

Wandering Color: Arbitrariness, Disjunction, and Decoration in American Art of the  
Sixties

Paper presented at the College Art Association Conference  
February 1998

To be published by the Journal of the American Abstract Artists Association  
Spring 2000

## Wandering Color: Arbitrariness, Disjunction, and Decoration in American Art of the Sixties

Richard Kalina, Fordham University

Art and culture reflected each other in complex ways in the 1960's. That decade was, on the surface, a time of great confidence in America. Logic and order; planning, analysis and balance were traits high on the list of the country's values, both in art and the society at large. The United States was at the height of its power and prestige. The "best and the brightest" moved easily between corporations, universities and government; structuring production, mergers, research, social and economic problems, and war with an astounding self-confidence and distance. The same attitudes prevailed in art. The earlier preoccupation with expressionist soul-searching seemed to devolve into a tired second and third generation academy, and the new art turned instead to a hardened, unsentimental empiricism. The great moral virtue in America has been masculine self-reliance. Was it so strange then that Clement Greenberg's prescription for art, articulated most clearly in the sixties, should have been one of formal autonomy and self-determination?

The compelling aesthetic model was the late industrial one, where everything fit together coolly, sleekly, seamlessly. No flamboyant tail fins and tropical two-tone paint jobs, but the monochromatically aerodynamic and efficient; no messy downtowns or hodge-podge commercial districts, but "urban renewal" and rows of barely articulated glass office buildings. It was so modern: the big blue and beige IBM computers whirring away in their hushed air-conditioned rooms, astronauts stowed neatly in shiny silver capsules, and on our bed tables compact transistor radios with mysterious, inaccessible, and un-repairable parts. And in art, no messy junk sculpture or hysterical space frames, but open, unadorned grids, clean, machine-crafted boxes, softly humming industrial lighting fixtures, and arrays of precisely ordered, straight-from-the-factory, metal plates. No struggle-laden, when-do-we-know-when-the-painting-is-finished gestural excesses, but simple grids, slabs, stripes, shapes, and fields. No realism that said, in effect, "I'm really a beautifully nuanced abstract expressionist painting, but with subject matter;" instead, affectless, ironic presentations of the stunningly quotidian.

Or so it seemed. But the era was full of contradictions and portents: doubt was in the air. Sensuality and mystery, unraveling, arbitrariness and failure presented themselves as real possibilities. These things affected art, tugging at artists in different ways. So what was one to do? For the most part it was considered rather corny to make social statements in your art. Especially if they were heartfelt. And artists weren't necessarily on the outside either, since in the 60's it was beginning to be possible to make a living at art, to have a shot at the Bohemian end of the middle class. Still, artists were scarcely unaffected by events. How then did these contradictions present themselves in their art?

I think that one important area is color. It is an aspect of art that is maddeningly elusive, all the more so for being ostensibly rational. As we know, there is no shortage of color theory, and no color theory that seems to explain things adequately. At least in practice. In the logically ordered work of the Minimalists, the Colorfield painters, and the Pop Artists, color, I believe, often operated at cross purposes to structure, introducing a kind of open-ended irrationality, and disjunction, and generating in the process a decorativeness and beauty at odds with what might be considered a suitably tough-minded attitude.

As I said, the integrated aesthetic model governed much of the art making strategies of 60's art. There was little in the way of excess — that is, all of the elements in the work of art were subsumed into essentially one structure, and the work, to all intents and purposes, told one story. Think about the decorative arts. In an ornamented object the abstract ornament tells a different story than the object. The ornamentation painted on a Greek vase or incised into a Chinese pot, for example, has only a tenuous connection to the shape of that vase or pot, and virtually none to its use. These various narratives become mapped onto each other, but in doubled, hybrid, and misregistered ways. If we consider Frank Stella's early black, silver, and copper paintings in relation to the decorative forms they recall, we can see that in the Stellas there is no disjunction between the internal and external formats: a single narrative is being spun.

This pictorial unity lies at the heart of modernist ideas of beauty. Beauty with a capital B seemed to be too weak a binding agent for the modernist work of art. The Sublime on the other hand — in modernist art detached from the depiction of awe-inspiring subject matter and projected instead onto the transcendent self, lucid geometric orderings, scale, mystery, and of course the invocation and evocation of the primitive — seemed fit for the job. The work of art could certainly be called beautiful, but beauty wasn't striven for — that came after the fact, an acknowledgment, really, of the strength and completeness of the concept. But if we see Beauty as something detached from the work of art, as an element of excess, something mannered, something off, if we see it as syntactical, as separate an item as line or form, or color, -- if we see it as the Decorative -- then it might be useful to see when and how the work of the artists of the 60's fits in.

