

Chicago Art Institute Lecture / January 1988

I'd like to begin by thanking the Art Institute for putting on this show. It is particularly moving for me to be able to show my work here. When I was a student I wrote two thesis essays; one was on Seurat and the other was on Matisse, so I'm sure you can understand why the Art Institute means so much to me. Secondly, I'd like to thank Neal Benezra for spending so much time on this exhibition and for writing such a beautiful essay. In response to his essay I will be talking about the early work with as much an emphasis as I will the more recent work, as he mentions that work in regard to personalizing the formalism of my paintings.

These paintings date from 1970 and are, going from left to right, nine feet high, six feet wide, six-and-a-half feet high and ten feet wide. Art historically, the two major influences that I was trying to cope with at this time were Piet Mondrian and Jackson Pollock. These paintings can be seen as a very cacophonous, expansive response to Mondrian or as an anal response to Pollock. The other great influence, in terms of the immediate environment, was the town in which they were painted: Newcastle. Newcastle is a shipbuilding town that connects with the rest of the world by iron and steel bridges. I would travel backwards and forwards, in and out of Newcastle on these bridges and would see details like the details you see in these paintings. Now, all of these were made by overlapping grids, by painting very systematically between strips of masking tape. There's a struggle going on here between freedom and system, a struggle that continues today in my work. I'll go into the reasons for that struggle hopefully later, if I remember to; and if I don't I hope somebody will remind me, because there are quite a few things I want to say. The grids are measured off differently, and by that I mean that they are different mathematical progressions. The grids are also layered, which is something that is common to all my work, something that runs right through it and is one of the obsessive characteristics of my paintings. I have this compulsion to overlay stuff. It is never really enough for me to just paint something once.

Here is another in the series, and it is about nine feet high. You can see that at the back of the painting there's a brown stain. Sometimes I would start the paintings off very loosely and would work forward through the colors until the paintings became harder and tighter. I would stop the painting when I thought I couldn't get anything more into it, which raises an interesting issue for me straight away; that is, "How do you finish a painting? Was the painting finished?" Now I'm not, and really never have been, interested in harmonizing (that is, in making compositions). My painting is too obsessively, too compulsively repetitive for that. So if I've filled up the painting and there isn't any room for anything else to get onto the surface, then that was a very good way of calling the painting finished. This way of working allowed me to make paintings without resorting to a kind of balancing act, which I've never really had any time for. For want of a better way of putting it, I've never been very interested in making pictures. That is to say, I've only been interested in representing some sort of extreme state in any of the paintings I've made. So even though these works at that time were made with grids, they're really not about order; they're more about manic addition.

At the same time as I was doing these paintings I was trying to do literally, physically, what I was doing optically with painting – that is, with some sculpture. Unfortunately this sculpture doesn't exist anymore. It was made with wooden grids, one of which, the closest one, was wrapped with woven pieces of felt.

It might be opportune to mention at this point that in 1970 I made a trip to Morocco. At that same time I was making calligraphic paintings that were also repetitive, compulsively so. But when I returned from Morocco I was making striped paintings and have made striped paintings ever since! It was as if I had some sort of revelation, that I had recognized something in that motion of the stripe that made it possible for me improvise for the next twenty years. Hopefully I'll get into that later. (The reason that I keep saying this is because when I talk about my work I never use notes; it makes it too easy. So I say it to remind myself as I go along.)

This is a painting that is, in a way, a little more refined than the earlier ones. It's a little flatter. Now that's important, because I think that fairly early on I began to feel that illusionistic space in painting wasn't what I was interested in. That's not the tradition that moves me. It didn't take very long before I began to flatten out the painting – a little, anyway. As you can see in this painting, the bright colors are always trapped, sandwiched, compressed between non-color or lack of color. This was done to achieve that flattening out so that they are more fabric-like and less an obvious, optical, illusionistic phenomenon. Also, the paintings were beginning to get a bit more contemplative, introverted, less obviously extroverted. This is another thing that I think is very interesting to art – what art is, what an art experience is. There is something I find very distasteful about an art, in whatever form, that is too available, that makes itself too available. This somehow cheapens the experience for me, cheapens the whole thing. I think that restraint in art, and rigor, have something to do with ethics, which has something to do with longevity and resonance and depth. That's really where I am coming from.

