

Marking, Scoring, Storing, and Speculating (on Time)

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Marking Time¹

In every work of art there is an irreducible singularity; a fund of affect and visual stimuli that is inexhaustible. Here is a strange fact, which is both so obvious and so threatening to art-historical analysis that it is habitually overlooked: every artwork is indescribable. And since we can neither grasp a painting in language nor exhaust it in experience, how can we assign it a meaning? Indeed, the value of modern painting lies not in its *meanings* or even its *actions*, but rather in its unlimited potential for staging meanings and actions. This structural futurity indicates that the time horizon of painting is absolutely distinct from that of politics, which is characterized by short-term objectives and analysis. Painting *marks time*, rather than intervening in the events that populate it.

Each and every painting is a time battery—its apperception could consume a lifetime. But who can spend a lifetime looking at a single painting? With so much art to see in so many locations the opposite has occurred: art consumption has accelerated, provoking new ways of looking. At the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), for instance, visitors move from painting to painting taking pictures with their cell phones—storing artworks for a future moment that may never arrive. The portable camera STORES these works, which themselves are devoted to marking time. This will to storage (or to accumulation) is not only consistent with the ideology of museums, which unendingly pursue the acquisition of works as a hedge against

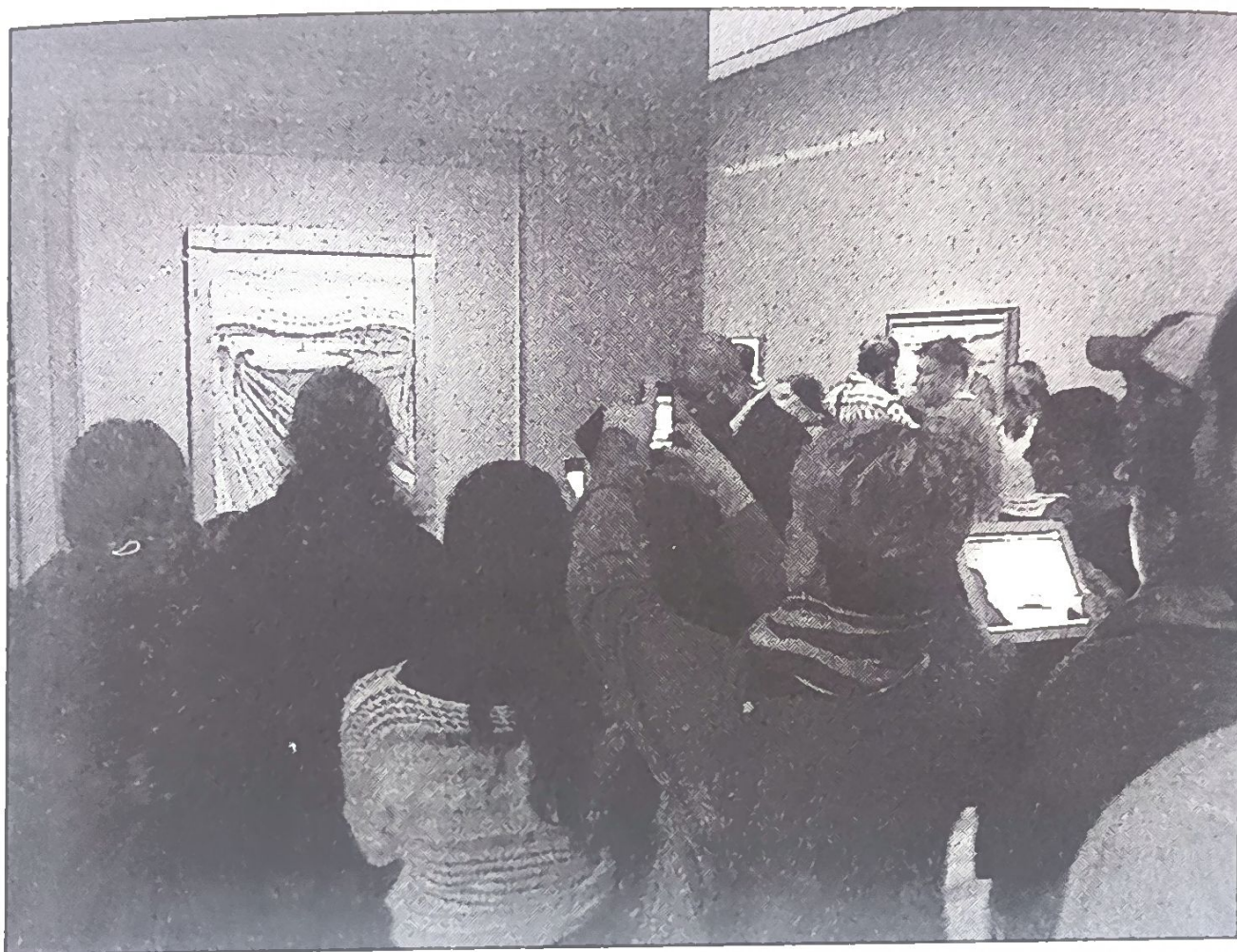
1 The opening sections and some other passages in this text are drawn from my essay "Painting Time: Jacqueline Humphries," in *Jacqueline Humphries* (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2014).