Again, I think color is the key here. In certain works I believe we can observe a pronounced (but I stress, not necessarily intended or acknowledged) discordance between formal structure and color structure, most often characterized by complex and arbitrary color grafted onto simplified armatures. Frank Stella is most interesting to look at in this regard. Stella's work through the 60's followed an arc which took it from the simplicity of the Black Paintings up through the complexity of the Protractor Series. Color moved from the basic and rationalized — largely monochrome or two color pairings or spectrum-like systems — to the shriller tones of the Moroccan pictures of 1964-65 and the Irregular Polygons of 1966, culminating in the riotously chromatic Protractors beginning in 1967.

Stella seemed to throw every possible color and saturation he could imagine -- from pale pastels to screaming fluorescents -- into the paintings. To quote Robert Rosenblum, Stella would "...embrace instead a chromatic vocabulary which always produces the sensuous shock of the unexpected — a piercing cerise, a burning orange, a brackish turquoise or, no less startling in these unpredictable chords, an inert, cardboard grey."<sup>1</sup>

As Stella went from systematic color to arbitrary color, the structure increased in complexity, the better to hold things together, to make for unity, to control the implicit sensuality. However, there was a most interesting lapse. The Protractor series was to have consisted of 93 paintings. There were to be thirty-one canvas formats, each executed in three manners: "interlaces", "rainbows," and "fans". It is the interlaces which we are most familiar with. The fans and rainbows are altogether more problematical. In them we find the same complex, arbitrary, and intuitive color, but the structure isn't up to containing them. They feel nervous and unresolved, spatially ambiguous, and probably a lot more decorative than Stella had in mind when he said, "My main interest has been to make what is popularly called decorative painting truly viable in unequivocal abstract terms. Decorative, that is, in a good sense, in the sense that it is applied to Matisse."<sup>2</sup> William Rubin in his 1970 monograph, while not exactly dismissing the rainbows and fans, pushed them politely but firmly off the main path, ostensibly for formal reasons, and Robert Rosenblum's monograph, published a year later, while lavishing great praise on the interlaces doesn't even mention the other two formats.

Looking at the work now, the interlaces seem boring -- too clever, and for all their ostensible energy, rather static. The fans and the rainbows, on the other hand, are strange and unsettling. The color feels sweeter, nastier, and more discordant. It seems to work against the form, pushing the edges, deforming them, wanting to get out. These paintings also connect more to the general culture. They bring to mind, both in their color and their forms, the clothes and the psychedelic paraphernalia one saw nearly everywhere.

Kenneth Noland is another interesting case. His compositions of the earlier 60's, while bold, were always tasteful: the shapes were simple and the colors well-modulated and reasonably few in number. But around the time that Stella was producing his Protractor series, Noland began a series of striped paintings which imposed upon a simple horizontal rectangular format a wild profusion of color. These paintings seem torn between a desire for order and simplicity and an urge just to let go and make the most luxuriant and beautiful object possible. (As an aside, their strong decorative quality -- a component of which is the ability of the part to function as a stand-in for the whole -- was evidenced by an interesting use one of the paintings was put to. An image of *Via Blues* wrapped around and formed the cover of Barbara Rose's 1969 *American Painting. The Twentieth Century*. The visible portion of the painting activated the book's spine beautifully: it stood out on anybody's bookshelf.) But as good as these paintings were, Noland obviously felt that he should move on. He began to make the striped paintings more decorous and less decorative by limiting the colors and restricting chromatic

variation to the top and bottom edges, and followed that with a series of not particularly inspired plaid paintings. Noland's work after this tended towards simplified palettes often balanced against mildly eccentric formats, and never again, in my opinion, achieved the freedom and verve of the stripe series.

Another Colorfield painter whose work demonstrates similar tensions was Morris Louis. I am thinking of his striped paintings — his last important series. These tall, thin paintings have always seemed the most difficult, psychological, and in many ways, the most intriguing of his works. By squeezing multiple color into minimally softened bands, he abandoned the complexity and luminosity of the Veils, and the loose, springiness of the Unfurleds. They seem like straightened — in both senses of the word— versions of the human form, simultaneously upside down and right side up; trying to please, but also remote and withholding.

