

## Paradigmatic pictures. Radical abstract painting as a philosophy of the image

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### *Introduction: Following the analytical lines*

In his seminal 1975 book *La linea analitica dell'arte moderna*, Filiberto Menna argues that modern artists are turning their attention away from expressive and representational processes in order to focus on the analysis of the nature and purpose of the artistic act. For the first time in history, the production of art occurs at the same time as the theoretical reflection on it, that is, artists, creating their own works, simultaneously comment on the ontological status of what they have created (Menna, 1975, p. 4). The Italian theorist is aware of the fundamental problem that such a way of understanding the artistic act implies and is therefore interested in how to separate these two processes in terms of the reception of the work of art on the one hand and the establishment of a new philosophy of art on the other. He asks the question of whether art can even discuss itself from the position of what fundamentally constitutes it—the work of art. In order to answer this question, Menna refers to the German philosopher Rudolph Carnap, who, in his 1934 work *Logische Syntax der Sprache*, discusses whether it is possible to determine the syntactic rules that govern language without leaving the language itself. Carnap puts forward the thesis that this is possible if the expressive means of language make it possible, provided we make an intra-linguistic distinction between «language-object» and the metalinguistic «language-instrument» (Sandrini, 2012, pp. 36-37).

Menna claims that conceptual artists do precisely this by using spoken/written language, i.e., text, to create works that we perceive as pictures, i.e., visual art. The Italian theorist believes that this phenomenon has essentially defined modern art since Georges Seurat's pointillist structu-

ring of the pictorial surface, which he considers a fateful turning point in the constitution of modernism in painting and in art more generally. Why is Seurat's *Sunday on the Grand Jatte* the beginning of what Menna calls the «analytical line of modern art»? Because this painting clearly establishes for the first time the difference between the conditions of visibility of the painting itself, i.e., Seurat's characteristic "punctiform colored fields", and what we recognize in the painting. In other words, the surface of the painting refers to its own factuality as a painting, and this factuality, being a pure visual phenomenon, is clearly separated from visual representation. This difference will lead to the fact that the connection between what we see on the canvas on the one hand and the extra-pictorial reality of the physical world on the other will become less and less important, while the events on the surface of the painting itself will become increasingly important. Seurat's pointillist procedure to that extent unites a twofold analytical process that will later develop within the framework of modern art: into the «aniconic line», which will primarily deal with forms that do not denote and do not connote any extra-pictorial reality, and the «iconic line», which will deal with more complex systems of pictorial representation. Menna defines the aniconic line as focused on the pictoriality of the surface, while the iconic line is addressed to the *tableau* and representation (Menna, 1975, pp. 10-13, 64). Although it is not itself illusionistic or mimetic, the iconic line of avant-garde art deals with the problem of visual phenomena that originate outside the image but are reinterpreted and redefined within it, establishing the ontology of the artistic image through a dialectical relationship with extra-pictorial reality. In the styles of the iconic line, therefore, we can count Impressionism, Cubism, Fauvism, as well as all those that possess, as Menna says, «*fondamento mimetico*». The aniconic line, on the other hand, encompasses radical abstract styles that consciously abandon complex pictorial structures in order to question the conditions of creation, reception, and visibility of art objects in themselves—from Russian suprematism to numerous currents of high-modernist abstraction: American minimalism, hard edge painting, color field painting, all the way to the conceptual tautology of Italian analytical (primary or fundamental) painting.

Menna, however, provocatively notes that even the first and most famous painting of the aniconic line in modern art, Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square on a White Ground*, retains the square as a possible link to extra-pictorial reality, that is, to something that is not immanent to the

painting alone. However, he immediately adds that in Malevich's work the square is not a «symbolic form» but a «primary structure» that «has no intention of representing even itself» but rather of encouraging the observer's mind to engage in a discussion about the nature of art (ibid., p. 67). In this article, we will refer to only one of Menna's two analytical lines of modern art—the aniconic one—but not by dealing with the stylistic ramifications of radical abstraction of the second half of the 20th century, but rather with its epistemic potential as a kind of philosophy of painting. Quite simply, if Malevich's *Black Square* «has no intention of representing even itself», has the end point of the possibility of understanding painting as an art-historical phenomenon been reached, a point after which all subsequent styles of the aniconic line of modern art can be nothing more than a mere genre or typology within the styles of pictorial abstraction? According to Menna, the aniconic line ends with Ad Reinhardt's *Black Paintings*, which completely abolish any iconic, symbolic, or representational residue that could still be found, albeit quite conditionally, in Malevich, and in this way actually make it impossible to establish any difference between iconicity and aniconicity, painting and world, representation and reality.

In our opinion, after Malevich and Aleksandr Rodchenko, the radical abstraction of Josef Albers, Ad Reinhardt, Agnes Martin, Robert Ryman, Paolo Cotani, Frank Stella, Jo Baer, Lucio Pozzi, Barnett Newman, Julije Knifer, and many other artists of the aniconic line can offer much more interesting insights if we approach their work as a general principle of pictorial representation rather than as an as-yet-unresolved hermeneutic problem of the history and theory of modern art contained in statements about the essence, limits, and meaning of the artistic act (for a concise and very informative overview of the development of radical abstract painting in America and Europe, see Gibson, 1987, 114-126 and Honnef, 1987, pp. 127-133). In the following pages, therefore, we would like to take a completely different trajectory of interpreting radical abstract painting by establishing procedures of pictorial visualization that explain the *general* concept of representation inherent in *all* objects and phenomena that we call images. In order to be able to extrapolate a general principle from a concrete artistic practice, it is necessary to bypass the disciplinary and teleological limitations to which abstract painting is subjected within the framework of art history. We think this can be done not by pursuing a distinction between figurative and abstract paintings, whi-

