

GI symposium: Painting as a New Medium. David Batchelor

My relationship with painting is ambivalent. I use the term in its strict sense, which is that I am, I guess, motivated by entrapment, a simultaneous attraction to it, and repulsion from it. I used to paint and I haven't painted for a good fifteen years, more than that actually. I've never showed the painting in anger and I doubt if I ever will, but who knows. And yet at the same time, pretty much everything I do in the studio and I am a studio artist and I'm very interested in the subject of studio, what it means to work in a studio in what some people have described as the post-studio world of art, including from the 1970's people like Daniel Buren. So I work in a studio and my work in studios is certainly informed by painting. Even if my work is mainly three dimensional and some would call it sculpture, but I don't think I would. Painting still informs it more than anything else. I can't get away from painting entirely, at the same time I can't do it. And so probably you could describe all my work as failed painting. I thought I'd begin by noting the title of this conference, which is 'Painting as New Medium'. And I asked Francis who came up with that title. He said 'It was either me or Ross'. They don't seem to know. I'm not quite sure how to understand that phrase 'Painting as a New Medium', but the term medium it seems to me never far away from the question of painting. And I've often wondered whether we need the term medium any more and partly because obviously the term medium was so prominent in the discourse of our art from the last century. But also because in recent years you've had a lot of critics and artists talking about the idea of a post-medium practice. But if we're over Modernism, which is arguable, then maybe we're over the whole business of medium specificity or medium in general. We now make art in general rather than medium-specific art. I don't think one or another is true. When I ask the question about medium I always end up not knowing what my art would be, whether it's a necessary condition or not. And it seems a lot of the bigger thinkers who've dwelt on this subject, like Rosalind Krauss, for example, can't make up their mind either. In the 1970s she was writing about the idea of the 'Expanded Field' of sculpture and she talks quite specifically in certain essays about the medium being an outdated and unnecessary term for discussing art, and yet when we look at that vast new tome which the October bunch have published, *Art Since 1900*, in this round table discussion at the end of the book, she reasserts the necessity of the idea of medium, without which she says, you just have arbitrariness. Medium becomes the condition of rigour and developments in any art form. Which appals her colleagues, Hal Foster and so on. So, the problem when you talk about medium is that you get dragged back to talking about Clement Greenberg, and I don't want to do that. Ever. Not that I have any problem with Greenberg as a writer, what I have a problem with is that generations of art historians who continue to bang on about Modernism, nearly half a century after he stopped writing about it seems rather a curious thing to do. It seemed increasingly bizarre to me that bloody essay, *Modernist Painting* written back in 1961, has held sway hell sway in a way that it appears to have done, not least because while Greenberg and then later Michael Fried were writing about ideas of medium specificity, self-definition and even purity within their theory of art, at exactly that time, which is say the first half of the 1960s approximately, it seems to me that almost all the best artists were heading pretty much in the opposite direction.

While the theory of medium-specific purity is very fine and good, if you look out there, it seems to me that the practice of art when it was at its most dynamic and most

vivid was when it was doing exactly the opposite; when it wasn't refining and purifying medium, but on the contrary it was fucking it up, it was corrupting the medium, it was about making works which were extremely unrefined and extremely impure. They were very hybrid like works which on the one had I think, certainly threatened the idea of the medium of painting, but I think in another way also, where the condition for the continuation of the medium of painting by the process of contaminating it in a way. And the obvious example for me, just to get personal, is the work of Robert Rauschenberg. It seemed to me that Rauschenberg made wonderfully, deeply, problematically impure paintings. There were works which were paintings, but there were also works which were always corrupted by materials which have stood and remain outside the condition of painting. In this instance a bed but also photographs, text, pattern, design objects, fragments of, to use a Ross's term, the real life, the everyday world of New York city in the 1950s and 1960s. I think with the project if you like was wanting to see, maybe no what happens if I throw this stuff at the painting, does it stick? And if it sticks, what does that say about painting and art and where it can go and where it can't go. If it doesn't stick and what does that say? And I think that, that's what Rauschenberg was brilliant at. And the reason this is a personal incidentally is because Rauschenberg was my entry into the idea of being an artist and doing art. It was the first work I saw when I was a teenager which made me think that painting art could be like the best books and the best movies and the best records. It wasn't a remote and exclusive and a rather intellectual activity, it could be as funky as the rest of it. And it was seeing a Rauschenberg combine from the 1950's - and incidentally not in London at the time because in London at the time, there was nothing to see of recent and contemporary art at all. The Tate as was in Pimlico was just a dark brown place, as I remember it, with dark brown paintings in it. And it was actually going to Amsterdam, to the Stedelijk Museum in about 1974, there was a kind of revelation to me that art could look contemporary, modern, fast, funny, insolent. So that's why I start with Rauschenberg. It seems to me that Rauschenberg in a way does offer completely another way of thinking of the medium of painting than that being promoted by very loudly by the likes of Greenberg and Fried. I've got this which *Bed* which hangs obviously in MoMA in New York, from 1955, the one I saw in the Stedelijk was actually one called *Charlene* which was a very bright red object. And I remember it being very big and very bright red and it had a kind of flashing light in it, and I couldn't believe you could have art with a flashing light in it, well not a painting, of course, and I know more now than I knew then. When I saw the combine again it somehow seemed rather less red, rather less big and rather less insolent than when I was 17, but that happens. It looked rather classical in fact, but never mind, those moments are very important ones.

