translated into images, as a characteristic of language
is its ability to be translated. If an image was a language, it would be ‘spoken’ by a community, for there to be language, there has to be a group.⁶

A painting presents us with an art-object that demands to be experienced, yet it cannot be ‘read’. Painting has no syntax or grammar, there is no dictionary to read a painting, a painting can not be right or wrong. Art historians have interpreted painting via symbolism, narrative and iconographic references where meaning is indeed established linguistically. However, the painting itself is always mute. While not denying the value of linguistic meaning that can be attributed to a painting, words or syntax do not provide the basis of visual experience. Through an engagement with line, colour, form, texture and mass, the process of painting enables an artist to think visually. This visual process provides the artist with a form of expression fundamentally different to the combination of words and syntax. To think in images therefore means we do not confuse thought and language. In painting’s refusal to speak, there is an imposed silence that I believe brings our attention to our other senses. The silence of painting enhances visual perception, just as sight deficiency intensifies hearing. I believe the less an image imposes itself through this silence, and through the specificity of its material construction the more it depends upon language and communication – to remind the reader that if art is to resist, it must ‘hijack speech’.

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Imperialism of the Signifier

The negation of communication is a call to interrogate the dominant role that semiotics plays in our interpretation of art. The historical submission of art to the science of semiotics has been central in maintaining the hierarchy of ‘language’ and ‘idea’ over an engagement with the sensorial complexity of matter. As I touched upon in the previous chapter, when subjected to the field of semiotics, painting’s materiality, and the processes that form it, can only find expression or significance through the circulation of signifiers. After the signifier separates its linguistic meaning (the signified) from the material dimension of the sign, an art-object’s physical dimension has no further role. The possibility for an intensified, physically present-based meaning is forfeited.

The dominance of semiotics has been further empowered through the rise of digital communications themselves. Reproduction and digitalisation has seen the evaporation of all texture and depth from an image, including reproductions of painting and sculpture. For example magazines and catalogues of art, detach colour and form from their support and environment, abolishing any physical presence a work may have had. The dematerialisation of the image by digital technology, which I discussed in Chapter I, enables an image to enter the worldwide network of communication technology where

7 In an ambitious project to re-situate the materiality of an oeuvre as central to its historical and aesthetic significance, Florence De Méredieu states that the study of western art has been subjected to the sciences of language and semiotics to such an extent that it has become difficult to think about art in any other way. The historical precedents that have favoured language and concept over a sensorial engagement with matter are outlined by De Méredieu as finding their source in Plato’s idealism, then propounded via the aesthetic philosophy of Kant and Hegel, where all writers maintain the advocacy of spirit over matter. Through an affirmation of the material realm, De Méredieu’s book is an attempt to escape what the author refers to as the ‘shadow of philosophic idealism.’ See Florence De Méredieu, Histoire Matérielle et Immatérielle de l’Art Moderne, 2nd ed. (Paris: Larousse, 2004) p. 42.

8 From a deconstructivist point of view, it could be inferred that ‘affects’ are only meaningful when they find themselves articulated in language. However for Deleuze ‘affect’ is positioned as unreachable by language (or before language). Affects are primarily felt experiences.

9 According to O’Sullivan, semiotics has also been favoured within art theory for two other reasons: first, the propensity to historically explain the production and reception of art through a Marxist ideology (a social art history) and, second, the fashion of ‘deconstruction’ (or the ‘new art history’) that emerged with post-modernism. Within the first factor, art is defined as representation par excellence; with the second, the notion of representation is problematised. Whilst both these critiques are in themselves important strategies of inquiry, as O’Sullivan states: ‘but after the deconstruction the art object remains. Life goes on. Art, whether we will it or not, continues producing affects. So what is the ‘nature’ of these affects, and can they be deconstructed?’ See O’Sullivan, Art Encounters, pp. 40-41.
its status as information allows it to be manipulated and circulated *ad infinum*; indeed, an exacerbated manifestation of what Walter Benjamin famously termed the loss of the ‘aura’\(^\text{10}\). Once digitalised, the unique material qualities of an art work become mere ‘signs’. As Debray asserts, this has been a win for semioticians who, in dealing only with the linguistic interpretation of sign and signifier, are not burdened with the material complexities of an artwork – a convenient circumstance for the recent boom of photographic and video art. Debray is adamant that the dominance of semiotics is itself a result of our very disconnectedness with the physical world\(^\text{11}\).

As I have outlined, an ‘art of sensation’ can be seen as an attempt to negate what Deleuze refers to as ‘signifier enthusiasm’ or the academic fashion of ‘deconstruction.’ For Deleuze, a work of art establishes ‘new becomings’ that are beyond representation, irreducible to language or code. The forces underpinning an art-object’s creation are contained and made visible in matter: ‘What is preserved – the thing or the work of art – is a bloc of sensations, that is to say, a compound of percepts and affects’\(^\text{12}\). If we are to think about art differently, beyond the limitations of a signifying regime, then ‘percepts’ and ‘affects’ can be seen as replacing the ‘signifier’ and ‘signified.’ This is indeed problematic for language and communication and, as Deleuze himself recognises, difficult for discussion or opinion as you cannot ‘read’ affects or percepts in this sense, you can only experience them\(^\text{13}\). Subsequently for the artist, this infers a responsibility towards the expressive potentiality of his or her materials and the possibility to convey meaning through the singularity of their material forces.


