

FURTHER DESISTANCE/ I'M LATE, I'M LATE!

Abstraction is always in crisis. This is a welcome inevitability not a dilemma.

We have come to use the word abstract in a broader, indeed opposite sense than its original meaning of 'taking from'. Abstract has expanded to encompass additive and chaotic as well as traditional reductive and formal practices.

I think of abstraction as a presentation of process. We can engage with the processes of abstraction through productive metaphors such as folds, fractals, bodily functions, sounds and movement. The metaphor of the pulse—an example I use for my work—acts upon the painting to produce a repetitive rhythm of strokes and enacts for the painting's audience its pulsatility.¹

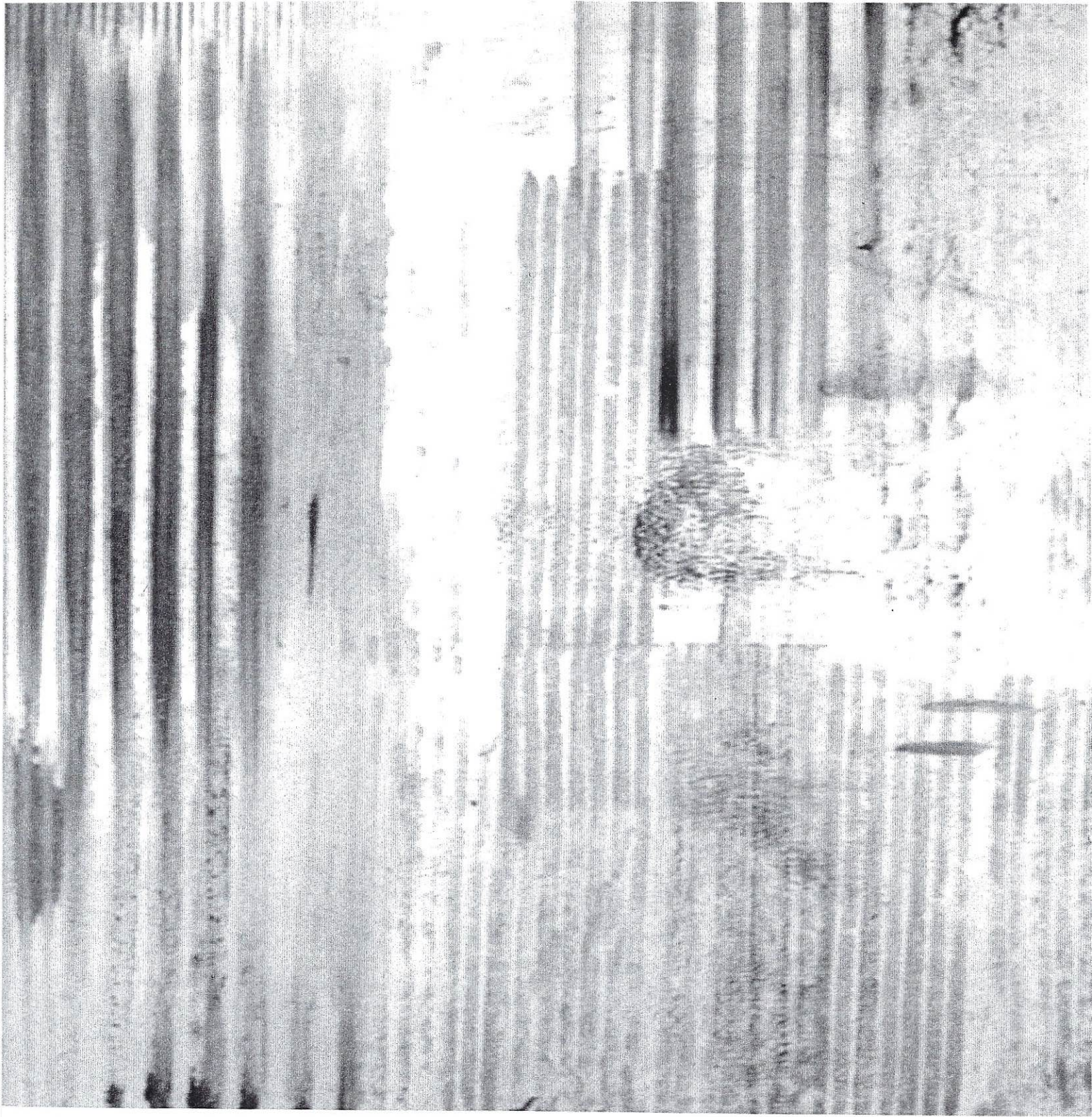
Music is often used to illustrate abstraction's complex temporality. The viewer approaches an abstract painting "in the manner in which an orchestral score is read: horizontally for the diachronous elements, vertically for the synchronous elements, and recursively for the varied repetition of elements previously introduced."²

For those who attempt to understand abstraction through language, words are the dilemma, but for the artist there is no dilemma, only a crisis of time. Present is past in the instant of consciousness. Time and memory conspire to make the unknown known, and once known, it becomes re-presentable. Malevich's *Black Square*, an emblem of the unknowable since 1915, is now an object of reverence and reference. Purity is impossible. We live by an ethic whose goal of abstraction is a modernist myth.

I, artist/audience, am both the visionary of purity and the force of corruption. Bringing the work to life corrupts it as it is filtered through the body—brain, breath, eyes, hands. Blots, smears, strokes, smudges, erasures and traces become purer forms of abstraction than a square; they are specific, but not referential, whereas geometry is universal and historically loaded. Dirty things may be the purest.

Believing that abstraction is a state previous to forms and symbols, our desire is to recuperate it in the present. Since the present is over in a blink, the abstract co-exists with it in a state of desistance. Desistance³ is a term which I take to mean an on-going stopping. Desist+stance uproots a single stance for abstraction. It is baroque like Deleuze's whirlwind. Desistance is the mechanism which holds open a gap between seeing and time. If temporal and visual come together in a blink, locating that place of 'jointure'⁴ is what is so compelling. That is the 'search' that we are driven by.

Non-representation is to not avoid that which already consists in not-doing. It is inevitable. Abstraction confronts the desistance of the subject; it has no site and no identity. It is impregnable; it is something which couldn't not happen. Absolute abstraction can exist only in a state of desistance—consciousness is its crisis: always after the fact, always post and modern. I'm late! I'm late!



Marthe Keller
Pliable Monster I
Acrylic on canvas
41"x40", 1999

1. 'Pulsatility' is from Rosalind Krauss', YoYo, in *Formless: A User's Guide* by Rosalind E. Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois, Zone Books, MIT, 1997
2. Susan Shaw Sailor describes reading Finnegans Wake in her book, *On The Void of To Be*, Univ of Michigan, 1993
3. 'Desistance', coined by Philippe Lacoue Labarthe, is described by Jacques Derrida in his introduction to Labarthe's *Typography Mimesis: Philosophy, Politics*, Harvard Univ, 1989
4. 'Jointure' is from an essay on Marthe Keller by Stephen Meville. His titles include: *Vision and Textuality*, edited with Bill Readings, Duke Univ, 1995, *Philosophy Beside Itself: On Deconstruction and Modernism*, and *Seams: Art as a Philosophical Context*, Intro, G.G. Rolfe, GBArts, 1996.