ch has not essentially changed in an epistemological sense for over a century anyway, but by considering the radically abstract painting as the paradigmatic condition of *all* pictures, both artistic ones and those we use in everyday communication. For this purpose, it will be necessary to examine paintings that we usually regard as belonging to various styles of minimalist and conceptual abstraction “beyond” their artistic status and view them as «theoretical objects», a method promoted (each in his own way) by Hubert Damisch<sup>1</sup> and W.J.T. Mitchell.<sup>2</sup> However, since such images will have only a philosophical function in our perspective, unlike the semiotic approach of Damisch or Mitchell’s cultural symptomatology, we will call them “paradigmatic pictures” (see Seel, 2005, 160-161). On the other hand, we will call all others—operative, communicative, and even abstract images if they are part of the art system—“instrumental pictures”.

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<sup>1</sup> Damisch succinctly explained his method as follows: «A theoretical object is one that is called on to function according to norms that are not historical. It is not sufficient to write a history of this object. [...]; it’s not enough to write a history of a problem for that problem to be resolved. A theoretical object is something that obliges one to do theory; we could start there. Second, it’s an object that obliges you to do theory but also furnishes you with the means of doing it. Thus, if you agree to accept it on theoretical terms, it will produce effects around itself. While I worked on perspective, I began to have *aperçu* with regard to the history of science that are not at all traditional; I began, that is, to produce theory. Third, it’s a theoretical object because it forces us to ask ourselves what theory is. It is posed in theoretical terms; it produces theory; and it necessitates a reflection on theory. But I never pronounce the word theory without also saying the word history. Which is to say that for me such an object is always a theoretico-historical object. Yet if theory is produced within history, history can never completely cover theory. That is fundamental for me. The two terms go together but in the sense in which each escapes the other» (Bois et al., 1998, p. 8).

<sup>2</sup> Mitchell does not propose a single theory but rather tactical approaches to different phenomena of visual culture and their networking independent of historical chronology and outside disciplinary canons—a method we could call «cultural symptomatology» (Purgar, 2017, p. 83). He explained his in-disciplinary procedure using the concept of triangulation: «We always need more history than we have. Is history enough? No. Is Lascaux a historical site? Yes. Is it also a nonhistorical site? Yes, and we need both. I think one half of the question of iconology is answered by the imperative *Always historicize*. Always place the image in its context—and context includes discourse, language, words. But also: *Always decontextualize*, because the image always resists text, leaps out of it. So the second imperative, I would suggest, is *Always anachronize*. Always defy the notion that history explains everything. If Lascaux were purely a matter of history, we couldn’t even see the images. The fact that they transcend history, that they leap across historical boundaries, is what lets them speak to us (I wouldn’t say they are intelligible to us, but that they speak). They show themselves to us, and we understand something» (Elkins & Naef, 2011, p. 40).

Following the insights of three German philosophers and theorists of the image—Dieter Mersch, Lambert Wiesing, and Martin Seel (whose theses are often challenged with each other)—should result in establishing that some of their key terms, such as *showing*, *visibility*, and *appearing*, are the fundamental categories of all images and, paradoxically, that it is easiest to recognize these categories by observing pictures as self-referential entities that originate almost exclusively in radically abstract art practice. Although instrumental pictures have basically the same prerogatives as paradigmatic ones—framedness, medium, flatness (see Greenberg, 1965)—the former, due to their utilitarian function, never put their own constitution in the foreground, while the latter reveal the mechanisms inherent in all images by focusing the observer's attention on the very procedure of pictorial appearing. We will single out the theses of the aforementioned German authors because they observe pictures as philosophical (theoretical) objects that reveal the epistemic connection between the material object, perception, and pictorial cognition; therefore, they deal with specific procedures of transforming reality into imagination and imagination into reality—a process which we claim here started with a “zero-picture”.

### *Paradigmatic pictures show and show themselves*

The fact that we see “something” in a picture seems self-evident, but determining what that is is not a very simple task. Do we recognize the manifestations on a picture's surface as relevant, or do we infer what someone (car manufacturer, meteorologist, family member, artist...) wants to show us by making something visible in a specific way? In his article *Pictorial Thinking. On the “Logic” of Iconic Structures*, Dieter Mersch claims that the very definition that assumes that seeing an image means first seeing something “as” an image and then seeing “what” the image shows requires us to accept the duplicity of the pictorial ontology, namely, a picture can be interpreted as a picture, but also as a simple thing that makes something visible. Mersch considers the key point of the ontology of the image to be the difference between matter and phenomenon, that is, between pictoriality and making visible (2007, pp. 162-163). It follows that pictures say less and communicate less to the observer than they show him, and what the pictures show has nothing to do with observation or understanding but with some new ontology that Mersch calls the

«logic of the image». Following this argument, we can derive the premise that any visual difference can be recognized as a distinctive visual sign; however, it does not have to be semiotically relevant but can be a mere record or a cognitive fact. Apprehending these differences can be established through narrative or figurative image strategies, but also beyond them; we can recognize them through the multitude of possibilities of referential effects of images, both through their relationship with nature and with themselves; we can recognize them as, for example, the ontology of materiality, the ontology of space, or the ontology of time.