Now it's not just me who noticed that Rauschenberg was doing something different than that which was being espoused by Greenberg and Fried. There's a great, great, a very underrated essay by Leo Steinberg, one of the other New York critics at the time. It's actually finally published I think about 1970. It was clearly written or developed in the mid-1960s. It's the essay called 'Other Criteria', where he nominates, clearly he's obviously suggesting other criteria, that those of 'Friedberg' as Dan Flavin used to call them, for imagining and discussing the look, the project of art and painting in the 1960's. And it was Steinberg that came up with the idea of the 'flat-bed picture plane', the re-orientation of painting away from the vertical allusion to nature, towards the kind of table-top allusion to culture. And he talked about the value of Rauschenberg's paintings, among other things, very quickly, was that, as he put it, it

let the world back in again. The world seemed, as when John quoted Michael Fried earlier on, which seemed to have been impossible to deal through the medium of painting, as Fried said, painting excluded the world or maybe the world excluded the possibility of painting. And in Rauschenberg and other artists at the time, the world comes flooding back in. And I think in the process it both makes painting vivid and possible again, but it also threatens the existence of painting, there's no doubt about that. In a way I think that Rauschenberg is about testing painting as it was imagined at the time and testing it to and beyond its limits until it fell apart if you like, some of Rauschenberg works literally and fictively fall apart. Others don't, others in a way refreshed and renew it.

Incidentally there's recently been a big Rauschenberg Combines show in New York, I think it's come to Paris, it's really just work from about 1955 to about 1962 or so. Now I was quite apprehensive about going to see it. Because it meant so much to me in 1974 I was kind of frightened that if I go and see it now it might look it looked like it will look old fashioned and something that my grandfather had made, rather than something which still remained vivid in my cultural landscape. And I'm happy to report that actually it looked fantastic. They still look great, most of them at least, they still look insolent, vivid, rich, alarming at times. And the term that came to mind, it's a term I've used before, is it looked carnivalesque, and I mean carnival, I use the term carnival in the most specific sense, which it comes from the writer, the Russian writer Michael Bakhtin who wrote about the carnival, the idea of a medieval popular carnival as being a kind of a disruption of the civic order, but also a renewal of it. It takes the official culture and sticks two fingers up to it. It turns the world upside down, but in doing so, in disrupting the world, as he would put it, dethroning official culture, it also renews that culture in the process. And I think you could say also exactly that of what Rauschenberg combines do, they have a carnivalesque relationship with the history of painting. They throw shit at it, but it sort of comes up smelling of roses, it refreshes and renews it. And it also, of course, brings in the question of pleasure to art. The carnival is not imaginable without it being a pleasurable, chaotic immersion in a kind of vast popular party. It also brings in the relationship between high and low in culture. It's in a way, often the idea of kitsch, the under-valued, the popular being used to disrupt the received culture, the received pronunciation and so forth. I mean there's been various critiques of Bakhtin's work. Bakhtin saw the carnival as a possible idea of kind of revolution in culture while he was living in Stalinist Russia, which can't have been a very carnivalesque place at the time. But people have also argued against Bakhtin that carnival is a kind of revolution contained. You have a disruption, you have your Mardi Gras and you have your moment of carnival and then everything goes back to normal again, and it's a kind of release valve for an oppressed culture. I don't have a definitive stance on that position. Another term that Bakhtin introduced, which seems to me germane and appropriate to the work of Rauschenberg and others, really comes not from readings on Rabelais and the idea of the grotesque and carnival and so forth, not a medieval idea, but along the idea of his linguistic theory which this phrase he uses: heteroglossia. Which really means that language is not just one thing, it's not just received pronunciation. It's a whole range of types of speech acts, some of which are official, some of which are unofficial, some of which are officially sanctioned and some of which, like slang or swearing, is officially disapproved of. Any language always combines these diverse and divergent levels and if we deny that we really lose track about what languages is and that what makes a language live is this polyphonic

noise. And it seems to me that a Rauschenberg painting has that in it, has different levels of language, as it were, or different levels of visual language or visual culture thrown at it all at the same time, from high art quotations of Rubens or whatever, to very local, low grade every day popular culture; magazine images, cartoons, and such like. And it all lives there, richly and confusedly in the same place.

