

Andrew Atwood

Rewriting Abstraction¹

A letter to Morgan Fisher from an essay by Morgan Fisher from an excerpt of a letter by Morgan Fisher to John G. Hanhardt.²

As we discussed, I'm interested in rewriting your essay, or rethinking it in terms apart from the way that abstraction has recently been explained, and hence, I would suggest, perceived in a drastically limited way. I do not think it's necessary to do this; it's just finally occurred to me that thinking in this way is possible. It disappoints me that abstraction is going down in history as a closed chapter, as if there were no more to be said, as if recent articles were the final word.³ I hope we can agree that this is far from so.

Others may read this, so it's important to state from the outset: this essay is not a corrective to your original. It is not meant as a misreading or as a misreading of a misreading or as a swerve or as a critique or any of those things. I simply admire your essay and I like the idea of operating on a referent with which my essay can be compared. I like having a composition and structure that was authored by someone other than me. I like the distance and the difficulty it provides. Perhaps this is why I am trying to put us in the same space, so that I might provide a comparison between apparently similar things.

But, more importantly, I chose to rewrite your letter because I have also been thinking a lot about abstraction. This is what drew me to your work. It occurs to me that abstraction is what my work is often about. In your terms, abstraction is my work's "impossible ambition." I realize it's odd to selectively quote one phrase in this essay—which itself is one extended quotation—but I find that particular phrase to be an extremely precise way of saying what I'm getting at.

It seems to me that the problem of abstraction in contemporary architecture is quite different from the issue of abstraction in modern art, in ways that have never been specified. The question for me is how we can continue to produce abstraction as a means of producing architecture. Like you, I admire Frank Stella, Ad Reinhardt and other abstract painters, and as you pointed out, the power of painting relies on the fact that we can see everything at once. A painting's facts are immediately present. Its image and materiality exist in a single frame, on one surface. Abstraction in painting is made possible by the coincidence of these observable facts. For a painting to be abstract, our perception of it must oscillate between looking at the painting as an object and seeing the image that the painting is trying to portray. If the image represents something too faithfully, we will never see the painting as a thing. If the process of creating the painting is too visible, we will never see the image. We must always see the thing and the image at the same time. Or, as you pointed out, it must continue to oscillate: thing, image, thing, image, thing....

1. Morgan Fisher, "Abstraction," in *Writings*, eds. Sabine Folie and Susanne Titz (Köln: Walther König, 2013), 15-16.

2. This essay is part of a letter I wrote to Morgan Fisher on August 20, 2014, which is based on an essay written by Morgan Fisher, which was excerpted from an unpublished letter written by Morgan Fisher to John G. Hanhardt on September 28, 2000 and revised in 2012.

3. Among others: Hal Foster, "At MOMA," *London Review of Books*, February 7, 2013, 14-15.

Morgan Fisher

Abstraction

What I'm getting at is the notion of rethinking my work, or thinking about it in terms apart from the structural film model in relation to which it has been placed, and hence, I would suggest, perceived in a drastically limited way. (Instead of "placed" I could say "imprisoned.") It's not for anyone to undertake to do this, of course, it's just that it has finally occurred to me that it's possible. It always irked me that the structural moment has gone down in history as something of a closed chapter, as if there were no more to be said, as if the groupings and periodization and affinities and explanations and characterizations were final. Far from so.

I have been thinking a lot about abstraction, and it finally has occurred to me that abstraction is what the films are about. Or to put in another way, abstraction is their impossible ambition. I forget if I already mentioned this to you. As you know, the painting I admire most is hard-core abstract painting: Frank Stella, Ad Reinhardt, Blinky Palermo, Gerhard Richter.

How to enact this ambition in film? It seems to me that much of the effect of an abstract painting is being able to see all of it, the full physical extent of it, before you, all at once. You understand the exact physical facts of the object: how big it is, its contours, its proportion, its shape, how thick it is, how it is made, how the paint is put on, thick or thin, opaque or transparent. And of course you also see it as a visual event or, to use a word that is wrong but useful, an image. You see it, in other words, as you would see it as a photograph, what it looks like. And all the material facts, the material extent, and the image, are coextensive. They are present in one another, congruent with one another.

