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Stout's doubt

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Abstract

This article looks at the American painter Myron Stout (1908–1987) in relation to arguments made in the early to mid-1960s around abstract art, as well as later historical re-evaluations of Minimalism. Using ‘doubt’ as explored by both Richard Shiff and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, I propose a re-reading of an artist who has been historically and aesthetically displaced. In the end I argue for a productive understanding of temporal resistances.

Keywords

Myron Stout

doubt

modernism

minimalism

geometric painting

Merleau-Ponty

abstract painting

postcolonialism

The photograph – in black and white – shows a carpeted gallery (Figure 1). In the foreground two small, modern sofas face each other across a low glass table. On the table is an elegant arrangement of white tulips. The paintings and drawings on the walls are also small, and spaced out in a deliberate rhythm. Some are alone, some in pairs, some in close relation. Larger works punctuate smaller ones. It is ordered and there is space. Aside from the furniture, there is little to distract you from the experience of standing and looking at paintings and drawings. It is a sensitive and well-considered picture gallery.

Where is this room? When? In fact, it is 1980 and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City. The exhibition is a retrospective of the American painter Myron Stout. But where is the Whitney's (then) unmistakable cast concrete ceiling? Its absence is only a part of the reason this exhibition looks as though it could have been any time from 1920 forward. Look at another photograph, dated 1969. This one shows the museum's distinctive setting and it looks like a completely different place. The room is the scale of a warehouse. The floor is stone, the ceilings high and the light low. In the foreground, parallel rows of cast metal on the floor, flakes and dribbles remain around the work as though the artist had just made it. The walls are mostly unused; the floor is where things are happening. There is a different order here from that in Stout's room: art occupies volumetric rather than linear space. We might say it refers to whole bodies, whereas the Stout show is aimed at the head and the eyes. One show signifies the space of work, the other a living room. Effort versus leisure. Hand versus head.

The second photograph is of Whitney's landmark exhibition, 'Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials', and the works installed in this room are by Richard Serra, Eva Hesse, Carl Andre, Robert Loeb, Rafael Ferrer and Keith Sonnier (Figure 2). This exhibition is widely seen as indicating a shift in attitude to materials and forms of art that occurred in the 1960s, the institutional recognition of a range of moves artists made during that decade against conventional art practices, later organized under terms such as 'the anti-aesthetic', 'postmodernism' and 'post-medium'. This decade is one of the topics of this essay, and the fact that Stout's 1980 show looks as though 1969 never happened is an underlying concern in what it will explore. The comparison does a few things: it maps two ways of thinking about art and it places them in an unexpected chronological order. I'm interested, too, in how the exhibitions suggest great differences, but also in how they start to frame a story where Stout's work is both close to and far away from what was shown in *Anti-Illusion*.

Myron Stout (1908–1987) was a painter who produced a body of mostly abstract work, paintings in oil, charcoal drawings, small graphite drawings, and landscape drawings in conté or pencil. His work was steeped in the ideas of subjective expression and pictorial space explored by artists in New York in the 1940s and 1950s, especially the Abstract Expressionist painters who count as his milieu, both socially and chronologically. His 'becoming modern' dates from the artist who taught him in his last year of university in North Texas, the abstract painter and one-time student of Josef Albers, Karl Gasslander; a few years later Stout spent a summer at the Academia San Carlos in Mexico City, the hotbed of the Mexican mural scene,

studying under cubist painter Carlos Mérida. In New York in the late 1930s, Stout got a Masters in Art Education at Columbia University, absorbing there not only the intellectual climate set by John Dewey but also the emphasis on non-academic compositional techniques innovated at the turn of the century by printmaker Arthur Wesley Dow. After World War II, Stout, like many, went back into education, and back in New York in 1946 he gravitated towards the German émigré Hans Hofmann but, as he put it, he wanted to ‘work through’ Piet Mondrian.

Stout was part of the New York art world but is little known outside that context, and so when his 1980 retrospective took place the lack of his renown had to be explained with the term ‘underknown’.¹ In present-day art criticism, Stout is cited in relation to younger artists working abstractly or compared to artists working as mavericks of one type or another, and what this inadvertently creates is a critical understanding disconnected with the historical frameworks that once supported Stout’s work. This wasn’t always the case. It was sometime in the 1970s that his work stopped appearing in thematic or historical exhibitions (in other words as contemporary art) and started to be considered in other modes: in monographic exhibitions, exhibitions of private or museum collections, and, notably, in exhibitions curated by artists.² What is most striking in the shift is that the historical paradigms Stout ascribed to (and sometimes fought against) – ideas about modern art as a calling, that abstraction was the necessary mode for making art in the twentieth century, or that art was and ought to be difficult – ceded to other ones that would have seemed limiting and somewhat alien to him. What interests me though is what such shifts reveal about art history’s (art

criticism's?) occlusions as well as its recuperative strategies: Stout becomes an artist who in part can only represent himself or the interests – tastes? – of individuals. Not fitting the historical paradigm, he becomes a figure of singularity: an 'outsider', an 'artist's artist' or a 'visionary'. And his work – how it is understood and how it is seen to contribute to art in general (and this last was of prime importance for him) – is delicate, difficult and elusive. These, I think, are the messages in the Whitney's retrospective. There Stout is placed out of historical time and into paradigms of singularity and timelessness, and away from the urgency of his aesthetic and social engagements. The extent to which *this* is 'modernist' depends on your point of view.