By claiming that all attempts to reduce visual strategies to rhetoric and semiotics, to linguistic allegories and figures, such as ekphrasis and metaphor, have failed, Mersch advocates that an image can only establish the essence of its own existence through the application of various dedicated but, in principle, non-disciplinary theories. He insists that such an ontological debate should start from the irreducibility of images to discursive practices, from the fundamental incommensurability that defines the relationship between the image and the gaze as a special medial format that requires other means than those taken from the theory of signs, language, or literary theory:

Semiotics, hermeneutics, and “iconology” prove to be inadequate approaches for a theory of pictoriality because they disregard precisely the key aspect that would have to be denoted as the mediality of the image in the proper sense. Moreover, the image resists a thorough discursive analysis, as is shown by the failing of ekphrasis, which, by interminable utilization of terminology, only shifts and enlarges the gap between discourse and pictoriality instead of closing it. If, alternatively, a discursive analysis were at all possible, if the image could be completely transformed into language, then it would be nothing but a readable text and its observation a continual reading. (Mersch, 2007, p. 167)

Mersch’s theses prove to be very inspiring for an attempt at a theoretical interpretation of radical abstract paintings as paradigmatic images. He claims that when we perceive a specific image, we perceive the «logic of iconic structures», the same logic that we apply when we perceive the general difference between an image and what is not an image. From this, it can be concluded that the pictorial expresses itself through appearing and as a phenomenon, not (only) as a sign or text as taught by the history of art. The visible in the image has a completely different structure from the visible outside the image, since the “pictorially visible” is visible differently from the “non-pictorial visual” because the image has its own material status. This material status is different from a mere vi-

sual phenomenon that is not an image. For this reason, one should always take into account the difference between the internal-pictorial and the external-visual. Mersch distinguishes three levels of the iconic (pictorial): a) what is actually shown, that is, representation, which can be empty; b) methods of visuality and their specific aesthetic and technical strategies; and c) conditions under which the eye deals with visibility, and seeing becomes aware of what is visible (ibid., p. 163). The author refers to the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and his thesis on the necessity of a double view if something is not to be seen as a picture. Mersch writes: «Initially, to see an image means to perceive something “as” an image as well as to perceive the object shown by the image. This phrasing alone alludes to an instance of duplicity: the “image as image” as well as the “image as a thing” that makes “something” visible or brings it into view, regardless of whether it is an object, a figure, a color, or a simple division of a tableau» (ibid.).

For Mersch, one of these dedicated, universal principles of understanding pictures is the phenomenon of the «chiasm of gazes» (ibid., pp. 181-183), that is, the property of an image to make something visible by constantly provoking changes in the observer's gaze between three ontological extremes: a) image and non-image; b) iconic difference and immersion; and c) framing and unframing. The point here is that the medial basis and the representational (not necessarily mimetic) content are equally important for pictorial evidence or appearing. On the one hand, the medium allows a chiasm of gazes [*Chiasmus der Blicke*] in order to recognize something in it as an image, while on the other, the image itself requires a reverse chiasm in order to recognize it as a medium. The German author claims, firstly, that the image cannot exist without the medium and, secondly, that while the medium cannot exist without the image, they constantly repel each other. This is a paradoxical strategy because it shows that the image cannot show—in addition to showing itself—what makes itself visible. In other words, the image and the medium can exist side by side, but one of them must become invisible in order for the other to become visible: «The image withdraws its own mediality. It keeps its mediality in the sphere of the invisible. This invisibility corresponds to the “dialectics of mediality”, which consists of the medium's peculiar quality to conceal itself in its appearance» (ibid., 173). However, for such an operation, it is necessary to have a non-discursive concept of the image because some of the textual models—such as tra-

ditional iconology, semiotics, or identity politics—always lead us only toward the instrumental meaning of the image, and we would not take into account the image's mediality, that is, what Mersch refers us to, and what was done much earlier by Mitchell with his «family of images» (1986, pp. 9-14). If we reach for Mitchell's description of the difference between graphic and optical images (for example, a portrait of a person and the reflection of a portrayed person in a mirror), it will be much more difficult to determine the point of refraction of the gaze in one and the other type of image than if we compare a graphic (physical) image and a mental one (that which dwells in the mind). The difference between a photograph and a mirror image of a person does not have to be great in the hermeneutic sense (it can be even indiscernible), but in the ontological sense, this difference is crucial. On the one hand, it can be so small that we are often not aware if something is a representation or a reflection in a mirror, but on the other, it opens up a large space of non-discursive meaning that we can resolve only by studying the phenomena that indicate how the image appears and how it shows itself. Pictorial art practices that question seemingly polarizing extremes, such as analytical painting and hyper-realism, deal with this very phenomenon of "pictorial appearing" (more will be said about this later in the context of Martin Seel's insights).

Perceiving an image as a specific object in the sphere of the visible is a concept that has been deeply woven into the meaning of pictoriality since the theoretical discussions about religious images in the 8th and 9th centuries (cfr. Mondzain 2005, 69-118). Subsequently, Western culture has favored the premise that making a particular image visible means reconciling two coexisting systems in it: the first presents its own reality through the surface of the image, and the second establishes a symbolically coded connection with the extra-pictorial reality. However, in Italian analytical painting, for instance (especially in works by Giorgio Griffa from the early 1970s), the code that encrypts the picture does not establish a symbolic connection with something outside the image but is an independently existing fact about the presence and appearing of the image itself. Since a self-referential loop is established between the code and the image itself—the image refers to its own making, and making is all that the image refers to—the perception of the thus created entity no longer encourages inference based on the connection between symbol and referent. Analytical pictures no longer «speak» to the observer; they