Now it's not just Rauschenberg although it's a very convenient model for me both for personal reasons and practical ones. I think there's a whole generation of artists in the early 1960s for whom, in different ways, the unofficial and unlicensed ways of going on became a means of continuing their practice. And this often came down to, not so much the imagery but to the materials that artists were using, particularly painters. And I think in those days, probably everyone was a painter, initially, when they went to art school and stumbled out often making other things. And even when I went to art school in the 70s, as far as I'm aware everyone began as a painter, and many people, myself included found themselves surprising themselves, realizing they weren't making paintings any more. They were building things rather than painting them.

What interests me a lot about the work in the 1960s is where they reinvented material practice of painting. What I had in mind, for example, was both the shaped canvases of Frank Stella but also the paints he used. Stella very famously said he wanted his paintings to look as good as they were in the can, the whole point is that he made paintings out of tins of paint rather than tubes of paint. It's industrial colour, it's commercial colour, it's not artists' colour. It seems that this whole generation of artists did as much as they could to get away from traditional materials of art or painting. So you have tins of copper paint or enamel or aluminium paint used by Stella but also by a number of other artists. [Warhol, *Marylin*] Warhol's fabulous body of work which is not mainly painting, well do you think of Warhol as a painter, I don't know, they're screenprints with some paint on them. But also Warhol's range of materials, you include, piss, diamond dust, silver, oxidation, and other were non-art, non-spectrum colours and materials. [Slide] A close up of the campest Donald Judd you'll ever seen, its copper with fluorescent pink plexi-glass, and unfortunately the slide gives nothing of the strangeness of the materials and the colour.

I started talking about medium, I moved into talking about materials, I'm doing that then in order to talk about colour. As we've been threatening to talk about all day. I think the, the value of these artists for me, and others - [Slide] a Judd Colour Chart, to remind me to talk about how, for these generations of artists and for many, many since, that the organisation of colour is not done according to the colour circles, to the traditional predicates of colour theory, but through occupying the commercially available systems of colourments in the colour chart. Which makes in a way, every colour you use a readymade. It's something you can go out and buy and apply rather than would mix up in the studio or something. And certain colour the way I think about is as a readymade. And a readymade of the everyday world of the city. And I think it's clearly the case for all these artists and many others that the subject of the work, whether they are a colourist, I think they are all colourist in one way or another. The subject of the work is not the colours of nature, but the colours of the modern urban environment. And maybe Fried was right that the world have become impossible for painting to represent in its traditional forms, because I think the

traditional forms of painting and what they were based on were calibrated to representing the effects of nature. And I think that for Rauschenberg, for Judd, for Stella it's about dealing with, if you like, the surfaces of the modern city more than anything else. And oil painting is not very good at doing that. Or at least I couldn't make it do that which is probably the more personal way of saying it.

[Slide]

A very early Dan Flavin. I saw these earlier works of Flavin from 1962 or so before his signature works using neon flashing lamps. I saw them when I was going round a private collection in New York. They are these two weird things, they are paintings, small 2 foot square boxy paintings with a light stuck inside. That seemed an extremely unlikely thing to do. And an extremely unlikely thing to make any sense, and yet somehow they kind of weirdly worked. This painting that didn't want to be a painting, but didn't know what else to be at the time. Art historians would call them transitional works. I think they're fantastic, strange, irregular, occasional pieces.

If your interest in a subject is surface of the modern city and the kind of colours it generates, the one thing one has to attend to is that area where most colour takes place which is through electricity, petro-chemicals and illumination. Just not too get stuck on the North Americans, I think John Latham, his early work from the late 1950s 1960s is fabulous example of the medium of painting corrupted, contaminated by books, by text, by other materials which seem always to stand outside the medium painting. And yet, I think they are some of the best paintings made in the UK at the time, far better than most English pop art for example.

Another artist I want to keep within this cluster is Eva Hesse, who we think of probably as a post-minimalist sculptor, but in a way her work seems to me to come fundamentally out of painting. And in a way what it does, is that it spills beyond the frame of painting, exceeds the frame and quite literally in some of the works their frames were hanging off the wall. Her later work is flexible, soft, formalist materials. But still for me, there's a great shot which I wish I'd brought with me of Hesse's studio with all these drooping, gloopy, objects all hanging off the wall. But if it's hanging off the wall then to me at least, it's still in the realm of painting at some level.