the future, but also the newest digital platforms for sharing and selling artworks, such as the web-based art archive ARTSY, which has recently been significantly capitalized, and Contemporary Art Daily, a major source of art-world information, or peer-to-peer sites like Tumblr. The art world, in all of its formats, has become a vast accumulation of potential energy whose enormous reserves are beyond the capacities of any individual to consume. It is a giant reservoir of deferred experience.

This dynamic—of massive ACCUMULATION amid endemic DISTRACTION—suggests why painting has acquired new forms and new relevance today. For, as Jonathan Crary has influentially argued, the great pioneers of modern painting like Paul Cézanne had already linked the marking of time with distracted spectatorship; indeed, in Cézanne's art the accumulation of marks is dialectically linked to distraction.² But unlike those visual media that store time explicitly, such as film, video, and performance (which have a determined duration whether or not one attends to them from start to finish), or photographs (which are defined by their time of exposure even if digitally manipulated), in painting the MARKING and STORAGE or ACCUMULATION of time are simultaneous and ongoing. Painting, somewhat paradoxically, is LIVE: a live medium. It is now "On the Air" as opposed to plein air.

The material procedures to make a painting are equally characterized by MARKING and STORING. This is the foundation of what Maurice Merleau-Ponty famously called "Cézanne's doubt": the painstaking process of transposing sensation into

2 Jonathan Crary, "1900: Reinventing Synthesis," in *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 281–359.



Photograph taken at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in front of Edvard Munch's *The Scream* (1893).

form, the excruciating doubt that comes with each decision to add a mark to those already present on a surface.³ Painting objectifies a fundamental existential question: How can an artist mark the flow of experience, first as a producer (painter) and then as a consumer (spectator). In modern painting, this "doubt" is omnipresent: no canvas can ever be fully resolved into a coherent image or be comprehended as an accomplished event. Every painting STORES an exorbitant stockpile of affect. How, for instance, could each individual signifying mark be accounted for optically, emotionally, and psychologically? No wonder MoMA's viewers resort to recording this potential energy rather than attempting the impossible task of consuming it all at once. One of the marvels of modern painting is that this tension between marking and storing time remains present on its surfaces, since its constituent marks, which are laid down over time, are always simultaneously available to vision. Painting has been, and remains to be, the privileged format for *negotiating attention*, for exploring the regulation and deregulation of affective time in an era of massive image production and circulation.⁴ In other words, modern painting formats the MARKING and ACCUMULATION of time both in its scenes of production and consumption.

Regarding the photographic practices of visitors to MoMA I have mentioned, one way of coping with the exorbitant accumulation of art, which takes place both *within* individual paintings and among them in their aggregation either in

3 See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt," in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, ed. Galen A. Johnson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 59–75.