now simply show themselves and their own genesis. Moreover, if we decide to reconstruct their principle of deconstruction anew, we will notice that paradigmatic pictures show something that we could call the *zero degree* of pictorial appearing. They bring us back to a sort of primal beginning of the image as otherness, to the first color stroke with which the Paleolithic man tried to establish a symbolic image code on the cave wall. Particularly interesting for our topic is the thesis on «irrepresentability», in which Mersch claims that what makes pictoriality possible, what its fundamental prerequisite is, cannot be represented within the pictorial. Every image is divided by the difference between representation and what cannot be represented, and this difference will always exist regardless of the technical perfection with which we create the image. Here, he starts from the assumption proposed by the “negative theory of the media”, which claims that people use the medium as a means to see something and that, at the same time, the gaze is not directed at the means but at what it makes visible. As such, the medium is transparent (invisible, because we look through it) and the image is non-transparent (visible, because our gaze rests on it). Unlike realistic painting or abstract expressionism, the particularity of analytical, hard-edge, or colored field painting is that it does not offer a narrative or expressive substitute that could allow the medium to become «invisible». Accordingly, Mersch’s theory needed to establish a distinction between the instrumental use of images when the medium becomes invisible and the rare cases of radical painterly practices when the medium becomes its own content. If someone now thinks that the content of a paradigmatic picture could also be what it conveys (as suggested by Marshall McLuhan in the context of instrumental media), one question should be asked as a precaution: what exactly is the message of the analytical and minimalist paintings of Giorgio Griffa, Kenneth Noland, or Agnes Martin?

Unlike an instrumental picture, every paradigmatic picture, in order to show something, must also show itself, must appear, and, through this process, reveal its medial substance, that is, the conditions of its own materiality. In his early days, Ludwig Wittgenstein emphasized in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922) that the essence of language cannot be described through language and that language must therefore speak for itself. The same goes for the image. Later, in *Philosophical Investigations*, he writes: «What the picture tells me is itself. That is, it’s telling me something consists in its own structure, in “its” own lines and colors» (1953,

§523). Mersch further emphasized Wittgenstein's thesis by insisting that images serve to produce a specific type of «evidence» that cannot be produced in a discursive way: «it is therefore not knowledge or understanding which is characteristic of the pictorial, but “the force creating such evidence”» (Mersch, 2007, pp. 176, 179-180). In this sense, the pictorial aspect of the paradigmatic picture is an evident fact about the image itself; it registers the image as an actuality that shows what we see in the image. The visible of the paradigmatic (analytical, conceptual, or minimalist) picture is the reality of the perceived image itself and nothing more—its visible is equal to itself.

*Paradigmatic pictures are visible because they are exclusively visible*

The problem of evidence in images is not only of a nominalistic nature but also necessarily includes ontological questions, for example: “who” or “what” makes something evident in the image? When it comes to analytical or minimalist painting, the answer to the question of “who” is essentially very simple: the one who creates a specific configuration of colors and shapes on the surface of the painting is the artist; he is the actor of the evidence of everything that enters the perceptual field of the observer. In paradigmatic pictures, this cause-and-effect sequence is even more pronounced because the minimalist, radically abstract, and most often non-expressive forms cannot be connected with the standard codes of artworks based on the mimetic tradition, and thus there is no meaningful intervention of numerous theoretical streams that could offer a hermeneutic assistance. On the other hand, since in all works of art the role of the artist is indisputable—and criticism and theory always point us precisely to the artist because, in such impenetrable works that offer very limited references to anything outside the image, only he can know the original concept of the work—the question of who creates the evidence of the paradigmatic picture then enters a closed circle from which there is seemingly no way out.

Lambert Wiesing drew our attention to the fact that modern theory solved this problem in such a way that it shifted the responsibility for the meaning of a picture from the artist to the picture itself; as an inanimate thing, it was given the characteristics of a living being that wants something, that acts, expresses itself, and shows itself. Wiesing based his theory of the image on disputing precisely such theoretical insights that

arose from Edmund Husserl's classic theory about the intentionality of the subject of observation, that the intentional act had consequences for what the image is, not for how the observer perceives it. Provided we consider it plausible, this thesis marks a turn in image phenomenology insofar as it favors the competences of the observer over the technical prerogatives of images; otherwise, if we were to attribute the effect of truthfulness or immersion of a pictorial representation to the artist's skill or, as is common today, to digital technology, then as a result of an "animate" image, we would get an "inanimate" observer as a mere object in the visual spectacle of technically produced images. Despite the fact that he believes that the insights of the classical phenomenology of the image have spread to a wide area of visual culture, such as art history, visual studies, and *Bildwissenschaft*, Wiesing's theory points to the fact that one metaphorical system must not be replaced by another, if we believe that the Cartesian subject of perception is still the backbone of communication:

In his 2010 essay *Das Zeigen der Bilder*, Gottfried Boehm firmly supports the opinion that showing «defines the actual action of pictures». Without meaning this metaphorically, Günter Figal argues in the same year in *Bildpräsenz. Zum deiktischen Wesen des Sichtbaren* for the opinion «that pictures generally can show». In *Das Leben der Bilder* from 2005, W. J. T. Mitchell seriously addresses the question «What do pictures want?». In his 2010 book *Theorie des Bildakts*, Horst Bredekamp programmatically designs an «image-active phenomenology», in which «the living power of the image is taken into account». The list of examples could easily be continued at length.<sup>3</sup> (Wiesing, 2013, p. 79)

Wiesing contends that attributing anthropomorphic features to images is not only the wrong metaphor for describing how images work but also reflects a misunderstanding of their true function. He argues that by approaching images as living entities with humanoid abilities, we cannot discover their essence but can only acknowledge the powerlessness of theory to discover what that essence is. If we admit our infatuation with images, we give them back their magical power, but since such a practice