The great problem with film is that the first set of things, the physical facts, the material embodiment, is inevitably always and forever severed from the image. Film is always only an image. Yes, I understand that a film image has grain in it, and so it can be claimed that somehow this fact can let you treat certain questions about materiality in a film, but nonetheless it is done within something that is always an image, not as a part of the totality of the physical event that a painting is. No one would for an instant claim that Jean-Honoré Fragonard's painting is about paint or an analysis of the materiality of paint, simply because you can see the manipulated pigment at the same time that you can see the picture that the pigment makes. Well, perhaps not exactly at the same instant, but by turns: paint, image, paint, image. But the point remains: being able to isolate the pigment as the means that makes possible a representational image does not in itself mean that the painting is about antiillusion, deconstruction, materiality, the subversion of bourgeois pleasure, etc.

The image is only a part of what film is. It's that simple. The film strip keeps on going beyond the confines of the frame, and because the image is projected, it is always displaced from that fragment of the material base that you do see. So the impossibility is rehearsed twice:

The problem in architecture is different. Despite recent attempts, we have never been able to see everything all at once. Unlike painting, architecture has no medium. There is not a specific conduit through which to understand architecture. It doesn't exist in a single frame, as a single thing. Its representation, image and physicality are never compressed into one object immediately consumable in a moment. These things are always different. Unlike painting, whose integrity allows it to remain abstract, architecture must attain abstraction despite the differences and distances between its various products.

The drawing, which has historically been the location of abstraction in architecture, is only part of what architecture is. It's that simple. Architecture always extends beyond the confines of this frame. And because drawings are projected, they are always displaced, whether it's from one drawing to the next, or to an image or rendering or model or building. These projections are rehearsed an infinite amount of times in architecture. Model to drawing to model to rendering to animation to model to photograph to building to drawing.... You always only ever see part, and what you see is only ever a projection of some other part.

This is why architects who index the process of drawing in their buildings are ultimately unsuccessful. They model their work on the language of abstract painting, but they ignore the fact that what painting affords is what architecture can never allow—the ability to see all of the work of architecture: not just the full extent of the building, but also the work's representations, which are the documents of the work's own making. Unlike paintings, which are things bound in a space, of a specific size, with edges of a finite width, architecture is never bound in this way. Yes, a building has a site, but our perception of it has no neat boundaries. Not only is the work experientially fragmented, but all the other media that prevision, envision and revision the building are assembled to surround architecture. The work's limits can never be understood by the boundaries of its material substrate and neither are they confirmed by its being a discrete singular object.

What to do to overcome this fatal set of circumstances? Well, one way to do it is to compulsively push into buildings the techniques and specific qualities found in forms of representation we use in architecture. One example would be to represent by means of illusionistic images the supposed "facts" of a building's experience projected onto the building itself: how the building is rendered, how it's traditionally constituted through representation as "real" before it's ever built. What is now automatically taken for granted in painting, its dual status as an image and object, might be achieved in architecture by making buildings that not only look like their renderings, but are also produced like their renderings. The ambition of some of my most recent work is this kind of self-congruence, bringing image (through rendering) and object together, to make architecture that delays a stable reading as a single form of architecture, whether it be in the form of a model or a rendering or a drawing or a building or something else.

you see only a part, and what you do see is not really that part, but a shadow of it.

This is the explanation for why abstract films of the kind in which worms and curlicues wiggle and writhe are so unsuccessful. They model themselves on the vocabulary of abstract painting, but they are severed from the fact that with a painting you see all of it. Not just the full extent of the image, but also a surface that is made and is a document of its own making, a bounded space of a specific size, something with an edge, something finite that stops. Yes, a film has an edge, but it's an edge produced by masking, not the edge produced by the limits of the material support, confined by its being a discrete object in a larger space.

What to do to try to overcome this fatal set of circumstances? Well, one way to do it is to compulsively bring into the field of the image representations of the physical facts of film and film productions. You represent by means of illusionistic images the facts of film and film-making that in abstract painting are available to the viewer by the simple fact of what a painting is as an object: how it is made, how it is constituted as a material artifact. What is secured in painting automatically, the self-documentation of making, the embodiment of making, is possible in film only by making pictures of it. Sound familiar? The ambition of my films is a kind of self-congruence, bringing image and object together, to make a film that shows you every material aspect of its making, just as an abstract painting does. This is by definition impossible in film, but that remains the ideal, and my films enact the frustration of trying to reach an ideal that they know is unattainable. To try to attain abstraction in film you have to use representational images. The result is abstraction by other means, or abstraction in an unfamiliar guise: images as bathos.