\(^{11}\) Debray, *Vie et Mort de l’Image*, p. 75.

\(^{12}\) Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, p. 164 (Italics in original).

\(^{13}\) For both O’Sullivan and Massumi, affects are understood as passages of intensity – while they may resonate with language, they are of a fundamentally different order, prior to linguistic expression. ‘Approaches to the image and its relation to language are incomplete if they operate only on the semantic and semiotic level’. Massumi in O’Sullivan, *Art Encounters*, p. 170.
Encounter 1: Norton Blue

As an embodied experience, a painting’s content or meaning consists of the substances it is formed from and the technical operations that form them. Therefore, the choice and utilization of materials is a determining aspect in any ‘art encounter’ and the initial departure point from which painting begins. Commencing my studio research, I explored the idea of painting on sandpaper; the antithesis of a smooth transparent video screen and a support that would affirm an overtly tactile genesis of an image (Ill.20). The nature of sandpaper offered an important deviation from established ‘fine art’ surfaces and evoked an implicit relationship to ‘manual’ force that I valued. The decision to experiment with ‘non artistic’ supports can be seen as an attempt to distance my work from the clichés that inhabit established forms of visual expression and communication\textsuperscript{14}.

Corresponding with a desire to produce a sensual encounter, I exploited the visceral qualities of oil paint – to bring its palpable, flesh-like nature into rhythmic contact with the roughened surface of the sandpaper\textsuperscript{15}. To highlight the physical dimension of the encounter, I maintained a simplicity of monochromatic colour that would not complicate the impact of the work with chromatic variation. The result was a surprising meeting between the two materials, particularly how the textured surface created a delicate scumbling effect in the paint’s application\textsuperscript{16}.

Motivated by the success of the smaller works on wet and dry Norton brand sandpaper, I decided to enlarge their format to increase the physical complexity of their impact. Through a researched process of preparing a stretched silica-oxide grit surface over a wooden frame, I was able to maintain the same texture of sandpaper albeit on a much larger scale. In the resulting series Norton Blue (Ill.21-22), the composition of each

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{14} Paradoxically, despite my investigations into alternative supports for painting, my attempts likewise led me back to a more to an enlarged appreciation of ‘traditional’ supports (such as canvas) and their material integrity.
  \item \textsuperscript{15} An idea inspired by Willem De Koonings’ famous remark that ‘oil paint was invented to paint the flesh.’
  \item \textsuperscript{16} Employed throughout art history, notably by early Dutch masters, the technique of scumbling has been used to create atmospheric effects of radiance and glow. Hence, an unforeseeable connotation with photography became apparent, as the application of colour onto the darkened surface created an x-ray effect that alluded to a photochemical process. Yet the existence of worn off hogs-hair bristles in the paint remind us that the image is the result of a very different process.
\end{itemize}
Illustration 20. Miles Hall *Norton Drawing#09*, oil on Norton brand wet and dry sandpaper, 28x22cm. 2007. Private Collection.
Illustration 21. Miles Hall, Norton Blue #05, oil, acrylic and silica-oxide on canvas, 160x140cm., 2007. Griffith University Art Collection.
painting is determined by the physical encounter between blue oil paint, the prepared support and the rhythmic force of the corporal gesture. The colour blue was used for the unique spatial qualities it conferred; an ability to shift between hardened opacity to diaphanous transparency. Working on a larger scale allowed me to increase the diversity of the gesture; to work with larger brushes and to affirm an important corporal presence in the image’s production. The physical resistance of the surface against a loaded brush determined a large part of the work’s formal development, as the roughened surface made the application of paint a tactile experience that became intrinsic to the final image. Here, ‘affect’ can be considered as the resulting optical vibration of paint as it enters into scumbled contact with the industrial surface and its formal containment within a structured field. The collision between the organic palpability of the paint and the hardened rigidity of the sandpaper has a visual quality that opens up a unique spatial dimension; the softness of the oil paint is transformed into a skeletal-like fragility that, in turn, transforms the character of the silica oxide ground and opens its hardened surface into an arena of infinite depth.