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<sup>3</sup> Wiesing refers to the following books and articles: Gottfried Boehm, «Das Zeigen der Bilder», in *Zeigen. Die Rhetorik des Sichtbaren*, ed. Gottfried Boehm, Sebastian Egenhofer, and Christian Spies, München 2010, pp. 19-54; Günter Figal, «Bildpräsenz. Zum deiktischen Wesen des Sichtbaren», in *Zeigen. Die Rhetorik des Sichtbaren*, ed. Gottfried Boehm, Sebastian Egenhofer, and Christian Spies, München 2010, pp. 55-74; W.J.T. Mitchell, *Das Leben der Bilder. Eine Theorie der visuellen Kultur*, München 2008, pp. 46-77; Horst Bredekamp, *Theorie des Bildakts*, Berlin 2010, pp. 52, 55.

would mean abandoning the legacy of the Enlightenment, the theory today recognizes a kind of secular agency in them that is logically and functionally credible, or so at least the proponents of anthropomorphism claim. In the case of paradigmatic pictures, phrases such as “the power of images” or “the life of images” become particularly problematic because they suggest either that, for example, a monochrome canvas with an evenly painted square grid of lines, as in Robert Ryman *Stretched drawing (5 x 5 grid)* from 1963 can possess an anthropomorphic power, that not all pictures have the same power, or that they do not have any at all. Looking at Paolo Masi’s painting *Tessitura* from 1974 and knowing the context within which it operates, we must reasonably state that it has a certain artistic value, but we cannot state unequivocally what its anthropomorphic agency as a picture consists of. Wiesing believes that one of the strategies of the mentioned critical-theoretical directions is to use a specific meta-language that aims to conceal the fact that the image is simply an object or information in the sphere of the visible; moreover, he maintains that in this way, the very meta-language of theory is given priority over the pure visibility of the image, the condition he calls «*Die neue Bildmythologie*» (2013, pp. 78-106).

Here we come to our central problem: can we even assert (as we did at the end of the previous section) that the paradigmatic picture itself makes something evident on its surface if that surface is most often devoid of the kind of visual information to which the human mind reacts with an emotional, intellectual, or purely instinctive response? Earlier, we drew attention to Mersch’s claim that the medium owes its uniqueness to the fact that it hides itself in appearance; however, if there is nothing in the picture but the medium, as in Lucio Pozzi’s *Level Group* diptych from 1974 or Ad Reinhardt’s “ultimate” *Black Paintings* from the 1960s, can we claim that then we do not even see a picture or, quite extremely, that we do not see that specific object in the sphere of the visible? Or are the pictures of radical abstraction specific precisely in that they “disclose”—and do not hide—the medium that makes them visible, as if, while watching at home live broadcast of a football match on the television screen, we constantly doubted the credibility of the events on the football field because at no time do we have a view of the entire stadium or because we see the kitchen when we turn our heads and not the opponent’s goal? This dilemma stems, to a certain extent, from the problem of aspectual viewing, which Wittgenstein introduced into the discussion with his fa-

mous example of the duck and the rabbit in *Philosophical Investigations* and was deepened by Richard Wollheim, who, in the second edition of his book *Art and its Objects*, explained the two fundamental aspects of pictorial representation, which he called “seeing-as” and “seeing-in” (Wollheim, 1980, pp. 137-151). Simply put, while looking at an image, the observer can always independently decide whether his perception will be directed toward what the image shows (seeing-as) or toward what he himself is able to see in it, regardless of whether this may be narrative content, as with works of classical art, newspaper photographs, etc., or the way in which the image was made visible (the technique(s) used, its texture, size, etc.) (seeing-in).

What Wiesing adheres to here is a kind of reverse phenomenology that starts from the pure visibility of the image and its effect on the observer. As such, we could assume that this principle is particularly suitable for the interpretation of analytical (paradigmatic) painting. However, if so, we must first agree with the main theses of this German philosopher: 1) «images show because people use them to show»; 2) «there is no objective compulsion to understand images anthropomorphically»; 3) «images do not have to be signs»; and 4) «images can be described by their specific visibility and presence» (2013, pp. 87-88). The problem with pure visibility in analytical and minimalist painting is that we still do not know if this is the visibility of the image or the medium. If we were to declare this controversy irrelevant and conclude that the function of a work of art is ultimately to disclose the various mechanisms that make it possible, and if we were to accept the fact that there is no difference between whether a painting “depicts” (something, as a non-being) or “shows itself” (individually, as an anthropomorphic being), we still could not avoid the questions that keep popping up one after the other while looking at, for example, Paolo Cotani’s paintings from the *Bende elastiche* series (1974-75). Are we nevertheless allowed to anthropomorphize his paintings and say that they reveal the physical presence of the artist to a much greater extent than Ryman’s white monochromes? The final question, which unites all the ones we have asked so far, is: Are we looking in this case at the “artist’s work”, a “work of art”, or simply an “object” to which we have decided to give our attention for some reason?

In response to these questions, but above all as a way of distracting us from the concept (even if only metaphorical) according to which images can be alive, do something, and show themselves to their observers,