This painting takes the implications of the last paintings further. It is called *Subtraction Painting*. At the back of this, in those chinks, there are some bright colors, like red and blue. I worked over the top of those colors with gray or something that approached a non-color to try and take away the color. The painting was about taking away color to the point where it was almost gone; and then it was finished. If I'd taken the painting further it would have started to be about something else, about the color within the grays, since the other color wouldn't have been there. Thus, the painting was finished when it had reached its most extreme point within its own terms, without changing the terms.

This is a painting that I came across recently that had been rolled up. The reason that I find it so interesting now is because it has a lot to do with what I am currently interested in – that is, with inserts within a field, painting things in different ways yet all contained in one work. It is still very active, spatially, but what I was really interested in at this point, looking back, was the way that things are painted, the way the form is interpreted. This leads to something very important in my current work, which is the issue of subject matter, the content in my paintings. Now the content rests very much with how things are interpreted: how the band or

the stripe is painted; what characteristics it has; what color it is; how big it is; what, where, how it is painted; what sort of surface it has; its personality and its nature; where it's in context; and so on and so on. And this painting here is interesting to me because it starts to deal with all that, as well as the issue of time, in quite an obvious way with things being covered and uncovered, worked and reworked, other parts of the painting being worked while one part of the painting is left alone, and so forth.

This picture follows the other one and is made up of nine squares. This bears a fairly obvious relationship to what I do now in the sense that there are literal divisions. The squares were painted separately and then bolted together at the end. They were painted according to an arbitrary system of which I fully accepted the consequences. This points out again that at this time I was not really interested in composing paintings; I have always needed to have another reason for finishing a painting. It is still quite spatial but not as much as the earlier ones.

This is a painting I made at Harvard. It is a very strange painting. It was made with a roller and is very textured. It's like two or three paintings on one painting. I find it interesting now, but at the time I thought it very disturbing, very worrying. I didn't know what it was. There was a real battle going on in my work at this point between the need to make a surface intimate and moving and the desire to make a painting optically, spatially engaging. This picture here states that dilemma as clearly as it can be put.

I don't know how many of you read [\[BLANK???](#) essay, but one of the things he brings up is very interesting to me. And that was that on a lot of paintings I would leave the masking tape on. That is what happened with this painting. It is made with paint and masking tape. The picture is becoming much more textural and more direct as well as more perverse, in an interesting way, because it is quite a strange thing to do, like a very odd form of collage.

This painting is about four feet square and is made up of canvas, wrapping tape and acrylic paint; so it is really laminated. I would put down some tape, paint, put down some tape, paint, put down some tape, paint, so on and so on and so on. I'm reacting, at this point, quite

negatively to the bright color, the interesting space, and the engaging opticality of the early work. All the things that everybody likes it for. An interesting aside (not that it matters very much, but as an aside it's interesting to me): at this point my ability to sell my work dropped to zero. So the way I was working had an interesting social consequence as well as an interesting visual consequence.

This is all from 1974., As you can see there is really a lot going on, relatively. I began to make another group of paintings that took me about a year, in which I would paint the surface gray, put two pieces of vertical tape on the surface, paint it dark blue, put some tape on horizontally, paint the whole thing really thick, and then take off the tape. If I didn't like it I would put the tape back in, paint the surface again on/off, on/off, on/off until I got what I wanted. And what I wanted was a compression again, but of a different nature than before – one that was much more related to material than drawing. The divisions within these paintings change quite a bit.