While being applied with considerable force, the ‘painterly’ gesture left by my movements finds itself partly negated in the production of these works. Unlike the ‘heroic’ gesture intrinsic to the work of abstract expressionists, the physicality of the paint’s application here is revoked, ‘sanded back’ and neutralised by the textured silica oxide surface. Although the paint is applied in an ample and overtly physical way, its surface is rendered uniform by the pervasive texture of silica oxide particles that define the support. This encounter between paint and ground produces two distinct dimensions in which to experience the work. From afar, the textured surface of the work vanishes and, as observers, we are presented with an overall engagement with the composition, its af-
firmation of colour and gesture. Up close however, we are enticed by the microcosm of detail and the minute variations of surface where pigmented colour is rendered tactile by the particles of silica oxide. The important consideration of the tactile in producing these works can be viewed as a response to both Deleuze’s and Riegl’s *haptic vision* – where the act of seeing is amplified by physical sensation.
In an attempt to produce an image beyond the conveyance of any established knowledge or information, the relationship that I have outlined between the chosen materials and the physical processes of their transformation is paramount. The protean-like nature of paint’s substance provides an arena of constant discovery; as gestural force and energy transform the relationship between the paint and support, new visual possibilities constantly emerge. In precipitating a materialist meaning, the content or ‘sensation’ of these paintings can be seen as arising in union with the gestural transformation of paint. Centred on an immediate dialogue between action and idea, meaning and the painting are made together. The art work’s material components become intrinsic to the significance or meaning of the work. As Deleuze clarifies: ‘We will see how the plane of the material ascends irresistibly and invades the plane of composition of the sensations themselves to the point of being part of them or indiscernible from them’\textsuperscript{17}. In this way, complex meaning cannot be considered independently from its materiality. A painting cannot be decomposed into a series of independent fragments or pockets of information that allow us to make sense of it. Contained in a composition as a ‘bloc of sensation’, these paintings must be felt and experienced on the basis of their material forces – forces that become continuous, independent beings. The signs at work here do not make their appearance as signifiers or representations, neither as information or communication; rather they are assemblages of material rhythms structured into relations of content and expression.

\textsuperscript{17} Deleuze and Guattari, \textit{What is Philosophy?}, p. 166.
New Becomings

Best translated as ‘the will of art’, Riegl’s notion of Kunstwollen has been adapted by Deleuze into a concept that outlines artistic volition – the ‘aesthetic urge’ that gives form to an expressive or intelligible material. For Deleuze, an artist is involved in the ‘becoming-art’ or Kunstwollen of her chosen medium; she is drawn to the material and invents new forms of expression and vision through its transformation. The things that are expressed and made visible through this process do not pre-exist; rather they are invented in the process. For Deleuze, creation is subsequently involved with a constant exploration of new becomings that are yet to be represented or codified. Therefore, production here is not the desire for communication, but the will to create new worlds that cannot be framed by language or information. For the artist, this infers a certain ‘risk’ factor; the exploration of new possibilities in material that precede premeditated concept. One could say that concept and form are created together, simultaneously through process. As O’Sullivan observes: ‘Indeed, we might say that an effective art practice, paradoxically, often relies on not knowing exactly in advance what effect the practice might have’18. We are unable to predict or determine what the character of an art encounter will be; consequently, Deleuze maintains that the audience for whom the work is constructed can not yet be known. As a result arts-becoming also defines a new audience. This may further suggest why, for Deleuze, art should never be a concern of communication, as communication presupposes an established audience with a targeted message.

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18 O’Sullivan, Art Encounters, p. 23.
For Deleuze, ‘sensation’ plays an imperative role in the generation of new becomings. Through the production of an art-event, the artist attempts to draw out of his materials a composition of affects and percepts (the two basic types of sensation) that cause us to see and feel in new ways – a liberation from habitual perception, memory and recognition. I employ the term ‘production’ here in relation to its etymological significance – from the Latin *producere*, that refers to an act of ‘bringing forth’ something in space. Painting allows an artist to actualise forces and rhythms through the expressive texture of paint in an experimental process that investigates the complexity of the physical world and our connection to it. The ‘bringing forwardness’ of paint corresponds to Paul Klee’s famous dictum that the production of art is ‘not to reproduce what we can already see, but to make visible what we cannot’\(^\text{19}\). For Deleuze, an artist’s role is therefore less a concern for reproducing or inventing forms, it is about ‘capturing forces’ – forces that are rendered visible through the transformation of matter into ‘sensation.’ I feel it is important to emphasise that this ‘capturing of forces’ is immanent to the physical world, the sphere in which we have concrete tangible relations; the realm in which we move, breathe, eat, touch and feel, etc. Such ‘sensations’ or ‘becomings’ are not subject to any transcendental or metaphysical authority but, as John Rajchman remarks, contingent to the production of new possibilities within this world:

Art works are composed of sensations, prelinguistic and presubjective, brought together in an expressive material through a construct with an unorganized plan, with which we have peculiar relations. They are not there to save us or perfect us (or to damn or corrupt us), but rather to complicate things, to create more complex nervous systems no longer subservient to the debilitating effects of clichés, to show and release the possi-

\(^{19}\) Klee in Deleuze, *The Logic of Sensation*, p. 48.
Deleuze’s conception of ‘becoming’ encourages a certain impulsive attitude to art making, that I believe finds a befitting correspondence in painting. The ‘bloc of sensation, made up of percepts and affects’, otherwise considered as the result of ‘artistic volition’, gives precedence to an instinctual dimension of human behaviour that is rarefied in contemporary society. The production of painting, its proximity to touch and gesture, provides artists with an important form of expression in which to engage with the physical world. This form of expression should not be reified to a role of communicating established information. For what we lack is not communication – but the production of new territories, new becomings and new meanings.