The work of this article is to weave Stout and his work back into the narratives that concern and concerned him. It focuses on discussions in New York in the late 1950s and early 1960s around alternatives to expressionist art, and the polemics both then and later around Minimalism. It takes account of an exhibition that never took place, and Stout's withdrawal – around the same time – from actively exhibiting his work. I'm calling this Stout's Doubt in reference to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's essay about the withdrawals and misalignments of the painter Paul Cézanne. By Stout's Doubt I mean his own doubt as well as doubts cast upon him, and the doubtfulness of the understanding of his work we have inherited. As Merleau-Ponty did with Cézanne, and as Richard Shiff has done more recently in his book *Doubt* (2007), I mean to explore doubt next to paradigms of certainty that structure historical writing. I'm trying to develop a better understanding of rejection and refusal (stronger versions of doubt) and one that resists the competitive model that still, astonishingly, drives the historical imaginary.

In the early 1960s, Stout was in his fifties and living all year round in Provincetown, the summer art colony on the tip of Cape Cod. He was represented at the time by one of the most dynamic gallerists working in New York, Richard Bellamy, who had recently opened his Green Gallery and was developing a reputation for his 'eye' for contemporary art (Stein 2014, 2016). The late 1950s had been good years. His work was included in Whitney Annuals, and Carnegie International, the Museum of Modern Art, had acquired the painting, *Number 3, 1954* (cover image) and he was being written about in art magazines such as *Art in America*. In '61 Bellamy and Stout started to plan a one-person exhibition for March or April of 1962. There are two accounts of this show that never happened in Bellamy's archive, now at the Museum of Modern Art; otherwise we would only know that in that month the Green Gallery held a group show that included one Stout painting alongside works by Burgoyne Diller, Peter Agostini, Philip Pavia, John Chamberlain, Franz Kline, James Rosenquist, Milet Andrejevic, Mark di Suvero, Ronald Bladen, Neil Williams, Julius Hatofsky and Tony Magar. But in 1961 the plans were ambitious. This would have been Stout's first one-person show in New York since 1957 when he had one at the Hansa Gallery (notably an artist-run gallery, latterly managed by Bellamy before he started the Green Gallery). The plans outlined in a long letter Stout wrote Bellamy in March 1961 inventories almost all of his available work as well as describing works recently begun that could be completed in the forthcoming year. At the end of the letter, Stout proposed doing a show entirely of drawings, about twenty to 25 of them, all of which would be new. Against expectations that a painter would show paintings he pressed the point that the drawings 'stand up, on

their own, as complete expressions and are not dependent on the paintings for their esthetic value'. He also liked their intimacy. He explained it this way:

In spite of the single medium, the single style, the exactly similar format of each to the other, I believe that a whole show of them will reveal a great variety of expressive aspects. I can show myself so to speak, in the drawings, to an even more complete degree than in the paintings. (Richard Bellamy Papers, Museum of Modern Art)

In a move to build on the consistency of showing one medium Stout also proposed an idea for their installation, suggesting the gallery be divided into smaller spaces, even at his own expense. He wrote that he didn't want them to be hung sequentially on the 'flat continuity of the wall space' in the relatively large gallery. The drawings could be grouped and visitors compelled to look at them closely.

The second document, also in Bellamy's papers, is undated but certainly later. It lists paintings, charcoals and drawings and names of collectors and institutions that might acquire them. In the interim, plans for the show had returned to including a mixture of works. What occurred between planning a novel installation of drawings, a more conventional show, and then withdrawing altogether? The documents read together suggest a reason nestled in between the lists, plans and declarations: simply too many works were unfinished. The drawings he planned are difficult to track, but from the second list we know that, of the eight paintings listed, four (*Hierophant*, *Aegis*,

Leto II, Untitled [Wind Borne Egg] [Figure 3] and *Apollo*) were unfinished at Stout's death in 1987, 25 years later. Two (*Demeter* and *Untitled*) he did not finish until 1968. And the final one, an untitled work, he finished in 1970. Out of this event and what followed emerges a picture of overwhelming slowness in making art and a monumental hesitancy around completing it. Stout's 'slowness' would become a theme in the 1970s and after,³ but here we should see it as a change from a more ordinary pace of producing work to a serious dry spell. Others have thematized this eloquently within his painting. Henry Geldzahler, for example, wrote:

The power of his paintings lies in their hovering quality of irresolution (without exactly fixed boundaries) within resolution, their power first to disturb and then to soar and remain aloft in our imagination. Their staying power, once grasped, is their most remarkable quality. (Geldzahler 1990: 7)