Wiesing emphasizes the difference between the power of the image and the power of the viewer's gaze and claims that the specificity of the images lies precisely in the fact that they are "not alive" and therefore "cannot" look back; on the contrary, the observer's gaze turns away from them and does not allow him to immerse himself in what is shown. Wiesing believes that the key feature of all images—which is not reducible to the features of any other object—is that it is able to stimulate the creation of appearances and phenomena, regardless of whether the stimuli are created within the domain of art or practical communication, but under the condition that the observer's critical awareness of the perception of the very object or phenomenon is proposed to the consciousness to perceive (Wiesing, 2009, pp. 39-40). Wiesing reverses the key question of phenomenology—"In what way does the observer, with his intentional consciousness, produce or, more precisely, become aware of the perceived object?"—and turns it into a new question: "What consequences does the reality of perception have for the observer?" (ibid., pp. 72-78). For us, this is a very instructive thesis, although not the part that served Wiesing to challenge the «fallacy of pictorial agency» but the part that affirms the authentic observer's insights into the meaning of an artistic picture, both in analytical painting and abstract art in general. The fundamental controversy of every radical abstraction is contained in the dilemma "what is the observer allowed to see at all?"; in other words, it is about the right to speculate about the meaning of what is seen. If we approach this problem from the position of the creator of the work, then between the reception of the observer and the intention of the creator, there necessarily always remains a huge empty space of potential meaning. On the other hand, if we implement Wiesing's reverse phenomenology, then we question the inviolability of the artist's creative genius. The German philosopher probably would not have come to his insights if he had felt bound by the conventions of art history, but he necessarily got involved in the discussion—in our opinion, in a constructive way—about the limits of interpretation of paradigmatic pictures. Admittedly, it is difficult to find any semantic or social links between, for example, documentary war photographs, political party posters, and Barnett Newman's painting *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue* (1970), but what we can do is define what they have in common so that we can fill in the empty spaces of meaning in each of them. Wiesing helped us in this insofar as he defined three forms of perception that are unique to all images.

First, the “object” of perception: the specific ontological property of a pictorial object is its reduction to a single property—sensibility. The image becomes visible only because it is exclusively visible. The presence of what is shown in the image is an artificial presence that is reduced to mere visibility. Second, the “source” of perception: these are the conditions of possibility of perceiving the object of the image. The peculiarity of image perception lies in the subject of perception, which in this case performs a fundamentally different constitutive act than in the perception of a normal object, that is, of what is not an image. Third, the “consequences” of perception: only when we observe an image is the experience of perception not associated with the obligation to participate in the perceived events. The observer does not participate in them! Exclusively in the case of image perception, the observer is no longer immersed in the perceived world (ibid., pp. 174-176). After this, the question remains: Is there something specific in the perception of a work of radical abstraction?

*Paradigmatic pictures foreground their own appearing*

The German philosopher Martin Seel united art, image, and sensibility in a new type of phenomenologically based interpretation of art objects, which he calls the «aesthetics of appearing» (*Ästhetik des Erscheinens*). Seel's concept was designed, first of all, for the aesthetic analysis of essentially new phenomena of beauty, which, in the age of digital communication technologies, are realized no longer as signifiers of the classical European metaphysical tradition but as visual phenomena materialized aesthetically and artistically through their own mechanisms of the sensorial. The most significant contribution of his aesthetics of appearing is precisely the omission of criteria based on historical-theoretical canons of beauty, as well as the relativization of historical-artistic themes. This does not mean that classic works of art cease to be the pinnacle of the humanistic tradition but rather that their appearing, just like the appearing of any object, must be seen in the light of a new paradigm of “becoming”, “emergence”, and “event”. Whether the object in its appearing will be constituted as an aesthetic object or a mere thing depends on the observer's ability for intuition and imagination. Although Seel does not limit himself to pictorial media, the aesthetics of appearing implies the existence of modalities of pictorial appearing, but “not” vice versa. Given

that the aesthetic must include the pictorial but the pictorial does not have to include the aesthetic, we must here give the pictorial appearing theoretical independence. We will start from the difference that exists between an aesthetic object and any other object in order to open a discussion about what defines the aspects of “pure” visibility on the one hand and the visibility of the paradigmatic picture on the other.

The difference between visuality and pictoriality is comparable to that between sensorial and aesthetic perception. Seel explains it as follows:

In principle, anything that can be perceived sensuously can also be perceived aesthetically. Among possible aesthetic objects, there are not only perceivable things and their constellations but also events and their sequences—in short, all states or occurrences of which we can say that we saw, heard, felt, or otherwise sensed them. Nonetheless, the concept of aesthetic object does not coincide with the general concept of an object of perception, because what is sensuously perceivable and can therefore be the occasion of aesthetic perception is not for that reason already an aesthetic object. All aesthetic objects are objects of intuition, but not all objects of intuition are aesthetic objects. (Seel, 2000, pp. 21-22)

Since this attitude clearly points to Seel’s polemical attitude toward the legacy of metaphysical aesthetics, right at the beginning of his analysis, he distances himself from the tradition of the analytical philosophy of art that arose in the wake of Arthur Danto. Although he agrees with the American philosopher that any object can possess aesthetic qualities, that is, «that it can be aesthetically perceived» (ibid., p. 109), Seel believes that this fact stems from the way a concrete object appears in the visible world, not from the properties that we attribute to that object in some instrumental or social context. Seel’s theory is essentially phenomenologically determined because it is equally skeptical of the philosophical-speculative source of aesthetic experience as it is of its conceptual understanding. As such, he restores the aesthetic experience from the domain of intellectual cognition to the domain of sensibility, from the activity of critical reflection to the eventfulness and phenomenality of appearing (ibid., p. 23). In a certain way, this is a return to Immanuel Kant’s original teaching on «disinterested pleasure»: it is not a question of an aesthetic object having no other purpose than as an object of pure aesthetic enjoyment but of the human mind being able to see or experience an object—outside or beyond its practical function—as an aesthetic object. Marcel Duchamp did not show us the neglected “beauty” of the urinal, nor did he reveal its aesthetic dimension, hidden for centuries, any more than Paul Cézanne’s paintings are interesting because of his own expe-

rience of nature. We appreciate both of them, like most of the great modern artists, because of the change in the paradigm of the creation of a work of art—from individual authorial genius to public critical judgment, that is, from the work as object to the observer as subject.