In the 1960's, before it took on its role as an often ironic signifier for high modernism, the stripe seemed to demand chromatic excess as a compensation for its intrinsic lack of formal interest. Gene Davis was a Colorfield artist who consistently pushed the boundaries, creating pulsating, almost stroboscopic fields of equal-sized vertical bands. They are harsh paintings, uneasily balancing the rigidly regimented and open-endedly intuitive. At a time when Albers' carefully modulated color investigations were still much on people's minds, these paintings raised the question: can you be a proper "color" painter if you use color willy-nilly? Through an act of aesthetic will power you could bring together three or four colors into perfect harmony, but thirty or forty? How could you fail? Or more to the point, how could you succeed?

If failure was, in a way, structurally imposed on work like Davis', what about Andy Warhol? The inability to get it right, to come up with the perfectly integrated, non-arbitrary painting is part of Warhol's aesthetic of variation and interchangeability. In the 60's it was explored in four ways: by varying the image, the number of images, the painting's format, and its color. These versions all pointed towards a kind of anarchic ambiguity and emotional leveling. With color, however, these manipulations went beyond the largely formal aspects of the other variables. Warhol's use of color represents the most blatant aestheticizing of the political, historical, and social, as well as the campiest and often the cruelest approach to his subject matter. Ostensibly to see an electric chair, a fatal car crash, or the aftermath of a political assassination as a neutral vehicle for the presentation of pastel color swatches is to deal with death at a distance that cannot be maintained: the membrane of metaphor must be pierced, the horror confronted in equal proportion to its desire to be avoided. The decorative, evidenced by repetition, symmetry, and most of all color, has become a scrim, a veil of insouciance and arbitrariness gingerly placed over highly charged subject matter.

Looking at Minimalism, seemingly the exemplar of the perfectly consolidated form, we can see that color has been the wedge which has forced both referential content and decorative lushness into works of art that ostensibly resisted it, particularly in the

sculpture of Donald Judd and Dan Flavin. This tendency, which started in the 60's, only grew more evident as time passed. Judd, for example, would take simple box forms in, say, a rich yellow brass and insert liners and panels of lusciously colored translucent plexiglass, creating a disjuncture which yielded both pleasure and surprise. Flavin used color, cast by simple arrangements of ordinary commercial fluorescent lighting fixtures in ways that shade his work with mystery, interconnection, and an eerie, immaterial loveliness. In an early work, *Primary Picture* from 1964, red, yellow, and blue bulbs are placed in a simple rectangular configuration, but one which generates the most subtle, complex, and gentle chromatic effects. In later sculptures, like the corner piece, *untitled (in honor of Leo at the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his gallery)*, an eight foot grid of red, pink, yellow, blue and green fixtures, facing both back and front, simultaneously dematerializes the physical architecture of the corner, and activates its space with a ravishing peachy glow. The color in a Flavin exhibition often mixes from one piece to another, dissolving boundaries, creating a sense of mingling and connection. He also uses color in starkly emotional ways, as in the blood red of the corner-mounted *monument 4 those who have been killed in ambush (to P.K. who reminded me about death)* from 1966. Flavin always resisted mystical or literary interpretations of his work, but in pieces like this, it becomes inescapable, and it seems to me that the work is all the more emotionally revealing for its ostensible avoidance of feeling.

These examples are only a very few of the many available, but I think they speak to the issue. For art to address the culture, particularly the contradictions in that culture, it must in some way embody them, and American art in the 60's did that admirably. When we talk of the artist's diminished control of the meaning of the work, it is tempting to see it as a function of multiple interpretive modes, of a kind of concatenation of exegesis. Might it not also be a result of the embedding of the art object and the artist in an unresolved cultural matrix? We tend to see our own cultural attitudes as transparent, our ideologies as self-evident. It is hard for us to accept that we, intelligent and aware as we are, are in the grip of forces rife with paradox and incongruity; that we don't really know what we're doing, but we're doing it anyway. Were the artists of the 60's on to the telling things they were accomplishing with color? Probably not. But as we know, intention often has unintended consequences.

1. Robert Rosenblum, *Frank Stella*. Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1971, p. 45.

2. William Rubin, *Frank Stella*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1970, p. 149. From conversations with Rubin, June and September, 1969.