[Slide] I've got a few slides of Judd's materials to point out that sense that if you're interested in the surfaces and the experience of the modern city, and you're trying to represent it, you've got to, it seems to me - and these artists certainly felt they absolutely need to - deal with these colours and details head on, not by representing them through other means but by using those actual materials themselves, and that was to say plastics, metals, shiny surfaces, mirrors, reflective elements like that. Here's a few of Judd's materials from his own descriptions or titles of his work: orange pebbled plexi-glass and hot rolled steel; galvanised iron; black anodised aluminium and bronze plexi glass; red fluorescent plexi-glass and steel; stainless steel and amber plexi-glass; turquoise enamel on aluminium; hot rolled steel and turquoise enamel; Harley Davidson hi-fi red; 1958 Chevrolet Regal Turquoise. There's a fantastic rich list of colours and material. The point and the curious thing about them is that none of them are traditional spectrum colours. It's fluorescent, bronze, turquoise, Harley Davidson and so forth. For Flavin it was the kind of colours available through fluorescent light.

I wasn't aware of it but maybe why I'm a failed painter is because I couldn't make the work of painting match the vividness of the world that I was drawn to in the city I live in which is London. It's very dangerous, very, very dangerous I strongly advise against doing a talk where you start with Rauschenberg and Stella and Flavin and end up talking about yourself it's as if it's a lineage and really, really, really I wouldn't want to imply that. These are works, and I maybe I can bring it round the studio to this, that are a small group from a series of works called 'I Like Kings Cross and Kings Cross Loves Me' made about 1996-97. There's a small group in GoMA at the moment as part of the Art Council Collection. But these began as I was trying to make a post-Yves Klein vivid, brightly-coloured monochromes, and all I knew, I didn't know how to make them, but all I knew was I didn't want to sit on the wall in a conventional kind of way and I was trying to find a support for my shiny monochromes and I was making a one of a panelled plexi glass, painting on the back very shiny liquid almost surface when you flip it. And I was leaving them on to try and I stuck it on an old dolly in the studio and the weird thing was that this sheet of plexi-glass happened to be about the same size as the dollies and it looked like it fitted and it made me think of the possibility that that might be the support for these monochromes that I was trying to make: dollies, wheels, monochrome on wheels. I don't think that had been done before, but the point of saying that is not that, it is in a way to illustrate for me why the studio is such an important place, which is that it's a place where things come together that you hadn't anticipated or planned. It's where you can bring in a wide range of materials and see what happens when you throw them at each other. And in a way it's often the studio accident where the most important shifts occur and work, things that you couldn't or hadn't imagined or anticipated, happen, as it were, in your peripheral vision. And those are the things for me that in a way generate the next step of work. And once I realised that I was kind of working with this sort of relationship between colours and surfaces of the city, and then I realised very quickly that I was gonna have to look at things like illuminated colour because that's where so much of it takes place. [slide] This is a large tower of light boxes, again old commercial light boxes from shop signs; exit signs, shop signs, burger joints and so forth, which I just re-light with different bits of plexi-glass and vinyl, to generate in terms of colour tones a haphazard arrangement of transparent and opaque colours - in this case a sort of 15 metre tower on old Dexian shelving units. And then the most recent work I've shown is a chandelier I made for the Bloomberg space in London which was made up 450 used plastic containers, bottle containers, each one individually illuminated on 450 lengths of cable. But in a way again the point for me I suppose was where are the great colours of the city? They're in weird places, they're in supermarket shelves. They're on old streets like Brick Lane in London. They're not in the high valued areas of the city and that in a way, for me it's really only about asking that question and seeing what comes up as a possible answer. Going round the supermarket you see these fantastically bright coloured bottles. For some reason, they're either cleaning fluids, hair products or fizzy drinks. I don't know why but that's it - so when you go up to the checkout with a trolley full of cleaning fluids, hair products and fizzy drinks, you always feel like well someone thinks you've got a disorder, cleanliness issues or something. What I did first of all when I started looking at these bottles was simply get a few and bring it back to the studio to find out what you could do with it. I didn't know what I was gonna be able to do with it, and then I found if you stuck a light up its arse it kind of glowed a nice colour and

then that in turn led to various a few works and eventually to these chandelier type pieces. [Final slide] And I think always, always in any of the work make sure that the support – it's the old Modernist in me in some respects - that what makes the work work, be it a physical support or electrical support, is always visible to anyone viewing it. And one of the reasons for that is that they're always gonna be someone who sees a bright light in a darkened room and who will mistake it for a religious experience. In a way, the whole thing is if you can see the plug, then it stops you get mystical. I don't know why it is exactly but its very, very important thing to always, always keep your plugs visible, otherwise you end up like James Turrell.

(Clapping)

END OF TAPE