In order to adequately argue the thesis that the paradigmatic feature of radical abstract painting is precisely “appearing”, it is necessary to take into account the previously mentioned pictorial/visual opposition (one of the fundamental aporias of the digital age) made by Dieter Mersch and refer to his suggestion that images should be freed of their “excessive” inscribed meaning, in other words, to approach them as abstract entities. We do not necessarily think here of images of abstract art but of images as objects freed from their culturally inherited aesthetic valorization. On the other hand, it should be recognized that in the *Aesthetics of Appearing*, Seel sets himself a more difficult task because he tries not only to separate the “factual” type of appearing (constitutive of any object) from the concrete “phenomenal” appearing (which is a prerequisite for aesthetic distinction) but also to establish criteria for observing those phenomena that participate “only” in the aesthetics of appearing within the desired aesthetic norm. In contrast to the approach to the aesthetic object in traditional hermeneutic disciplines, such as art history, where artistic properties are attributed to an entity—a picture or a three-dimensional object—in the process of interpretation, Seel’s method assumes the process of subtracting or abstracting the multitude of apparent phenomena of an object and turning attention to only those phenomena that are aesthetically relevant. He calls this process of the aesthetic reduction of all those unlimited and never fully comprehensible phenomena that make up the universal reality of an object the «simultaneous and momentary appearing of appearances» (ibid., p. 46). In other words, something can appear in a specific way, in a certain context, and with a specific way of viewing, regardless of all those universal and permanent features of that object that otherwise would not be particularly aesthetically interesting. This leads us to a key conceptual distinction: the “appearance” of an object is its universal factuality by which we recognize the particular thing within a class of visually and haptically recognizable objects. On the other hand, “appearing” is an aesthetic operation of visual focusing and the sensory perception of an object in a new status, at the same time freed from the multiplicity of its everyday appearances and enriched by a unique «simultaneous and momentary» appearing.

In the second part of the *Aesthetics of Appearing*, there is an essay entitled *Thirteen Statements on the Picture* in which the German author expressly claims that the problem of the ontology of the picture is more clearly opened if we start from abstract pictures because they do not carry the "burden" of representation: «Every theory of the picture has to explain on the one hand how the pictorial object relates to the pictorial presentation and on the other how pictorial presentation relates to other (for instance, linguistic) representations» (ibid., p. 163). In other words, the concept of representation in any case complicates what the image itself is because it is evident that representation is, first of all, the relationship between the presence of what is shown in the image and its absent referent. This is precisely why, when it comes to non-figurative images, Seel states that the so-called abstract image «proves to be the most concrete and therefore the paradigmatic case of the picture» (ibid., p. 161). Paradoxically, the abstract picture of analytical painting becomes concrete because the habitual aspect of representing extra-pictorial references is completely omitted in it. The latter, as we know, have been embedded in Western image culture since its very beginnings, and as such, the paradigmatic picture is a kind of metonymy of the pictorial essence, a framed two-dimensional surface that only hints at the possibility of pictorial action, returning the pictorially visible to the zero level of representation. Since it is not emptied of secular or religious content due to ideological prohibitions but due to pointing out the essence of artistic and pictorial sense as non-reality, it is entirely wrong to call analytical, minimalist, or other radical abstract painting "non-objective" or "iconoclastic".

Seel distances himself both from the classical philosophical tradition of Western aesthetics and from the approach of analytical aestheticians such as Arthur Danto (1974, p. 140; 1964, pp. 573 and 580-581) and George Dickie (1969, p. 254), affirming a clear phenomenological approach based on the act of appearing of a certain object. From such a phenomenological approach, Seel develops his thirteen theses on the picture in which he tries to define the concept of the image and its attributes in the world of contemporary visuality as precisely as possible. Starting from the thesis that, when talking about a picture, it is important to adopt the fact that there is also an extra-pictorial reality, Seel points out that the appearance of a picture differs from other types of appearances present in the visible world. In the first thesis, «Pictures are pre-

sentations that present something visible within the space of a surveyable surface», the author says that pictures are not only what they are since they also denote what they are not. Namely, a picture is a special type of sign and can be separated from what is shown on the pictorial surface. The picture as a material signifier and the picture as an intuitive creation of the visible differ according to the principle of duality or separability. Visible in the picture is reality, which is of a different nature than the picture as a surface—in the ontological sense, they exist on different levels. This gap, however, is bridged in the paradigmatic picture because what is visible in the image does not go beyond the domain of pure visibility, for example, in the domain of language, narration, or description; in other words, in our particular case, an analytical (paradigmatic) picture can only be “described” by another identical picture, and as such, it is always tautological by definition.

In the second thesis, «Pictorial signs are not (just) symptoms», Seel claims that the meaning of the image is not exhausted by indicating the cause of their pictorial appearance; the specificity of paradigmatic pictures is that they are concerned with indicating the cause, that is, the process of making or the purpose the pictoriality of the analytical pictures carries within itself. In an abstract artifact, one can therefore speak of an attempt to abolish the difference between what is seen on the surface of the painting and what is intentionally inscribed with a brush. In the fifth thesis, which talks about the fact that self-referentiality allows “all” images to be visible, Seel says that this is especially noticeable when the image is perceived as an artistic image (Seel, 2000, p. 169). It should certainly be noted that our thesis about self-referentiality as a subtype of metapictoriality refers primarily to paradigmatic pictures, so it differs to that extent not only from Seel’s but also from the one affirmed by Mitchell in *Picture Theory*. In the chapter *Metapictures*, Mitchell understands the concept of self-referentiality much more broadly as a kind of special pictorial status conferred to a very limited number of images, which is recognized by the fact that metapictures refer both to their own material production and “social” production of all images (Mitchell, 1994, pp. 35-82).