This is a painting that was shown in New York and is in fact, the only one of these paintings that has ever been shown. It was in a show curated by Kate [???name???] called “Aspects of All Over.” I had this painting in and little tiny painting on wood. It is dark brown, very close to black, with the paint down wet, all over the surface with big rollers; I would pull out the grids at the end. This is one of the most successful ones, I think.

As the series progressed the drawing in the pictures would tighten up and also loosen up. At this point I was really testing out the limits, figuring out what I could do with it, how spare I could make it and how full up I wanted to make it, how optical I wanted it. What I was trying to do was to not have opticality in the paintings. This was something I'd been interested in earlier but was trying to get away from here. I wanted to make paintings resonate in another way, in a deeper way, rather than just in an “eyeball” way.

I don't know if I've accurately described this to you, but the lines on these paintings are not on the ground, but rather they're in the ground, incisions in the ground. That to me is very significant because it says a lot not just about the visual appearance of the painting, but about

my intentions, at that point, to beef up the surface. So they're not lines that are simply drawn on a cream-colored ground (that cream color was really the foreground, the last thing to go on). The lines are cut into it.

These are smaller pictures, but again within the same series; so as you can see on the blue verticals with the pink running down the side, I am working in a similar way to the others. That is, the reason that the pink runs down the side of the blue is because the pink was painted all over after the blue was painted; and then it was taped and then painted pink. This is why there is that bleeding. Again, this compulsion to paint in layers persists.

This group was painted in about 1974, I think. That is an eight-foot square painting with the masking tape left on all over the place. They are real, rough paintings, very aggressive. All the scarring on the surface is the result of the pulling out of the tape. The big cream-colored rectangle at the bottom is really an embossed grid where the masking tape was left in. It's as if now I've started to try to use the tape in a way that is extremely aggressive. I was doing this kind of thing on works on paper as well. Here's another one in the same series. Of course it is like what Ad Reinhardt has done in format, but different. And this one is about seven-foot square.

This was painted in 1975 and was the first painting that I made when I came to live permanently in the United States. It is less euphoric than the paintings I made at Harvard, which is interesting to me because it clearly suggests a much stronger commitment and a more long-term plan of action (whereas before I was just doing experiments, getting as much out of the year of my fellowship as I could). The fellowship at Harvard ended in 1973, the year that I had to go back to England. I'll tell you about that: when you don't have any money you have to have your wits about you, and you have to survive on fellowships. Like, you go to Harvard and there's no studio space but you have to get a studio somehow, which I did. It was nearly as big as this hall, and it was free. So that was one year. But when you get a grant that has government funding and you are a guest of the United States, you are required to leave the country for a minimum of two years because of the treaty that exists between the U.S. and the U.K. So in 1973 I had to go back to London, and nothing happened

there at all to make me change my mind one way or the other. I'd already decided to leave again, however. I was just going to stay in England for two years. So in 1974 I applied for a Harkness fellowship on my last eligible year, when I was thirty years old. And lo and behold, I got it! So, here I am. The Harkness was much better, that was serious money. The other one was \$2,400 for a year, while the Harkness was something like \$18,000 for a year, much better. In 1975 I thought this wasn't bad at all. So Cathy and I rented a big place in Manhattan (just like all the other artists), painted it white and sanded the floors (just like all the other artists), and started to make our work. What I decided to do was to continue to make the paintings that I needed to make, and I had the money to do it for two years. I was able to make these paintings that were, of course, completely unsaleable. Nevertheless, I had a long-term view about what would happen in the future.

This painting is made with cotton duck, which was then covered with black paper masking tape. Then the whole surface was painted with a translucent gray, allowing the black to show through as you can see on the left side. Then I cut down the middle of the painting with a razor blade and pulled out all the tape on the right side – and that was the result. What I was doing at this time was still playing around with the materials of the painting, but making paintings that were much more austere. I got rid of everything in the painting except the one thing I couldn't bear to get rid of: the line, stripe, band. I made paintings like this for a long time. I got rid of color, even. And for me that is a very hard thing to do.