New Territories: Resisting Hylomorphism

In order for art to produce what Deleuze refers to as ‘vacuoles of non-communication’, I argue that painting requires an alternative modus operandi than that of semantic denotation. If art is to render visible that which we have not yet thought or seen, beyond representation or communication, how then is this to occur without code, syntax, notation or language? One response lies in the way that form can be transfigured rhythmically and instinctively as a physical event that maps out or explores new fields of visual experience – what Deleuze refers to as new territories. In What is Philosophy, Deleuze argues that art begins with the animal; the instinct to carve out a territory where select

boundaries or frames are imposed upon the primordial chaos of the earth. Therefore, the production of painting can be seen as the production of new territories – where conventional and established domains are hijacked and ‘de-territorialised’. Signs become diagrammatic and cartographic, rather than symbolic or iconic. The role of an artist is therefore, one of an animal-like-becoming, where materials are used to establish new territories that are yet to be named or, alternatively, de-territorialise existing territories of control and re-territorialise them as unfamiliar. Deleuze maintains that art proceeds and is, indeed, characterised by an animal-like compulsion:

Every morning the *scenopoetes dentirostris*, a bird of the Australian rain forest, cuts leaves, makes them fall to the ground, and turns them over so that the paler, internal side contrasts with the earth. In this way it constructs a stage for itself like a ready-made; and directly above, on a creeper or a branch, while fluffing out the feathers beneath its beak to reveal their yellow roots, it sings a complex song made up from its own notes and, at intervals, those of other birds that it imitates: it is a complete artist. This is not synaesthesia in the flesh but blocs of sensation in the territory – colours, postures, and sounds that sketch out a total work of art. These sonorous blocs are refrains; but there are also refrains of posture and colour, and postures and colours are always being introduced into refrains: bowing low, straightening up, dancing in a circle of lines and colors. The whole of the refrain is the being of sensation. Monuments are refrains. In this respect art is continually haunted by the animal.21

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Consequently, the marking out of a territory implies the construction of a ‘frame’; the drawing of a boundary or a series of marks that establish a defined space. Requiring an inherent physical engagement, the production of territory also involves an implicit use of the body; its forces, rhythms, and energies are essential to reshape material into new formations. For Deleuze, rhythm can be seen as playing an intrinsic role in the production of any territory; it is rhythm that connects the most rudimentary structures and milieus together and allows for a specific reality to resonate within the boundaries of a delimited space. Thus, the rhythmic, corporal affirmation of the artist’s body is crucial in transforming substance into new tactile configurations. For the artist, ‘territorialisation is an act of rhythm that has become expressive, or of milieu components that have become qualitative. The making of a territory is dimensional, but it is not a meter, it is a rhythm’.

Fries’ work (Ill.10), is a perfect example of how painting, once fixed, gives duration to such rhythm; maintained as a bloc of sensation, its forces are rendered visible in the creation of new cartographies.

In opposition to the disembodied realm of digital communication, the process of painting puts the artist’s body to work as an ‘art-machine,’ where the production of an image can be considered as ‘a privileged site of corporeal experimentation’. Through the use of her body, an artist imbues her materials with rhythmic forces that, becoming sensation, catalyse the creation of new possible worlds. Through a physical, bodily experimentation with material, the production of new territories can negate the phenomena of what Deleuze refers to as ‘hylomorphism’. ‘Hylomorphism’ is any operation that moulds matter into forms according to an ideal model or dominant ideology; an operation that presents the world as conforming to a preconceived idea or representation. Deleuze maintains that it is art’s duty to map, and drag out, the energies and forces that are held

24 Is there no better example than Plato’s metaphysical opus ‘Myth of the Cave’ where earthly existence is considered a mere shadow of pure idea?
hostage or rendered unrecognisable by the hylomorphic model. ‘Art is to liberate the life and vitality that society does not cease to imprison’25. Subsequently, the artist must attempt to revoke the hylomorphism that shapes our existence by producing new conglomerations of rhythmic forces that become physically manifested as new territories of experience. In doing so, the ‘production of painting can liberate the energy and potential that is held within the limitations of representation, communication and opinion. As Deleuze scholar Simon Zepke suggests, such creation involves the necessary destruction of whatever seeks to oppose it:

Any creation worth its name will therefore encompass the destructions necessary to set it free, an explosion that destroys negation and propels its liberated matter into the new. Affirmation is therefore like a leap of faith, a leap into the chaos of the world in order to bring something back, in order to construct something that expresses life beyond its sad negation.26

Therefore through an experimental and corporal process, painting presents an opportunity for artists to establish new rhythmic cartographies that challenge hylomorphic conformity or pre-established opinion and information. Resisting the reified status of ‘communication information’, the energies and forces unique to a painted image are crucial in maintaining an alternative experience to our codified perception of dominant media. This is an experience that presents the world to us as an intensification of energy, line and colour; an affirmation of new territories and avenues of knowledge.

Encounter 2: Dirty Drawings, Line and Colour

By encouraging a physical genesis of form, painting’s material constituency confers the employment of line and colour with an important tactile dimension. For an artist, it is by exploiting line and colour against any representational function that the production of an art-object can resist communication. Once liberated from any relation to ‘language’ or ‘information, the physical qualities of both line and colour can be exploited to produce new territories that negate hylomorphic command. As Deleuze asserts: ‘the production of new territories don’t function to represent, even something real, but rather constructs a real that is yet to come, a new type of reality27. In the desire to produce an image at odds with the immaterial nature of digital communication, I employed the tactile possibilities of both line and colour to develop a series of works that celebrated the sensuality of touch and substance: Dirty Drawings was the title given to the works28 (III.23-25).