Here, we want to point out that the peculiarity of paradigmatic pictures is that they possess a charge of self-referentiality that is not directed toward pointing to other images but deals exclusively with the logic of their own visibility. This is precisely what is stated in the sixth thesis, «All pictu-

res present; most pictures represent», what Seel calls the «highlighting of aspects of its own appearing» (2000, p. 174), which is the fundamental determinant of abstract pictures. Although the depicted scene is important because it contains the semantic segment of the picture, the surface itself «is not of secondary importance in comparison to its sign function» (ibid., p. 175). The presence of a picture is not conditioned by the presence of any special extra-pictorial content, but the mere presence of the picture *per se* is sufficient as a basis for the appearing of a represented phenomenon: «In exhibiting a picture, what occurs on the expanse of its surface is always exhibited at the same time. The picture not only “contains” certain appearances (of color and form), it “refers” to its own internal references. It is through this reference to its appearing that it first becomes a picture» (ibid., pp. 177-178). Signifying is an integral part of the nature of the image, and paradigmatic pictures signify themselves as images, giving, through this process, a secondary analysis of their own appearing—they demonstrate what they actually are, what the observer actually sees. In the fundamental definition of an analytical image as a self-referential paradigmatic picture that carries a strongly expressed meta-component, its own appearing to the observer is emphasized. In this sense, in radical abstract art, the (visual) signifier coincides with what is (visually) signified.

#### *Conclusion: Toward the contingency of the zero-picture*

Recalling the year 1921 when he first exhibited his triptych consisting of three monochromatic canvases, *Pure Red Color*, *Pure Blue Color*, *Pure Yellow Color*, Aleksandr Rodchenko gave a kind of instruction for the use of his work eighteen years later: «I reduced painting to its logical conclusion and exhibited three canvases: red, blue and yellow. I affirmed: it's all over. Basic colors. Every plane is a plane, and there is to be no more representation» (Dabrowski, 1998, p. 43). This interpretation of Rodchenko's Russian avant-gardism as a new beginning was accepted by Dieter Mersch, as was made evident in his commentary on Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square* in which the German author, like the entire discipline of art history, recognizes tautology and non-picture, a place of transition that breaks with all previously accepted ideas about images, a performative act that transforms from a gesture of negation into something completely new, that is, «the quintessence of the pictorial itself» (2015, pp.

123-124). Mersch even claims that Malevich offered a new epistemology of the pictorial and its mediality and made representation superfluous or even impossible: «We could, with Wittgenstein, say that which makes the picture a picture cannot itself be part of the picture—it shows it» (ibid.). Painting can indeed be an allegory of a comprehensive image philosophy, especially because we have seen that there are compelling reasons to look at the fundamental features of pictoriality not only through the concept of showing but also through such different paradigms as active, inactive, or temporal, that is, through showing, visibility, and appearing. From today's perspective, we can indeed consider that Malevich and Rodchenko created the last paintings before artistic representation took on completely different prerogatives, but does this mean that high modernist radical abstraction simply affirmed the (post)modernist canon of "last paintings" as a painterly genre? If we were to answer this question positively, then all radically abstract painterly practice should necessarily be interpreted as the ultimate consequence of turning the avant-garde ethics of painting into the postmodernist aesthetics of the palimpsest. This would inevitably mean that modernist abstraction is really nothing more than a pure form in constant cyclical repetition, an artistic *perpetuum mobile* that always asks the same questions and gives the same answers. In this article, we sought to point out that objects created in the domain of art must be seen outside the area in which they were created because only then can we advance their meaning. Rodchenko called his painting «the last» because it really marked the end, but it was only the end of the historical-artistic teleology of painting, not of the concept of the picture. That is why we claim that the essential significance of abstract painting as paradigmatic pictures should be sought beyond the fascination with form or composition, the teleological contemplation of art, or the penetration into the spiritual spheres of emptiness and nothingness, because after the avant-garde, all these extremes always already result from turning art into a commodity fetish. Therefore, we do not suggest that they be viewed as the last paintings but that we move toward the beginning of representation, all the way to an imaginary "first" picture and, even further, toward recognizing in them the allegory of the "zero-picture"—the idea of the pure contingency of what is visible pictorially; in other words, to refer to the conceptual origin of their appearing, which is the real beginning of the history of pictorial, not just artistic, representation.

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## Abstract

This article starts from the thesis that radical painterly abstraction from the 1960s and 1970s is not only an important part of high modernism and postmodernism but also helps us to better understand the ontological position of the concept of the image and pictorial representation in general. Only when we separate the image from its instrumental function, either as an art object or as a means of communication, can we understand how images differ from reality and what we can actually see in them or through them. In order to do this, we give pictures of analytical painting and minimalism an exemplary or prototypical status and call them “paradigmatic pictures”, while we call all other pictures, including those pertaining to the tradition of 20th-century radical abstraction when viewed within an artistic context, “instrumental pictures”. We will first place our discussion in the context established by Filiberto Menna’s concept of the «analytical line of modern art», and then expand it with insights from the contemporary phenomenology of the image. Referring to the theses of the German philosophers Dieter Mersch, Lambert Wiesing, and Martin Seel, we will single out three of their key observations that explain the fundamental determinants of all images: «pictures show and show themselves», «pictures are visible because they are exclusively visible», and «pictures foreground their own appearing». Although these authors did not deal with radical abstract painting in the narrower sense, we aim to demonstrate that the mentioned paradigms are discernible especially in the works of minimalism and analytical painting and that the pronounced self-referentiality of these artistic practices has a theoretical potential that should be given a status different from disciplines that deal with art through concepts of form, style, or periodization.

KEYWORDS: paradigmatic pictures; instrumental pictures; image phenomenology; Filiberto Menna; Dieter Mersch; Lambert Wiesing; Martin Seel.

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