But there is another, social and critical story to tell that speaks to the conditioning of wider rejections of such ideas. As is well known, the Green Gallery was an important place for exhibitions that are now canonical to the history of Minimalism (namely shows of Robert Morris, Dan Flavin and Donald Judd from 1963 onwards). The revelation of Stout thinking, in the early 1960s, of a group of drawings being exhibited in a kind of installation at that gallery provides us with a compelling point of entry to its early history. Whilst neither Stout nor the Minimalist artists were alone in thinking in this way – Allan Kaprow, Red Grooms and others had been making installations and

environments for a few years already – it's important to account for how intertwined the ideas being discussed at this time were. Building Stout back into this history helps foreground the way it has been dominated by narratives of rupture and assertions of particular differences, which then come to stand for more. The timing of Stout's cancelled show, it turns out, is precisely where and when understandings of his work start to conflict with arguments being made about other reasons for making art. Stout's doubt is set here against certain certainties asserted then and later, in artworks and in critical readings of them. I am not alone in remarking on how arguments made on Minimalism's behalf are extremely powerful, and how they are taken to hold implications beyond the artists and artworks associated with the movement (notable ones are Chave 1991, 2000; Best 2006). Hal Foster's writings, for example, often return to Minimalism as the first movement to coherently and categorically reject idealism, making it art's inauguration of postmodernism. In his book, *The Return of the Real*, Foster writes:

Although the experiential surprise of minimalism is difficult to recapture, its conceptual provocation remains, for minimalism breaks with the transcendental space of most modernist art (if not with the immanent space of the dadaist readymade or the constructivist relief). Not only does minimalism reject the anthropomorphic bases of most traditional sculpture (still residual in the gestures of abstract-expressionist work), but it also refuses the siteless realm of most abstract sculpture. In short, minimalist sculpture no longer stands apart, on a pedestal

or as pure art, but is repositioned among objects and redefined in terms of place. In this transformation the viewer, refused the safe, sovereign space of formalist art, is cast back to the here and now; and rather than scan the surface of a work for a topographical mapping of the properties of its medium, he or she is prompted to explore the perceptual consequences of a particular intervention in a given site. This is the fundamental reorientation that minimalism inaugurates. (Foster 1996: 36–38)

Foster's argument marks Minimalism by means of its various 'breaks' with modernist or formalist art. His distinctions could easily be deployed for a reading of the two exhibitions this article started with, as a 'before' ('transcendental' or 'siteless' space, and the apparent 'abstractions' of time and viewership) and 'after' ('repositioned among objects and redefined in terms of place'). Foster's critical method claims to be a 'radical rereading' of the 1960s, an incision into root polemics rather than a general account of its history. He argued then as he does now that it is a battle between art with a radical-political agenda and whatever else normalizes and socializes art. In his most recent book, *Bad New Days*, Foster defends this exclusionary method. He writes

Put more strongly, they [his organising terms: abject, mimetic, archival, post-critical and precarious] suggest that, even if art is not driven toward any teleological goal, it still develops by way of progressive debate, and this means – why not say it? – that

there is art that is more (and less) salient, more (and less) significant, more (and less) advanced. (Foster 2015: 2)

Incisive as he may be in its allegiance to tracking an avant-garde position, or to keeping one alive, such an argument is a type of sleight of hand. Anti-aesthetic gestures made by particular artists in the 1960s are generalized into transhistorical phenomenon; selected examples stand for larger wholes, and those wholes are fixed back to those particular examples. Richard Shiff critiques this type of thinking in his book *Doubt* (2007), which traces similar paradigms in a similar period. He writes (specifically criticizing Rosalind Krauss):

...a differential or critical term loses its efficacy when regarded as an absolute that 'always' applies, that is, when we designate it as the correct term under all conditions rather than the more beneficial term under specified conditions. With absolute identity, ideological assertion substitutes for critical analysis. (Shiff 2007: 22)

Exploring doubt further (this time writing about Willem de Kooning), Shiff writes that 'Ideology can disguise chance as an 'underlying cause' or an "internal logic"' (2007: 43). He argues this is particularly acute in relation to critics and artists, and the considerably complex and interwoven debates and understandings of art and ideas as they may happen at the time. The debates over what was at stake for an artist like Myron Stout were much more than

we're led to believe by the metaphors of Minimalism's foreclosures, and they were arguably just as polemical. A different form of radical reading of the early 1960s, one informed by feminist and postcolonial concepts of 'reading otherwise', finds an artist such as Stout implicated and even present in (albeit occluded by) Minimalism's canonical texts.⁴ This is, of course, to suggest how to find any number of voices in what come to sound like univocal ones.

Research by art historian James Meyer has revealed that 'Questions to Stella and Judd', the interview so central to critical readings of Minimalism, was in part a comment on the exhibition, 'The Classic Spirit in Twentieth Century Art from Brancusi & Mondrian to Art Today', held at the Sidney Janis Gallery in 1964, a show that included Stout as well as Frank Stella (but not Donald Judd) (Meyer 2001: 87–93). This fact contextualizes what appears otherwise in the interview as a generalized critique of 'European' and 'geometric' painting. 'Questions to Stella and Judd' was aired originally as a radio interview on the left-leaning New York station WBAI, in February, 1964. In conversation with critic Bruce Glaser, Judd and Stella (and Dan Flavin too, although he chose to be edited out) explain the differences between their work and art it might resemble. The interview is the source of Stella's quips 'I wanted to get the paint out of the can and on to the canvas' and 'what you see is what you see', and Judd's, 'I'm totally uninterested in European art and I think it's all over with'. The opening question of the radio interview – edited out of subsequent versions, explains Meyer – refers directly to the Janis show. Re-reading the interview in this light, Glaser's first question in later versions ('There are characteristics in your work that bring to mind styles from the early part of this century...') orients the whole interview towards Stella and Judd

defending themselves in relation to the 'old geometric artists' in the Janis show. An example cited widely is Stella's assertion:

