

## The Ambiguity of Freedom: Three Painters Discuss Abstraction Now

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**Richard Kallman:** We can start with the question, how does the new abstraction relate to formalism?

**David Row:** Formalism suggests a closed system, but I'm not interested in a formalism that's about refinement or an assumed purity. What's formal now can be more disruptive, more unpredictable than it was previously.

**James Hyde:** But why should this disruptiveness be worked out through painting? Why not through something else?

**RK:** I think it's because people really aren't looking hard at painting now. It's an undercharged medium, a depleted medium. Its gravitational field, so to speak, has been weakened, and the hold on its internal parts has been lessened. A painting used to have a logical and consistent set of meanings, but in our situation meaning tends to attach itself very lightly to the work. Device, which used to be firmly embedded in pictorial structure, has been, almost by default, set free. It can separate itself out and move around. It can refer to its original function, and yet not be bound by it. The layers are opening up.

**DR:** That keeps it from being an end in itself. At this point, device or motif implies signature, with all its baggage of authority and authenticity. In the past, the idea that directness in itself carries meaning provided a kind of freedom. Now there's interchangeability, temporality, and removal. It's more matter of fact. But it's also more ambiguous.

**JH:** And perverse. The situation now is that the vitality of painting must be related to its dying. A hundred years ago painting was revered as the main discourse of this culture's visuality. Nothing else had its breadth or focus. But now there are many media that are capable of housing our most urgent discussions. The importance of painting has diminished. As a painter, the irresistible issues are what is to be amputated and what ghosts are to be called out; in other words, what is necessary simply to go on.

**RK:** We don't have much of a choice, do we? There's been a closure, and we have to understand what it means to be outside of it. It certainly implies distance and a degree of loss. And right there you've got the possibility for cynicism, or even worse, nostalgia. But you're right, there's also a degree of freedom in the situation.

**JH:** Another question I have to ask is, are we making art about art?

**RK:** No, we're making art about art about art.

**DR:** Like Duchamp squared. In this context all actions take on a self-conscious, provisional nature. This makes for a kind of false rigor. If there's a discipline, it is in the resistance to anything programmatic or formulaic, because rules and programs cannot be followed past a certain point. There's a kind of open-endedness and illogicality here, a sense that you can't quite grasp exactly what the program is, since the program is always violating the new sense of what it should be.

**RK:** We're talking about limitations, but

not limitations leading to an ideal, toward any kind of purity. It's the creation of limits in order to help construct a new visual grammar.

**DR:** My feeling is that limitations are necessary to allow the semantic relationship of the parts to be readable. But we should keep in mind that even with strict limits, we're still involved in a synthetic process where the parts are never subsumed by the implied whole. We are so historically self-conscious, both as viewers and as artists, that we can never experience that totality.

**JH:** Maybe we can't experience totality because we don't need it. One thing we seem to have in common is a detailed interest in the gaps between things. How things are constructed and how those things speak of their making continually fascinates us. Imagine a language which is

distinct from the logical patterns of other languages, but which gains coherence in part from its disjunctive relation with these other languages. I am thinking of something that operates in a viral manner, something that disorients

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and disturbs other languages of vision.

**RK:** This is the difference between accent, dialect, and new language. I think that we're now somewhere at the point between developing a dialect and a new language.

**JH:** It's a sort of *patos* which speaks of a "sign-ness of signs," rather than the thing-ness of things. *Patos* is essentially hopeful because there's change and a reorientation both in terms of vocabulary and in terms of rhetoric.

**DR:** But it's a shifty business. You have to risk losing something in order to gain something else. And then there is the risk of not communicating at all.

**RK:** At the same time, there's a certain allure to this work. It has a bleak sensuality to it. And we need that whiff of death, don't we? We need a little desperation. We need the sense that it's all coming apart. Otherwise how can we summon the energy to put it back together again?

**DR:** The fact that there are remnants of a public domain for painting gives us a starting point. In spite of the lack of cultural consensus, in spite of rampant subjectivity, people have an unfulfilled desire for completion and meaning. That is something the work can draw on in unexpected, non-didactic ways.

**JH:** It's amazing how meaning gets attached to anything placed on the wall. I think what's happening is that by insisting on the objectiveness of the painting, by insisting on its material, on the surface, on the edge, on its technique, on the gamut of technical operations that we run on a painting—by insisting on its concreteness, we are also setting up the conditions by which it slips away from its concreteness, where it becomes abstract. And I think that's the interesting thing about this work being abstract work—it can flee from meaning. And I think this ultimately sets up a kind of dialogue between that which is known, that which is understandable, and that which is misunderstood and incomprehensible.