Again the choice of materials proved essential in the development and meaning of each image. Providing an infinite variety of marks, the organic brittleness of charcoal was central to the work’s production and provided the necessary inspiration for each image’s formal development. The fragility of its carbonised constitution encouraged the charcoal stick to break and explode into diverse and randomised fragments that, subject to the physical movement of the artist’s body, produced an incredible diversity of marks and traces. Erratic and haphazard, the quality of line produced by the chipped and broken charcoal stick provided a constant source of unforeseeable possibilities in which to influence the direction of each work. Produced on prepared aluminium panels, the hardened nature of the surface provides an important resistance against the fragility of the charcoal line. As a by-product of the drawing process, a fine black dust appeared

27 Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus, p. 142.
28 *The word ‘dirty’ has an intentional ambiguity in the title - refering to the black charcoal dust but also to the drawings ‘penetration’ into pink (paint).*
upon the surface of the aluminium allowing a range of softened sfumato tones to be produced with either the fingers or a brush. After the charcoal image was established and rendered permanent with an industrial fixative, its dirty, carbonised surface was dipped into a cleansing bath of pink Teflon-acrylic paint. Providing a ‘body of colour’ in which the work is partly immersed, the use of paint here is employed not only for its chromatic impact but for its tactile, sensual presence. Subsequent technical experimentation was needed to produce the final works; notably, an upright re-enforced bath and drying system (Ill.26).
Illustration 24. Miles Hall, *Penetration #3*, charcoal and Teflon paint on aluminium panel, 120x100cm., 2009. Collection Ray Hughes.
Illustration 25. Miles Hall, *Unguéal*, charcoal and Teflon paint on aluminium panel, 120x100cm., 2008.
The Diagram

Through the immediacy of drawing, the encounter between charcoal and aluminium can trigger a series of uncontrolled lines and accidental marks that have no formalised intention behind them. Unattached to any signifying or symbolic regime, these marks can be seen as mutilating or destroying any attempt to depict or represent an established concept. In his text on Francis Bacon, Deleuze outlines the importance for painting to overcome pre-existing cliché through using what he calls a ‘diagram’. The diagram ‘is like the emergence of another world… They are non representative, nonillustrative, nonnarrative. They are no longer either significant or signifiers: they are a-signifying
traits. In the case of *Dirty Drawings*, line is used to create abstract diagrams that exploit the role of touch in the creation of a ‘manual space’ (Ill.24-25). When held in close proximity to the hand, a fragment of charcoal can create a series of marks and lines that are more determined by touch and pressure than by any visual calculation; in this sense, it is the hand, and not the eye, that functions as the dominant organ. These almost blind marks remove the image from any pre-meditated visual condition, and encourage the emergence of something that was previously un-thought, previously unseen. In opposition to optical vision that implies a necessary distance from the work, the genesis of these images result from a tactile use of material; the close proximity of the medium to manual force confers an inarguable ‘haptic’ dimension the image. As Deleuze states: ‘It is a manual space, a space of active manual strokes, which works through *manual aggregates* rather than through *luminous disaggregation*.\(^{30}\)

Throughout *The Logic of Sensation*, Deleuze promulgates the important tactile qualities of line for its ability to generate a ‘vital chaos’ (or diagram) that enables the emergence of something previously inexistent – a new becoming. However, in order for line to create a new becoming, it must first break with the principles of optical representation. Particularly developed through classical art, optical representation’s dominant use of line to depict, enclose, define and outline a form has to be negated through the affirmation of a *haptic*, animal-like trace that gives prevalence to physical instinct over idea. Referring to what he isolates historically as the *Gothic line*, Deleuze suggests that line can be used to create a manual space where the hand can expresses itself in an overtly tactile way. Applied with a considerable rhythmic force, I believe the material properties of the line in *Dirty Drawings* corresponds with *Gothic line* – liberating an image from any representation or *hylomorphic* idealism:

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29 Deleuze, *The Logic of Sensation*, p. 82 (Italics in original).
It is a geometry no longer at the service of the essential and the eternal, but a geometry in the service of ‘problems’ or ‘accidents’: ablation, adjunction, projection, intersection. It is thus a line that never ceases to change direction, that is broken, split, diverted, turned in on itself, coiled up, or even extended beyond its natural limits, dying away in a ‘distorted convulsion’: there are *free marks* that extend or arrest the line, acting beneath or beyond representation… We are no longer directed toward the purely optical; on the contrary, the tactile once again assumes its pure activity, it is restored to the hand and given a speed, a violence, and a life that the eye can barely follow.31

In favour of a *Gothic line*, the dissolution of optical representation therefore enhances the possibility to explore new avenues of visual form. Negating a subjection to pre-established idea, the *Gothic line* celebrates a sensual production of form and confers painting with the ability to produce something visually different to the habitual representation of the ordered world.