I always get into arguments with people who want to retain the old values in painting – the humanistic values they always find on the canvas. If you pin them down, they always end up asserting that there is something there besides the paint on the canvas. My painting is based on the fact that only what can be seen there *is* there. (Battcock 1968: 157–58, original emphasis)

But there were other things in play. Judd reviewed 'The Classic Spirit' for *Arts Magazine* as did Michael Fried for *Art International*. Fried took issue with the show's broad view of abstraction, taking special umbrage with the use of the term purism:

purism is, in its deepest aspirations, profoundly a-historical. It aims at a kind of metaphysical validity, and proceeds as if on the assumption that by somehow distilling art down to its basic essence one can arrive finally at whatever it is that gives art the power to exist sub specie aeternitatis... In contrast to this, Stella's paintings, like Barnett Newman's, are historically self-aware. They both arise out of and demonstrate a personal interpretation of the particular historical situation in which 'advanced' painting first found itself in the late fifties. (Fried 1964: 59)

Meyer, notably, performs an elision when he writes retrospectively that Fried 'demolishes the ahistoricity [*sic*] of the show' (Meyer 2001: 286, note 58).

More precisely, Fried criticizes the term purism.

'Questions to Stella and Judd' is used by many to make Minimalism the end of the conversation about content in abstract art, but the ground on which the artists' argument was being made, widespread and somewhat urgent then, was how to get away from expressionism. This is why Stella's focus on 'what can be seen' does not include 'explor[ing] painterly detail'. Opposing Abstract Expressionism and its reliance on free gesturing and 'metaphysics' was at stake. By then it was widely dismissed by artists as not art at all but an empty performance of art. When Stella wanted people to see the work all at once, it was a reminder to attend to the work, not the claims made for it.

'The Classic Spirit' exhibition was itself an attempt to find a history to shore up artists who were reducing their means of expression and reorienting themselves to being 'objective'. In his short catalogue essay, Janis drew both connections and differences between older 'classic and purist' work and 'retinal' concerns of the younger artists. The exhibition was organized chronologically into 'pioneers', 'middle-generation', and 'younger artists'; Stout and Stella were both 'younger' even though one was 56 and the other 28 years old. 'Retinal' refers to op art, which was being accounted for in these years. (Ann Reynolds has argued that the conversation about op was ended by the exhibition 'The Responsive Eye', which took place at the Museum of Modern Art in 1965, a point that bears consideration when evaluating

exhibition histories [2003, Chapter 1].) The show's historicizing might be considered conservative, but Janis cannot be altogether dismissed as a dealer trying to establish a provenance or a history for new painting; he had been instrumental in the organization of 'First Papers of Surrealism' in 1942, the show featuring Marcel Duchamp's notorious 'mile of string'. And in 1962 his was the first gallery in New York to do an exhibition of pop art, 'The New Realists'. Meyer's discovery of 'The Classic Spirit' as a reference for 'Questions to Stella and Judd', I'd argue, allows us to reread some of Stella's comments as clear desires to control his historical influences provoked by other artists included in the exhibition. For example, in response to a prod in the interview about the Hungarian painter Victor Vasarely, Stella said: '. . . it still doesn't have anything to do with my painting. I find all that European geometric painting – sort of post-Max Bill school – a kind of curiosity – very dreary' (Battcock 1968: 149).⁵ And what was the work by Stella in the show? The catalogue describes it as six one-foot square 'sketches' from 1961. Stout was represented by a single painting, *Untitled No. 1*, 1956, 28inch × 24inch in size.

We might need reminding of what happens when statements like the one Stella made about Bill and Vasarely are transformed into signifiers of 'breaks'. Meyer, for example, attends to the chauvinism (or localism) Stella and Judd expressed in the interview. Then he adds, shifting the point from their ignorance to the articulation of differences that we know are crucial to how things develop: 'but then, minimal practice might not have arisen but for such blindness' (Meyer 2001: 88). Here, as elsewhere, the concept of a breakthrough via a generative misreading is re-inscribed in art's history, and,

as if we need reminding, this is a particularly strong trope of modernism. Meyer, arguably, is simply repeating a belief internalized by its proponents. He might have felt justified by what Stella argued in other places, for example, in a well-known 1960 lecture:

The painterly problems of what to put here and there and how to do it to make it go with what was already there, became more and more difficult and the solutions more and more unsatisfactory, and finally it became obvious that there had to be a better way. (Stella in Meyer 2000: 193)

Stella's 'better way' was to make his paintings more regular, to focus on filling the space evenly and all the way to the edge, to use repetition, all to make them more 'literal' and 'real'. A painting wasn't an accretion of decisions, but appeared to be a product of already-made ones. But even if we take these statements seriously, it's difficult to make them add up against the variety of Stella's work, or how it might relate to a plethora of words issued by Stella himself.⁶ Distinctions are important, but a cursory consideration of 'aesthetics' and 'making decisions' would demonstrate that both ways of thinking involve metaphors and neither is more factual than the other.