This painting is striped with very narrow bands on both sides and is made up of four different blacks. It is twelve feet wide. There's no question at all that here I was confronting American painting head on, the people that I thought were important like Agnes Martin, Sol Lewitt, Robert Ryman, Frank Stella, Brice Marden, all those guys.

The importance of abstraction has always been very clear to me. It's strange because when I was at art school I had very thorough training in life drawing and painting and could do it as well as anybody else. I could have gone down that cul-de-sac, at the bottom of which is a dirty brick wall, and up against it Francis Bacon and Lucian Freud, drunk and sketching each other. I have always felt, and still do, that abstraction is generous, liberating and expansive –

which brings me to an interesting point about my paintings, and something that is very consistent. All the lines in my work go off the edge as if there's a longing to be in the world, as if painting isn't enough. And really, I don't think any medium is enough. No matter how good it is, it's not as wonderful as life itself.

This is a painting called *Spider*. It's very difficult to see what it is from this photograph. It's a painting I made in a funny little place in West Berlin that's sort of an underground showing space. When you make work that nobody will buy you get invited to show your work in lots of places that are "underground" and intellectually and morally superior. So I got on that circuit, which led to installation painting, of which I made two. I would have made more but nobody asked me to. So there it is: a sum total of two. I called this *Spider* because it's sitting in the corner. And that's an interesting thing. I have to think about this some more, but it must have been around this time that I started to use very directly evocative titles. So the work, for want of a better term, became figurative, or rather it had a longing in it to be as relatable to people, as usable to people, as figurative art has been able to be up until now.

This is a painting in progress, made with very thick shiny brown paint. That's masking tape down the bottom and paint on the top and plastic on the walls.

I can't remember whether I did this one first or another one that I did in New York, but on both of these I turned the corner. The one in New York was as interesting because I got to turn the corner both ways. An interesting phrase, "turning the corner," and I was in some other way starting to turn the corner, I suppose. But this is of course meant to be regarded as skin. It really looks as if it was on the wall in some other way and that somebody had pushed it along and it flipped round without releasing its grip on the wall. With the other one I made the corner went in both directions, so there was an "in" corner and an "out" corner – which led onto the paintings later, the ones where there are real projections and where I literally paint around the corner. There's clearly a desire with this work to break out of something, for it to be more. I've always been very interested in the extremes of any art medium. It seems to me that when you get to the edge of a medium, concurrent with its other attributes, it is possible to get to a realm where art and human experience occupy almost the same zone,

or where they rub up against each other so closely that that's where art can be almost as beautiful as life itself. Almost.

This is a small painting, four feet square, in oil paint over acrylic paint. I started to get very interested in the surface here. Like with *Spider*, in this group of paintings the surface becomes really sexy, very shiny or matte, and the paint is quite clearly pulled one way or the other. Here you can see it quite a bit. I started to make these diptychs because I felt that what was interesting about these paintings was the division between the two panels. Now that's one thing I wanted to emphasize, this collision between the two panels, or the dialogue between them. The other thing that I wanted to do was to make them very relatable. I keep coming back to this word – that is, how to make the work have some sort of proportion as people. So I got rid of a lot of the area of the painting. And by shutting it down in acreage I emphasized the relationship between the two sides. And by making the panels so vertical I put the vertical back in the work, which relates back again to the grids.

The reason I've used the horizontal and the vertical for so long is because I feel that they express the most fundamental attitudes that we have available to us, and that everything in between really is in between. There's something very moving to me about what I would call, for want of a better phrase, a primary form – the ability that that can possibly have to generate a deep emotional reaction, in other words to short-circuit a lot of stuff that we have put on us. I think that one of the responsibilities of art is to try to blow that aside, to give us a kind of relief.

That's a close-up of the last painting. The drawing is horizontal but there are a lot of things in the painting that are vertical, including the way the paint is put down and, of course, the proportions of the painting itself. Another point is that at this time the painting is becoming extremely sculptural (for a painting that is, not for a sculpture).