In order to produce another series of works that expand the tactile dimension of line, I experimented with a different medium (Ill.27). In replacing the use of charcoal with small fragments of black oil-stick, I endeavoured to explore how this change of medium might instigate alternative outcomes. While maintaining the direct approach to mark-making and drawing used in *Dirty Drawings*, the use of oil-stick changed the character of the image into a more textured, tonally diverse space. Akin to cake-icing, the soft

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Illustration 27. Miles Hall, *Splice (Sibelius Blue)*, oil on aluminium panel, 120x100cm., 2009.
tackiness of the oil-stick provided a different range of marks against the aluminium support to that of the charcoal. Unlike the solid dryness of the charcoal, the softness of the oil-stick imparted a greater fluidity to line and provided a denser substance in which to inscribe marks with the hands and fingers. Like drawing on a foggy window, the oil paint retained the traces of the fingers in a direct way, imbuing the image with a tactile resonance or, what Deleuze refers to as, a ‘manual space.’ Different media provide artists with a range of divergent tactile possibilities. The unique difference in line and form between these two series is a demonstration of how the physical properties of a chosen medium become integral to the final nature of a painted image. The significance of a painting’s sensation cannot be removed from the material elements of its construction.

**Colour**

Likewise, the task to liberate colour from any involvement in representation or communication is a challenge for painting. In seeking to utilise colour in an unfamiliar way, I reconsidered its habitual use in the production of *Dirty Drawings*. The subsequent role I ascribed to it was as a body of liquefied pigment that would surround the aluminium support as it was slowly submerged into the paint’s liquid mass. The upright bath held the large quantity of paint needed to perform such a task (Ill.26). As the finished drawing was partly submerged into the mass of pink paint, the immersed region of the drawing became lost under the envelopment of paint. Upon its removal from the bath, the aluminium panel retained an opaque band of thick pink colour that, once dried, became a fixed element within the work’s composition (Ill.26). Subject to the forces of gravity, the horizontal nature of the bath’s surface established a strong horizon-line upon
the surface of the drawing once removed. Not only was this an impertinent take on hard-edge abstractions dependence on masking tape to achieve a straight edge, it conferred the image with a subtle sense of weight and immersion; an image that, like us, shares its genesis in the reality of the physical world\(^{32}\).

In this way, freeing colour from any dependence on line or a process of tonal graduation to produce form, painting’s tactile potential can be harnessed to present colour in an overtly physical way. After the aluminium panels were removed from the paint, the pink-coloured bands that remained (akin to tide-marks) conferred the image with an important tactile quality that engage us in a sensual experience of colour. Exploring this idea further, I developed a series of painted works experimenting with colour harmonies (Ill.28), where thickened oil paint was applied with a large spatula against the smooth, yet hardened, surface of form-ply panels. The encounter between the two materials created a heightened awareness of the paint’s physical presence; our experience of colour

\(^{32}\) As an indexical reminder of the works production, the Teflon strengthened paint assured that the drips that formed on the bottom of the image remained.
becomes essentially a tactile affair. In de-territorialising colour from any role in communication or representation, the physical dimension that is conferred to its chromatic impact heightens our attention as to how colour can relate to its immediate surroundings as an autonomous body. Colour becomes what Deleuze refers to as a ‘vector of intensity’. Made physical in such a way, new relationships can be established between the ‘body’ of colour and the space, architecture and light in which it is situated. Rescued from an immaterial *mode d’emploi*, colour can achieve a direct physical impact upon our perception:

> It is very simple. Painting directly attempts to release the presences beneath representation, beyond representation. The colour system itself is a system of direct action on the nervous system.33

**The Production of Presence**

In a world of perpetual representation, Deleuze’s call for an art of sensation is indeed a challenge for artists to remove the ‘re’ from representation – to create an art encounter that ‘presents’ us with something new, rather than the representation of an already established idea. The appeal for presence (or presentation), in opposition to representation is also Gumbrecht’s central argument in his book *The Production of Presence*34. A text, that in the context of this thesis, establishes a number of pertinent connections with the ideas of Deleuze concerning the importance of materiality in aesthetic experience. In order to ‘hijack speech’ and operate as a ‘vacuole of non-communication’, I have outlined how the physical process of painting’s production can resist communication and

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33 Deleuze, *The Logic of Sensation*, p. 45.
likewise negate the ‘re’ of representation. In examining the ideas of Gumbrecht, I would like to finish this chapter by suggesting how paintings refusal to communicate – its silence – provides a moment of intensity or ‘presence’ that is much needed in contemporary society.