Turning back to Stout, on the face of the arguments made by Stella and Judd, his approach to painting would put him on the wrong side of the divide being demarcated. The language he used to describe his work was different, as were the visual solutions he found. The metaphor Stout used to describe when painting was good was that he was 'inside' it. He would not

have followed a plan; he believed a painting was generated through intuition and improvisation. In 1965 Stout wrote in his journal:

I don't believe I really have got what I want on the canvas (no matter how much it looks right as I back off for the long view) unless I've seen (felt) it happen under my brush as I make the change. It must appear there, out of the void, so to speak (for I won't know that it's me and my brush doing it) – a 'becoming' – an epiphany. (Dickey 2005: 208)

To be inside a work was to be fully involved as a person using intellectual, emotional and perceptual faculties together. And to be outside of a work was for the work to be mechanical, impersonal and over-intellectualized. These terms are Stout's; they appear in a journal entry he wrote in December 1966 after seeing Tony Smith's *Die* on the cover of *Art News* and a visit to the Jewish Museum's exhibition 'Primary Structures'. Minimalism, in fact, dominated most of the last few pages Stout wrote in his journal before stopping altogether. It's tempting to draw a conclusion here but difficult to speculate: Stout had stopped writing for more than a year between January 1965 and April 1966, and refers to 'all this time that, for the last three years, I've been "down" – physically depleted – I have been, temperamentally or psychologically "asleep"' (Dickey 2005: 250). Hans Hofmann, who was a great friend and mentor, had also died that year in February. And yet, despite Minimalism's putative rupture, Stout addresses it as he had done other work before, parsing differences between his own painting and that of others. In

Minimalism he found a 'dual source', both aesthetic and anti-aesthetic. He wrote that the anti-aesthetic was 'at least as positive – searching, finding, proclaiming – as it is negative – denying the usual Artist-as-Hero-Creator aesthetic'. Stout was not, however, convinced. He saw a conflict where 'the [anti-aesthetic] artist tried to get outside of himself, as it were, before he created, rather than going beyond himself to find himself'. And, conscious of how much this broke Minimalism's own rules of engagement, he exclaimed that Smith's *Die* at first reminded him of the Kaaba (Dickey 2005: 250–53). A decade later, when interviewed by a young art historian working on her Master's thesis, Stout was emphatic about Minimalism's failures. Speaking about its 'intellectualism' he said:

Maybe this is the theoretical aim of minimalism. But when it goes to the point where it loses the essential aesthetic validity – reducing experience rather than plumbing the full depths of experience – then it's not worth it.

[...]

The whole business of the minimalist movement through the sixties and on, the effort has been to reduce the emotion, to reduce the feeling, and to push the intellectual as far as possible. Where some of them achieve something with that, then it is certainly to their credit. But it points up that your strength can also be your weakness. (Maartens 1979: 49–51)

In the same interview he refers to Judd as an intellectual – in other words a writer-critic – but he concedes he is also a good artist. He says, with a touch of Judd's deadpan irony and no small amount of acuity: 'Donald Judd remains unemotional with a real passion' (1979: 50).

Far from making art that is just 'what you see', Stout wanted to link his painting to experiences, often of the natural world. To Maartens he explained that when one of his paintings was good, 'there's still a line back to the original visual experience... The more it departs from actual visual experience, it tends to become abstract in a bad sense... It loses its completeness' (1979: 48) And the point was this was a shared value. Back in 1954, in a review of an exhibition that was held of Stout's work at the Stable Gallery in New York, critic Sam Feinstein wrote:

Each picture presents itself as a totality – like a suddenly illuminated object – and its impact, like the movement of a dancer, creates a gesture that is not a reflection of nature, but its equivalent. (Feinstein 1954: 16)

And what was at stake here? The painting was a figure in an argument about non-instrumental thinking and against categorization. This is in part why for Stout, along with Stella and Judd, geometric art was beside the point. The 'single image' was a theme in the Judd and Stella interview, and it was a preoccupation for Judd throughout his early writings. Judd, around 1964, began to distinguish between work that excited him and what he called, as Stella did, 'the older geometric painting'.⁷ But before that he seemed driven by

concerns such as contemporary art's relationship to art history and considered many different types of art within that frame. A wide reading of his writings suggest his judgements were far from definitive. Judd – in a sense like Clement Greenberg before him – was interested in individual artists over generalizations. He wrote, for example, in 1964: 'If Ellsworth Kelly can do something novel with a geometric art more or less from the thirties, or Rauschenberg with Schwitters and found objects generally... then someone is going to do something surprising with Abstract Expressionism'. He added:

It isn't necessary for an artist who was once fairly original and current to abandon his first way of working in favor of a new way. The degree of his originality determines whether he should use a new situation or not. This, of course, is the complicated problem of artistic progress. A new form of art usually appears more logical, expressive, free and strong than the form it succeeds. (Judd 1975: 150)

This is an interesting statement for a critic to write to his readers. Exceptions matter against historical concepts and artists act in relation to them. Around the same time, in a riposte to Greenberg, Judd advised, 'The history of art and art's condition at any time are pretty messy. They should stay that way' (1975: 151). Should this impact how we see Judd in relation to Foster's rejections, breaks and refusals? I would argue yes, but Meyer accounted for it this way:

