

OCTOBER

R. H. QUAYTMAN

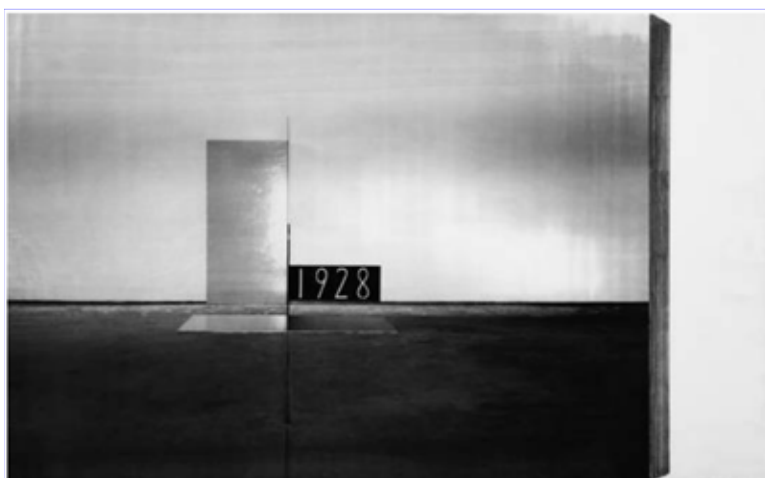
The work of plastic art does not express anything.
—Władysław Strzemiński (1893–1952)

Did early abstraction inadvertently indoctrinate us into modes of thinking and perceiving that now prevent the revolutionary experience they first provided?

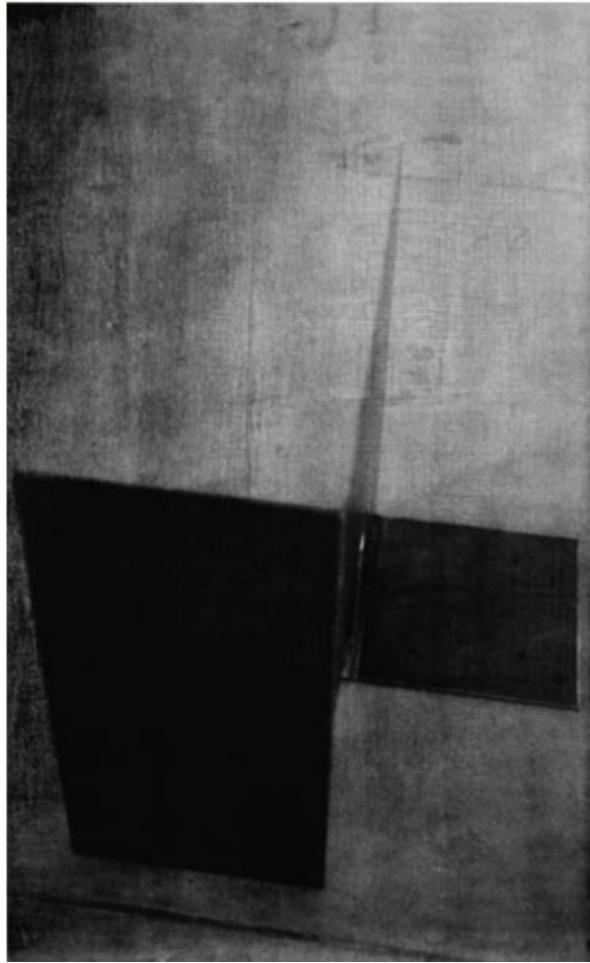
Is it possible to look and understand this evacuation of the subject and the temporal as if it were an archaic written language, the sound of which has been lost or perhaps was never even meant to be spoken?

How to inherit abstraction as a painter?

It is my belief, based on experience, that abstraction and especially early abstraction constituted a revolutionary break: it demanded and returned the gaze of monocular and binocular vision—of a heavy moving body contested, sometimes violently, in public spaces. On a few occasions, I've been able to see early abstraction in the way I intuit it was made to be seen. I can describe it only like this: as looking at a form whose expression is simultaneously forcefully directed to the viewer and obliquely towards its own problems/thoughts—communicating nothing but itself to you *or not*—in indifferent clarity and generous legibility. In short, the feeling of something alive and equivalent to life. This sensation of equivalence, as the works age, is harder to access. Paintings, like words, lose their origin and become, over time, emblems. I believe, like Mondrian, that the temporal is diagonal—and orthogonal. Wherever a diagonal or curvilinear shape appears in abstraction, its date appears with it. Mondrian's paintings, which I began reproducing in the late 1980s, resisted being straightened back onto the two-dimensional bounded plane of the experience he meant them to give. In order to even understand this resistance, I had to have the