As discussed earlier in Chapter I, Gumbrecht laments the loss of our engagement with the physical world. He argues that the challenge for art is to re-establish an important material dimension to our experience of being, through what he calls ‘the production of presence’:

Something that is present is supposed to be tangible for human hands – implying that it can have an immediate impact on our bodies… Therefore, ‘production of presence’ refers to all kinds of events and processes in which the impact that ‘present’ objects have on human bodies is being initiated or intensified. All objects available in ‘presence’ will be called the ‘things-of-the-world.35

Gumbrecht’s text can be seen as a response to what he considers contemporary culture’s obsession with ‘making sense’, rationalising instinct, and the dominant (hylomorphic) Cartesian interpretation of the world. Like Deleuze, he sees the dominance of semiotics as being indicative of this tendency. Consequently, in order to deal with the problematic issue of semiotics, Gumbrecht defines two types of cultures: a meaning-based culture and a presence-based culture. As its name suggests, a meaning-based culture is defined by its drive to interpret phenomena and to clearly outline the specific elements that may give it an intellectual significance. Typically cerebral and mind-based, this is the domain

of semiotics. However, a presence-based culture considers the impact of phenomena on our senses and body; a concern for felt experience which is echoed in Deleuze’s concept of ‘sensation’. While his text focuses on this presence-based culture, Gumbrecht does not condemn a meaning-based relationship to the world. Instead, he fighters for a balance to be made between presence and meaning-based cultures so that our experience of the world can be liberated from the dominance of interpretation and linguistic dogma.

Gumbrecht’s argument is therefore not against meaning, but precisely how meaning can be enlarged and intensified through ‘presence’. In response to Gumbrecht, the unique tactile properties of painting that I have outlined in this paper provide a privileged avenue of creation, where visual form can be imbued with an important physical presence. Painting’s ‘bloc of sensation’ renders visible the rhythmic and manual forces of a physical encounter and offers an embodied image that is tangible to human touch. The meaning of painting might be reconsidered in this way as a productive encounter that is less concerned with a role of information, than with a desire to enable new kinds of tangible relations with the world. These new relations operate through a silent connection with the things-of-the-world; felt relations that, independent from language, enable us to experience what Gumbrecht calls a ‘moment of intensity’. Such moments of intensity are defined by Gumbrecht as being experienced throughout the body and mind, as concrete and authentic encounters characterized by an absence of any ‘message’ or communication. Therefore a presence based culture promotes the notion that meaning or subjective truth can be revealed through the quietude of substance; through the primordial dimension in which relationships are established between bodies and the things-of-the-world. A relationship that, like Gumbrecht, I argue has become marginalized in the contemporary world:

And are we not precisely longing for presence, is our desire for tangibility not so intense – because our own everyday environment is so almost insuperably consciousness-centred? Rather than having to think, always and endlessly, what else there could be, we sometimes seem to connect with a layer in our existence that simply wants the things of the world close to our skin.37

Painting, by virtue of its tactile qualities, has the potential to offer us such an experience.

The processes and techniques developed in my studio practice have therefore been inspired by the challenge to generate a 'moment of intensity' — an image without recourse to language or communication. As a result, I have developed certain aesthetic predilections: notably the employment of a reductivist, formally restrained visual vocabulary and a concern for scale.

If the haptic qualities of painting are to operate critically, their potential to operate as a 'bloc of affects and percepts' must not be attenuated by perfunctory elements. I believe that by employing a refined, minimal range of forms and colours, the physical attributes of the painted image maintain a dominant role in our perception — in this way the quietude of substance is most felt. Likewise, a simplified range of colour and tonal variation tends to bring the spectator's awareness towards the haptic qualities of an image where a heightened awareness of physicality is fostered. Given the exploratory nature of my research, I have attempted to maintain a strong formal coherency through the consideration of scale. The majority of my studio production is conducted through developing specific series where each work is developed on an identically sized support. This enables each image to establish itself as a part of a greater whole and importantly creates unforeseen dialogues between individual works. The sequential nature gives not only a unified presence to the work, but importantly extends its dimension in a temporal sense; the viewer is encouraged to move between works establishing an active interaction that negates an involuntary, bodiless gaze.

Conclusion
Conclusion

‘Expression, like construction, signifies both an action and its result... If the two meanings are separated the object is viewed in isolation from the operation which produced it, and therefore apart from vision, since the act proceeded from an individual live creature. Theories that seize upon ‘expression’ as if it denoted simply the object, always insist to the uttermost that the object of art is purely representative of other objects already in existence. They ignore the contribution which makes the object something new.’

John Dewey, Art as Experience
What attracts us to a painting, I believe, is something that our everyday world is not capable of offering us. If we understand that our day-to-day lives are both culturally and materially determined, then it is reasonable to say that the objects of aesthetic experience are also culturally and materially specific. In our media-led culture, where the sensual materiality of an image has been marginalised in favour of instantaneous transmission, the rarefied nature of painting’s physical, tactile dimension provides an exceptional avenue of visual experience. Our growing interaction with the world through screens has exacerbated what Marcel Brodthaers once referred to as ‘monomania’ – the propensity of both art and society to flatten everything. In the face of this reality, the desire for an embodied, tactile perception of the world becomes amplified. Painting responds to this need. The analogue complexity of painting, its implicit link with ‘substance’, offers artists a pertinent medium in which to create alternative territories – ‘tactile ruptures’ within the dominant sphere of digital representation and communication. The recognition that art works, like actions or events, gain their significance only within particular historic and cultural events confers painting’s tactile dimension with an important significance. Art has a responsibility to address the dominant paradigms of our time; the pertinence of painting must therefore be evaluated in direct relation to the technological developments that are rapidly changing the way we perceive reality; painting’s importance cannot be justified through the use of debilitating clichés that regard it as a timeless, universal or metaphysical pursuit.