The polemics that surrounded the art of the sixties, and minimal work in particular, bespeak the deeply competitive nature of the New York scene. Art mattered. Who showed and where one showed mattered. Who reviewed one's show mattered. The situation demanded strong voices... Judd and [Robert] Morris rose to the occasion and prospered. The majority of artists did not. (Meyer 2001: 46)

It is important that Meyer's approach is different from Foster's. Attentive to historical detail and using close readings, Meyer nonetheless structures his account of Minimalism on the same teleological and competitive model. If one looks equally closely – but from the perspective of a different artist who does not fit the major model – one can see exactly how what was 'messy' gets tidied up, and why. In the second of his books on Minimalism, Meyer mentions Stout once as one of the so-called hard edge painters Judd looked at and *rejected* in the late 1950s. Stout here is put on the receiving end of an exclusion and literally made into a footnote (Meyer 2001: 35). And the effect is deepened by the sentence that follows when Meyer writes that Judd later called his own works from the late 1950s 'half-baked abstractions'.⁸ Like a cancelled show that creates an absence, doubts are cast, forty years later, by Meyer's attribution of motivation to the powerful figure of Donald Judd.

There is another story. Judd knew Stout and there is ample evidence suggesting he admired him. He saw Stout's work in exhibitions and via the networks of artists showing at the Green Gallery.⁹ Pursuing this quite different ground, of engagement rather than contestation, and via intuitive criticism and

close reading, I aim to counter the generalizing moves made by Meyer and Foster. Based in part on an observation of what might be called Judd's 'recursive' critical method – in other words how he developed ideas about a particular artist's work from one review to the next – it speculates about what might have happened if Stout had done his exhibition in the spring of 1962. Stout did not have a solo show during the years Judd was actively writing, from 1959–1965. Thus Stout did not provide Judd with an opportunity to engage discursively and publicly with his work. However, in 1962 Judd would have seen Stout's work in the Whitney's *Geometric Abstraction in America*, a show he reviewed positively. Judd mentions Stout in his review of the Jewish Museum's 1963 show, *Black and White* and there he lists Stout in passing. The following year, in his review of 'The Classic Spirit' at Janis, Judd includes Stout amongst artists worth consideration in what is otherwise a negative review.¹⁰ And later that year Judd singles Stout out of a large exhibition of drawings the British critic Lawrence Alloway, then living in New York, curated at the Guggenheim Museum. Most of the review critiques the show's unwieldy size and the problem of including only one medium. But here, out of 35 artists, Judd writes of Stout twice. In the context of Judd's spare writing such 'mentions' positively exude.¹¹ (Judd of course was explicit about what he did not like – in another section of this review he took the space to list twenty artists whose works either were 'middling' or didn't interest him at all.) In Judd's review, it's clear that Stout was not one of the 'old' artists bound by geometry, illusionistic space, or naturalism; instead he was held in a place of possibility. A small and unstable thing, perhaps, but by no means a rejection.

To go further with this speculative exercise, comments Judd makes about other artists can be considered for a reading of Stout's work. From the late 1950s, Judd wrote often on abstract, reduced painting, and his mind was far from being made up. Two long articles from 1964 are relevant to this discussion: 'Local History' and a feature on Barnett Newman. In 'Local History' Judd reflected on the previous four or five years of art he saw being shown in New York and it was followed, a year later, by his now-canonical essay 'Specific Objects'. 'Local History' mainly concerned how the discourse on Abstract Expressionism in the 1950s had suppressed interest in the work of Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg and Ad Reinhardt. Judd recounted the failures of critical method, noting that 'At any time there is always someone trying to organize the current situation. ...The bandwagon nature of art in New York also comes out of the urge to make categories and movements' (Judd 1975: 150–51). He attended to the status of geometric work several times, however, and very unlike what he says in the 1964 interview, here Judd suggested that 'wholeness' was the interesting thing shared by current and older work. The mistake of so-called second generation Abstract Expressionists, Judd wrote, was that they turned individual expression into a style. They added 'archaic composition and naturalistic color' where what still seemed relevant about Abstract Expressionism was that 'The more unique and personal aspects of art, which had been subservient before, were stated alone, large and singly' (1975). What dominates the essay, however, is a suspicion towards group thinking and it's marked by close readings of works of art against general ideas held for them.

The other essay that warrants attention for finding Stout is the article Judd wrote on Barnett Newman in 1964 (although not published until 1970). Judd introduces the idea of 'specificity' here. It's a positive characteristic in which Newman's works stand for themselves. Stout is not mentioned in the article but it appears to be informed by the Jewish Museum's show *Black and White*, which included Newman and Stout and which Judd reviewed. There are several qualities Judd sees as important in Newman's work. The first is scale, the second is wholeness, and the last is that the paintings are 'open'. 'The openness of Newman's work', Judd wrote,

is concomitant with chance and one person's knowledge; the work doesn't suggest a great scheme of knowledge; it doesn't claim more than anyone can know; it doesn't imply a social order. Newman is asserting his concerns and knowledge. (1975: 202)