R. H. Quaytman.
Łódź Poem (1928,
Spatial Composition
23.3 Parsecs Away)
Chapter 2. 2004.



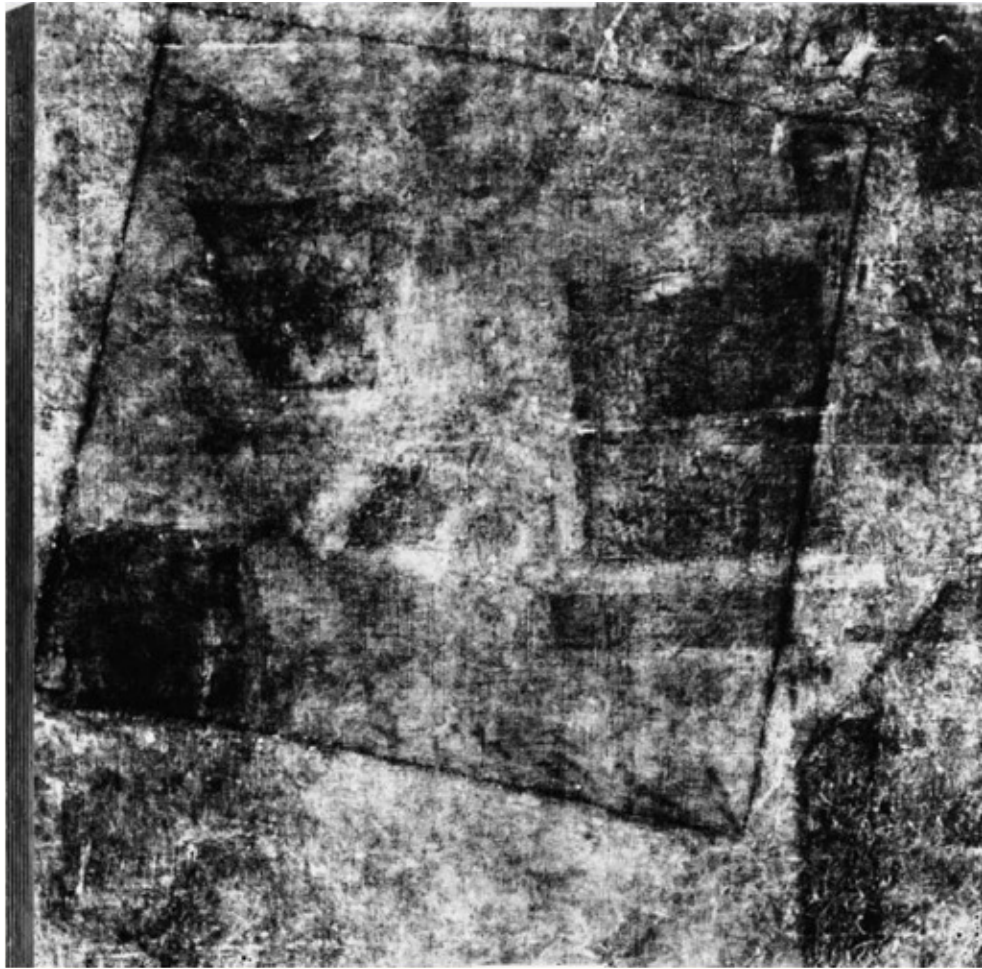
Quaytman. Constructivismes,
Chapter 13. 2008.

first experience described above of communicating nothing but itself. This is what I mean by the idea that through early abstraction I learned not to see it. To see it as it was meant, outside of time. I wish abstraction, in all its revolutionary anticipation, had figured out a non-reactionary way to reify its own longevity and that it could travel through time with its equivalency machine still ticking.

Katarzyna Kobro (1898–1951), who made one of the few works I believe is traveling through time intact, wrote a motto I live by: “I like to have fun by correcting what was not finished in any former artistic movement.”¹

While participating in Leah Dickerman’s think tank on early abstraction, we had the opportunity to visit the conservation laboratory at MoMA. While there, we

1. Katarzyna Kobro, *Katarzyna Kobro 1898–1951* (Leeds: Henry Moore Institute, 1999).



Quaytman. (White on White), Chapter 24. 2011.

were shown an X-ray of Malevich's 1918 *Suprematist Composition: White on White*. I was given permission by the museum to use the image of this X-ray, which I then silk-screened onto a wood panel with red and green inks. I also painted a trompe l'oeil edge in oil on the left side. One of the things I love about this image is that it not only depicts an abstract depth, it also reveals indecision and complexity—the amount of work that went into the painting of the painting before it arrived at its revolutionary conclusion.

"I have ripped through the blue lampshade of the constraints of color. I have come out in the white. Follow me, comrade aviators. Swim into the abyss. I have set up the semaphores of Suprematism."²

2. Kazimir Malevich, in "Non-Objective Art and Suprematism" (1919), *Art in Theory: 1900–2000* (Blackwell: Oxford, 2003), p. 292.

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