To re affirm the material specificity of painting is also to re affirm the subjective nature of painting practice and its place within contemporary art. The recent rise to dominance of ‘concept-based’ practice has seen the emergence of an art concerned more with the production of concepts than sensations; artists in the pursuit of a more objectified, politi-
cal and social engagement have abandoned sensation for a production of meaning that is situated predominately within linguistic and signifying regimes. The breaking down of modernist discourse by conceptualist practice has challenged the subjective dimension of art, especially painting, relegating it as an object of romantic, individualised expression. Remarkably influential within contemporary art, Bourriaud’s ‘relational aesthetics’ for example, attempts to negate the role of subjectivity by focusing attention on an artist’s relationship within the wider social community, ‘an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and it’s social context rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space’1. I believe painting problematises Bourriaud’s assertion; the two domains of ‘public and private’ are not mutually exclusive. Painting is a subjectified form of aesthetic production, yet its place in the world as a ‘thing’ engenders a series of ongoing encounters with the wider social and cultural world that continually allow it to produce new meaning. I argue further that the subjective private realm, celebrated by painting, is essential to any successful art practice – how is it possible for an artwork to function without the assertion of any imagination?

Through the manipulation and interplay of paint on its support, painting explores new possibilities of meaning (sensation) in essentially an intuitive and tactile way. The role that I propose for painting engenders the emergence of an image that has no a priori or linguistic message to justify its existence, ‘for what we need is not communication’. The significance of the painting and the process of its production cannot be separated – meaning and the painting are made together. I believe that painting’s production needs to be positioned more as an ‘affirmation’ of the subjective realm than the singular ‘expression’ of the artist’s ‘self.’ The encounter that painting offers is not limited to the subjectivity of the artist alone with his materials; the subjective dimension of the specta-

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tor is equally important to the creation of a painting’s meaning. Unlike communication, painting celebrates subjectivity, ambiguity and the ability of form to evoke divergent responses from the receiver. Opposing the didactic bombardment of information and opinion from both dominant media and certain genres of contemporary art (what Deleuze refers to as ‘signifier enthusiasts’), the nature of painting’s presence-based meaning offers a timely way out of the conceptualist/rationalist bind that characterises a large part of contemporary art practice. The role of painting is neither to manipulate already-existing codes and signs, nor to illustrate a theory; painting is a physical event that brings about the possibility of something new by accessing the energies and rhythms liberated from hylomorphic control.

As human beings we have no choice but to address the physical world. The affirmation of painting’s physical dimension is also an affirmation of the material world, a celebration of the here and now – the ‘isness’ of all things. Unlike the disembodied image of photography and digital media, painting never leaves the natural world of things. Along with the material dimension of paint itself, the physicality of a painting’s support is also of critical importance in establishing an image with ‘presence’; it is the support that literally maintains the paint (fixed as a bloc of sensation), as a durable object in space. Opposed to Greenbergian theory that neglected the significant role that a support could provide in the creation of an image, I believe painting today can be significantly diversified through encouraging a more active valorisation of the support. Painting’s ability to provide a visual experience that is both optical and tactile calls for artists to exploit the possibility of paintings material extension into space. The use of varying supports I believe will provide painters with an ongoing exploration as to how the impact of an image can be made more tangible for human interaction. In contrast to sculpture that is

\[\text{For Greenberg the support (predominately canvas) was something to be covered over and, hence ‘de-materialized’ into a picture plane, receding into optical vision. In stressing the ‘flatness’ of the support the haptic potential of painting was disregarded by Greenberg. For an in-depth account of this from a formalist point of view, I refer the reader to Resisting Blackmail in Yve –Alain Bois, Painting as Model (Massachusetts: MIT, 1990).}\]


safely lodged in the three dimensionality of real space, painting’s ability to function as both a pictorial image and object creates a fecund visual tension that noteworthy artists such as Richard Tuttle, Imi Kneobel and Reto Boller (Ill.29-31) are currently investigating.

Against transcendence, metaphysics and the desire to locate meaning beyond that which is tangible for the senses, I believe painting can provide a sensual experience that grounds us in the immanence of the material world – an embodied experience of reality that operates beyond its mere representation. Regardless of any aesthetic sophistication and quality a digital image may have, the uniformity of its surface (its clean, homogenised two-dimensionality) and the disembodied nature of its perception, severely limits the capacity of an image to embody sensuality. Given the proliferation of internet pornography, it would seem that the screen can indeed excel in ‘representing’ sensual phenomena; however, beyond its mimetic role, a digital pixel remains a square, a naked supine body – a series of them. However, a painted image has a curious affiliation with an individual being – it too is made of substance – a product of accident, encounter and hope, subject to the laws of gravity and nature. Painting has a physical contingency that can never be repeated nor reproduced. The more a painting affirms its distinct physicality, the less it resembles the plethora of photographic and digital imagery that surrounds us. In affirming, rather than negating, the corporeality and materiality of paint, artists can resist the evaporation of texture characteristic of digital technologies and create an image at odds with dominant media. Yet a painting, by virtue of being an image, will always invite comparison with the other images that surround it – a position that confers painting’s material specificity with a pronounced significance in questioning the digital world.
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