The painting that arrested Judd in *Black and White* and illustrated the later article was Newman's *Shining Forth (to George)*, 1961, now in the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, a painting made with black paint on raw canvas and named for his brother who had died prematurely that year. The two paintings by Stout in the show were his *Untitled*, 1954 and *Untitled, Number 3*, 1956. There are differences, of course, between Newman's and Stout's work, such as size and the fact that Newman's lines bisect the canvas – touch, or run off the top and bottom – where Stout's figures sit in a cushion of background, never touching or going over an edge. In that world such details

mattered. As Judd writes in the essay, 'Ordinary abstract painting and expressionistic painting are bound in the rectangle by their composition. Their space and color are recessed by a residual naturalism' (1975). Newman retains some brushwork in his paintings, often in or around the stripes, and in the ground, which creates a sense of depth, albeit very shallow. Stout, by contrast, leaves little evidence of brushwork, but depth is 'felt' as a consequence of figure and ground. And yet, such differences between them may mean less than the way each signifies an opposition to a 'classically' ordered sense of space. A comparison to Mondrian helps clarify this. For Judd, Newman's wholeness is found in each painting being specific and so not asserting any continuum of given knowledge. 'This wholeness is also new and important. It is why the stripes and edges don't correspond', Judd writes. With Mondrian, on the other hand, 'The lines are dominant and the white is secondary, volume and space once removed. ...Mondrian's fixed Platonic order is no longer credible' (1975) In such terms, Stout's work is closer to Newman's than Mondrian's: each of Stout's paintings is singular, a result of the balancing of the individual shape in its background space. There is no repetition in Stout's work, arguably no principles that can be reproduced. (This is one of the reasons Sanford Schwartz thought Stout couldn't keep painting. It was too difficult to make 'new' paintings with such limited means; he had pushed himself into a corner.)

To reiterate how Stout's work was understood in these matters, we can turn to Allan Kaprow, the artist known for happenings and someone who also knew Stout well as a fellow member of the Hansa Gallery in the 1950s. In his 1963 essay 'Impurity', Kaprow put Stout, Newman and Mondrian together.

Written a year prior to Judd's essay on Newman, the essay uses remarkably similar terms. Kaprow writes at the start, 'The more compelling goal of finding an adequate critical language for values in motion has taken precedence over what for the past were clarifying guidelines, constants amidst change' (Kaprow 1993: 27). His writing on Stout is eloquent and extensive, considerate of the intentions, effects and consequences of Stout's works. A passage that starts with Stout and ends with a comparison between Stout and Mondrian is exemplary of this:

I am suggesting that we are intended to wonder, that the painting on some level is made to be wondered at. What is pure and perfected in it is not present to us, or else we should understand. Painted by a man who perhaps wonders as deeply at his own creation, it hints at the separation between us and art.

With Stout, the data of vision are confirmed a fortiori the longer we look, but their cumulative significance eludes us. With Mondrian, the data of vision cumulatively annihilate themselves, but it takes our eyes to accomplish this, and we become increasingly sensible of their role in bringing about exaltation. Mondrian has answers, difficult as they may be, whereas Stout poses questions. But both precipitate a crisis of consciousness and identity. (1993: 37)

Let's return to the two photographs we started with and the opposing ideas they seem to suggest. I proposed at the start that there was a productive breakdown in the way Stout's 'modernist' installation came after the 'postmodernist' message of *Anti-Illusion*. This still seems important since it demonstrates that interests, far from being foreclosed, remain open, including the works of art that stand for things that have been asserted as outdated or outmoded. But there are other differences to attend to in the comparison. Stout's show was a retrospective, an exhibition staged at a point at the end of an artist's career. *Anti-Illusion* looked forward, functioning not precisely as the first exhibition of a new type of artwork, but nonetheless a formalizing or a recognition of it. In this way, the shows have very different temporalities: one says 'this is now' and the other 'this was then'; one says 'this is urgent' and the other 'this might always be'. This is reinforced in each by their modes of display, but both are institutional views, and both play upon established expectations. Another difference then is how these models of temporal thinking map on to the single artist versus a grouping of many. The two shows usefully frame the negotiation between biographies and/or social histories and Histories, in other words, the situating of lives in the times during which they are lived, or out of them. Merleau-Ponty addressed this in 'Cézanne's Doubt' whilst writing about Leonardo's 'unfinished' work:

The very decisions which transform us are always made in reference to a factual situation; such a situation can of course be

accepted or refused, but it cannot fail to give us our impetus nor be for us, as a situation 'to be accepted' or 'to be refused', the incarnation of the value we give to it. (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 25)

We do not need to take up Merleau-Ponty's occasional arguments for Cézanne's genius or anxieties to account for his doubt. 'Cézanne's difficulties are those of the first word', he wrote (1964: 19). Looking at this as an issue of history and power, there are ways of discussing 'lived history' as something quite different from History. Gayatri Spivak has proposed – as a critique of Hegelian time in the interests of individual (and political) voices – that 'Time often emerges as an implicit graph only miscaught by those immersed in the process of timing' (Spivak 1991: 99). More recently, in her book *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (2012), Spivak has argued for re-valuing of art's unknown-ness within the ongoing project of postcolonialism. It would take another project to explore this provocative idea, but following this, differentiating between biological stages and socially constructed ones clarify both convergences and divergences, and might shift the entrenched tropes of belatedness and the getting-there-first that so strongly drive cultures framed by exceptionalism. We can remember that Stout shared slowness and dislocation with Cézanne but also with other painters formed in the same moment as he. When he decided to be a painter full-time in the late 1940s Stout was surrounded by a generation of artists (his models and his chronological age) – Newman, Reinhardt, Jackson Pollock – who hit their stride late, and took their time. Mark Rothko spent more time looking at his paintings than applying paint to them. An assistant who worked with him in the