4 As I suggest above, the best account of how painting can regulate attention is in Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception*.

museums or online, is to reformat them as “pictures” or digital images.⁵ And indeed, the becoming-picture of the painterly mark was Pop art’s response to Cézanne’s doubt, as in works like Roy Lichtenstein’s comic strip renderings of enlarged brushstrokes.

For the moment, I would like to bracket this explicit process of painting’s becoming-picture, and reflect on the structure of accumulation—both the accumulation of marks within paintings and the accumulation of paintings in physical or digital collections. The most prestigious and pervasive theory of accumulation pertaining to the visual is of course by Guy Debord, who defined spectacle as the accumulation of capital beyond a certain threshold to the point where it becomes an image.⁶ If we can agree that modern art, and its spaces of exhibition, satisfy Debord’s definition of spectacle, then, by snapping pictures visitors to MoMA and to museums everywhere are accumulating accumulation, leading, arguably, to a virulent, metastasized form of spectacle. But I would like to propose an alternate model of accumulation to that, exemplified by Debord. Rather than foreclosing action and agency, the kind of accumulation I’m thinking of may function as a SCORE, in the sense of a musical score which can enable an infinite number of future performances, or closer to the context of visual art, the kinds of performance scores that have proliferated since the mid-twentieth century. I will argue that in painting, marking time and storing affect leads to SCORING experience, rather than devolving into SPECTACLE. The

5 Here I am using the term “pictures” in the sense that Douglas Crimp defined them. See Crimp, “Pictures,” *October* 8 (Spring 1979): 75–88.

6 “The Spectacle is *capital* accumulated to the point where it becomes image.” Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995), 25 (see para. 34).

fundamental question here concerns what kind of relationship may obtain between the procedures of painting, as an unregulated means of marking time, and the digital picture, as an ostensibly reified representation. In other words, how can closed, oppressive forms of accumulation (associated with the 1 percent) be opposed to a more open form of accumulation characterized by the personal selection or scoring of images?

My answer begins with the work of Jackson Pollock. Pollock's dripping and flinging of paint constitutes a particular type of accumulation by which mute sensation becomes articulate—even capable of capturing the unconscious, as various commentators and the artist himself proposed. In his classic drip paintings Pollock opened an aesthetic threshold between disorganized sensation and organized form. This precarious border zone required an allover field as its "life support"; consequently, it was extremely difficult to sustain. On the one hand, Pollock's automatic procedures could easily devolve into rote mechanization or as Clement Greenberg feared, debased decoration. On the other hand, the painstaking abandonment of hierarchy and reference in Pollock's skeins of marks would ultimately be eclipsed by the reemergence of a totemic (or even caricatural) mode of figuration crystallizing out of emergent compositional relationships in the allover field around 1951.⁷ In short, there was constant pressure on the open perceptual play of mid-century painting to become a picture. This is what T. J. Clark called, with regard to the publication of Pollock's works in *Vogue* in 1951, the "bad dream of modernism."⁸ And indeed, it is important to insist that this

7 For a discussion of the complex play of figuration in Pollock's work see T. J. Clark, "The Unhappy Consciousness," in *Farewell to An Idea: Episodes from History of Modernism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), chap. 7.

8 *Ibid.*, 306.

pressure to “become-a-picture” characterized the most important painterly styles after Pollock—namely, Pop and Neo-Expressionism. Here, the accumulation of marks is no longer located at the threshold between unregulated sensation and its registration in form. Rather, the mark has come to occupy the threshold between a painterly mark and a picture, defined by Pop and appropriation as a commodified image. Pollock was probably the last artist for whom the modern gestural mark retained its purchase on interiority—in terms of either the optical mechanics of vision or the psychoanalytic concept of the unconscious. Henceforth, the gestural mark is turned outward, captured in the dynamic of becoming-picture, as painterly passages condition and are conditioned by appropriated images in Robert Rauschenberg’s works of the mid-1950s.