1950s remarked that he 'would sit and look for long periods, sometimes for hours, sometimes for days, considering the next color, considering expanding an area' (Breslin 1993: 317). Stout often developed his forms quickly in a sketch. In the paintings, scaled up and worked through, the object was to bring something slowly to completion but to have it be as alive and impromptu as the flash of that original idea. In a description of a studio visit in the mid-1960s, the collector Charles Carpenter wrote,

Myron and I were sitting in front of one of the large black-and-white paintings, which he had started in 1955. It was a simple white V shape on a black ground [*Untitled*, 1955–68]. To me it looked finished and very beautiful, and I said as much to Myron. 'No,' he replied. 'There is a bit more work to be done on it yet.' He got up, walked up to the painting, pointed to the bottom of the V shape, and said, 'The curve here is too flat. It should be rounder, fatter.' He made the curve with the sweep of his hand. I stared at the picture, and at the offending curve...

The next time I saw the picture, a year or so later, it looked a trifle different from what I had remembered. When I mentioned this to Stout, he answered, 'Oh yes, there have been several changes since you last saw it'. (Carpenter 1996: 54)

So what of such time? For Stout the object was not to belabour time spent. When, then, would the paintings seem to be? An answer might be found in what Rothko once said in reply to a question about how long it took to make a

particular painting. He responded with a kind of evasive bombast: 'I'm 57 years old, and it took all that time to paint this picture' (Breslin 1993: 326).

What's at stake here is to see how Stout's time and timing could be seen in relation to issues of doubt. Doubt is acting whilst holding things in suspension. Doubt, Shiff suggests, can be more reasonable than certainty. By paying attention to doubt and recognizing it as a particular mode of resisting – and distancing – it's possible to come closer to feeling what was urgently contemporary then. This is important not only for Stout but for others caught, repressed and elided in ongoing dramas where, so crudely, certainty takes all.

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Notes

¹ This was a theme in exhibition reviews from the 1970s onwards (e.g. Friedman 1977; Kramer 1980; Russell 1980; Rose 1980).

² Two of note include “‘I Knew It To Be So!’ Forrest Best, Alfred Jensen, Myron Stout: Theory and the Visionary’ (1984), New York Studio School and traveling, curated by painter David Reed, and ‘The Indiscipline of Painting’ (2011), Tate St. Ives and traveling, curated by painter Daniel Sturgis, who is an editor of this journal. The author contributed essays to that catalogue, on Stout and other artists.

³ See Sanford Schwartz (1975, 1997), Henry Geldzahler (1990) and Trevor Winkfield (2002).

⁴ I’m drawing here from the way Mieke Bal interprets Gayatri Spivak in her book *Travelling Concepts* (2002, Chapter 8).

⁵ Stella’s dismissal had a powerful effect, establishing Vasarely for years after as a ‘relational painter’. The term more likely has its origins with the work of painter Fritz Glarner who used it to title many of his works. Glarner had lived in the United States since 1936 but was Swiss, which Stella might be conflating along with Vasarely into that ‘dreary post-Max Bill thing’. Perhaps on his mind was the 1962 show, *Geometric Abstraction in America* at the Whitney Museum, where Glarner’s works were all titled *Relational Painting*.

⁶ See the two excellent essays on Stella’s early work by Harry Cooper and Megan R. Luke (2006).

⁷ The first instance I’ve found of Judd using it negatively is in a review of the Swedish painter, Olle Baertling: ‘It’s better than discrete or rationalistic parts, but it’s inferior to a more direct consideration of continuity and infinity, as in Frank Stella’s paintings.’

On the whole, Baertling's work is **still** too near the older geometric painting' (1975: 134).

⁸ Meyer is quoting Roberta Smith (1975: 7). The 'rejection' can be contextualized further in that the Judd paintings in question are very Stout-like. But whose oedipal moment is it: Judd's or the critic's?

⁹ Judd reviewed ten exhibitions at the Green Gallery from 1960 until his own work was included in a group show in May 1963. Judd had his first one-person show there in December 1963.

¹⁰

There are interesting and uninteresting works shown. There is an excellent relief by Pevsner made of sheet bronze and cream plastic, Gabo's well-known construction, a piece by Max Bill, paintings by Van der Leek, Lissitzky, Léger, Kupka, Schwitters, Albers, and Myron Stout. Of course Glarner, Diller and Bolotowsky are represented. (Judd 1975: 123)

¹¹ 'The drawings by Johns, Myron Stout, de Kooning and Lichtenstein are as developed as their paintings, only smaller'. Later, 'The drawings by Stout and Youngerman looked well together, since all were black and white but clearly differentiated by geometric and amorphous forms'.