It makes perfect sense that in the early twenty-first century, Cézanne’s doubt, which named the ontological aporia of painting as procedure for marking time, would become something else which might be called “Duchamp’s doubt” regarding the aporias of circulation rather than those of production and perception. The question has become, not where to deposit a quantum of paint on its support, but rather, where will the painting—or the image—go. How will it behave? Duchamp’s doubt begins when the work enters the world.

Scoring

This externalization of painting leads to an expansion of its definition from mark making on canvas to a kind of scoring in physical space. Indeed, a variety of strategies have emerged over the past several years to accomplish such an entry into the world. At least five formats may be identified for scoring painting’s circulation, each with roots in the history of

modernism: 1) Series or ensembles of works may eclipse the individual (unique) painting, as when R. H. Quaytman creates “chapters” of interrelated works rooted in a particular site-specific complex of themes, often drawn from a local archive. The chapters are typically installed in such a way that a spectator is drawn to move from panel to panel as opposed to lingering with any single work; 2) The delegation of mark making to various technological apparatuses,⁹ as when Wade Guyton “prints” his paintings with an ink-jet printer; 3) Painting is made performative as when Jutta Koether activates her canvases as interlocutors and puts them into dialogue not only with her own actions outside the canvas but also with historical figures like Nicolas Poussin, from whom her motifs are often derived; 4) Images are made to ebb and flow in and out of pictures as when Amy Sillman literally enlivens the process of painting through digital animations representing the sequential metamorphoses of an image; and 5) Painting is staged as a souvenir of life, or specifically that subset of life lived in the art world, as when Michael Krebber generates images from an ongoing art critical conversation, recently transposing the postings of a blog into the rhetoric of a mark.

In his theorization of the “intraface” (a kind of internal or distributed interface), Alexander R. Galloway offers a helpful paradigm for this eruption of external conditions into the traditionally well-bounded object of painting. He writes: “The intraface may [...] be defined as an internal interface between the edge and the center but one that is now entirely subsumed

9 In using the term “delegation” here I am referring to Claire Bishop’s work on delegated performance (where the artist assigns performative acts to others). See Claire Bishop, “Delegated Performance: Outsourcing Authenticity,” in *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012), 219–39.

and contained within the image. This [...] constitutes the zone of indecision.”¹⁰ As opposed to Pollock’s Abstract Expressionist all over, in the painting of the artists I’ve mentioned there is a bilateral migration from framing conditions to the center of an image and from the image back to the framing conditions. The intraface represents a different kind of “zone of indecision” from Cézanne’s doubt—one concerned with the painting’s entry into the world as an image in circulation. Rather than marking sensation, such painting exhibits a properly spatial anxiety characteristic of globalization and digitization, which are both deeply involved in questioning what is an edge and what is a center. A painting that exceeds itself begs a profound question: How can one delimit any *thing*—even that most ostensibly autonomous thing, a painting?

Speculation

In its colloquial sense, *speculation* is a future-oriented method of extracting profit from volatile markets. It is also a term with rich philosophical overtones, whose Latin roots encompass the meanings “to spy out, watch, examine, observe.” In other words, speculation is an optical model as well as an economic and philosophical one. For my purposes, what distinguishes speculation is its futurity. It is a type of vision indigenous to circulation in that it aims to foresee, even to regulate, how an artwork will behave once it enters the world. The painters I’ve discussed speculate in the sense that they incorporate gambits and formats of circulation within their works. Such speculation is the structure of Duchamp’s doubt, for it was Duchamp who, in the era of Futurism, invented something distinctly different: FUTURITY, or what finance people would call futures. Indeed, the readymade was

10 Alexander R. Galloway, *The Interface Effect* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), 40–41.

understood by him as a rendezvous that would take place at a moment to come. And of course his work speculated on a small lexicon of forms, such as the *bride* or the *bachelors*. Duchamp's doubt is a form of SPECULATION.

With that said, I will respond directly to the central issue broached by the conference for which this paper was written: "the question of painting's *specificity*, which has been historically tied to the notion of medium but is now ready to be reimagined and redefined." Here is my definition of modern painting's specificity: it marks, stores, scores, and speculates on time.