

Shapes of inhabitation: Painting in the expanded field

MARK TITMARSH

*When is a sculpture, an installation, a photograph or a building really a painting?*¹

At some point in the recent past the final stage of a historical transition took place within the discipline of painting. This event was a paradigm shift, as momentous as previous evolutionary developments from cave to church to canvas. After many stops and starts the discipline of painting has completed the final stage of its self-sublimation. In doing so it has traded its traditional concern with picturing things in favour of an intense interest in its thingliness, its status as an object.

The inevitability of this shift has been understood for almost a century. However, the timing and full significance of the event could only be known *post factum*. The multiple deaths and regathering of painting that led up to this moment can now be cast as a historical discussion about the object-ness of painting. The result is a quantum dispersal of pictoriality into the processes of 'making' and 'doing' painting. Possible terms for this kind of work are expanded painting, conceptual painting,² total painting, deconstructed painting, theoretical painting, painting under erasure, displaced painting, as-painting, painting outside painting, unpainting, ex-painting and so on.

Forty years ago painting was characterised technically and ideologically as the most regressive and conservative discipline in the visual arts. Recent expanded practice has come to remind us of the simple truth that there is no final truth of painting, that it has 'no essence outside of history, thus gathering, dispersing and regathering itself at every moment'.³

I am using the term 'expanded painting' in reference to Rosalind Krauss's essay 'Sculpture in the expanded field'. Written in 1979, she noted that 'rather surprising things have come to be called sculpture' and that the category of sculpture was being stretched so as to be 'infinitely malleable'.⁴ At that time, a classic paradigm shift was taking place in sculpture. The traditional limits of the discipline were overwhelmed and redefined by land art, marked sites and serial structures. A similar shift was taking place in painting, but as Krauss noted at the conclusion of her essay, it was to be understood in terms of 'uniqueness and reproducibility'. In the decade following, painting and most of the other disciplines were discussed in exactly those terms.

What needs to be emphasised now is that many of the minimal and conceptual practitioners discussed in that article were painters escaping their discipline for the sake of freedom from convention. While Ian Burn, Donald Judd and Robert Smithson abandoned painting in the 1960s and established new territories, one of the inevitable outcomes of their work was to pose a whole series of questions for painting. The partial answer to those questions is expanded painting. Since that time the act of abandoning painting has become established as a necessary rite of passage for contemporary artists.

While expanded painting has not yet been defined, and is in some sense undefinable, it functions as a field of possibilities that questions what painting is and what it can become. In the recent past the search for pure painting limited painting to an intrinsic flatness and an aesthetic of fluids. Expanded painting tends instead towards total painting, an absorption and 'synthesis of all the arts under painting'.⁵ The emphasis subtly shifts from 'what is painting' to 'how is painting'. How a painting 'is', the nature of its being, is partially determined by tools such as paint, canvas and brush; the history of what has been done in painting up to the current moment, 'one can paint only out of the history of paint'; and an analysis of the concept of 'medium', as a grammar or family of concepts that cluster around the medium of painting.

Up until very recently the question of what was and was not a 'painting' was not so complex. The dictionary still reassures us that painting is 'the practice of applying a pigment suspended in a medium to a surface'. Since the time of easel painting, brushes did the applying, paint carried the pigment, and canvas was the surface. These were the three members of painting's quorum. The flat surface of painting differentiated it from sculpture and created a division between the world of the viewer and the world of painted content. Greenbergian formalism made the flatness of the surface the apotheosis of painting. Michael Fried refined the point by saying, 'flatness ... ought not be thought of as the "irreducible essence of pictorial art" but rather as something like the minimal condition for something to be seen as painting'.⁶ Painting and flatness are once again fully contentious. Contemporary painting has made the boundaries of the medium 'infinitely malleable' such that 'rather surprising things have come to be called painting'.

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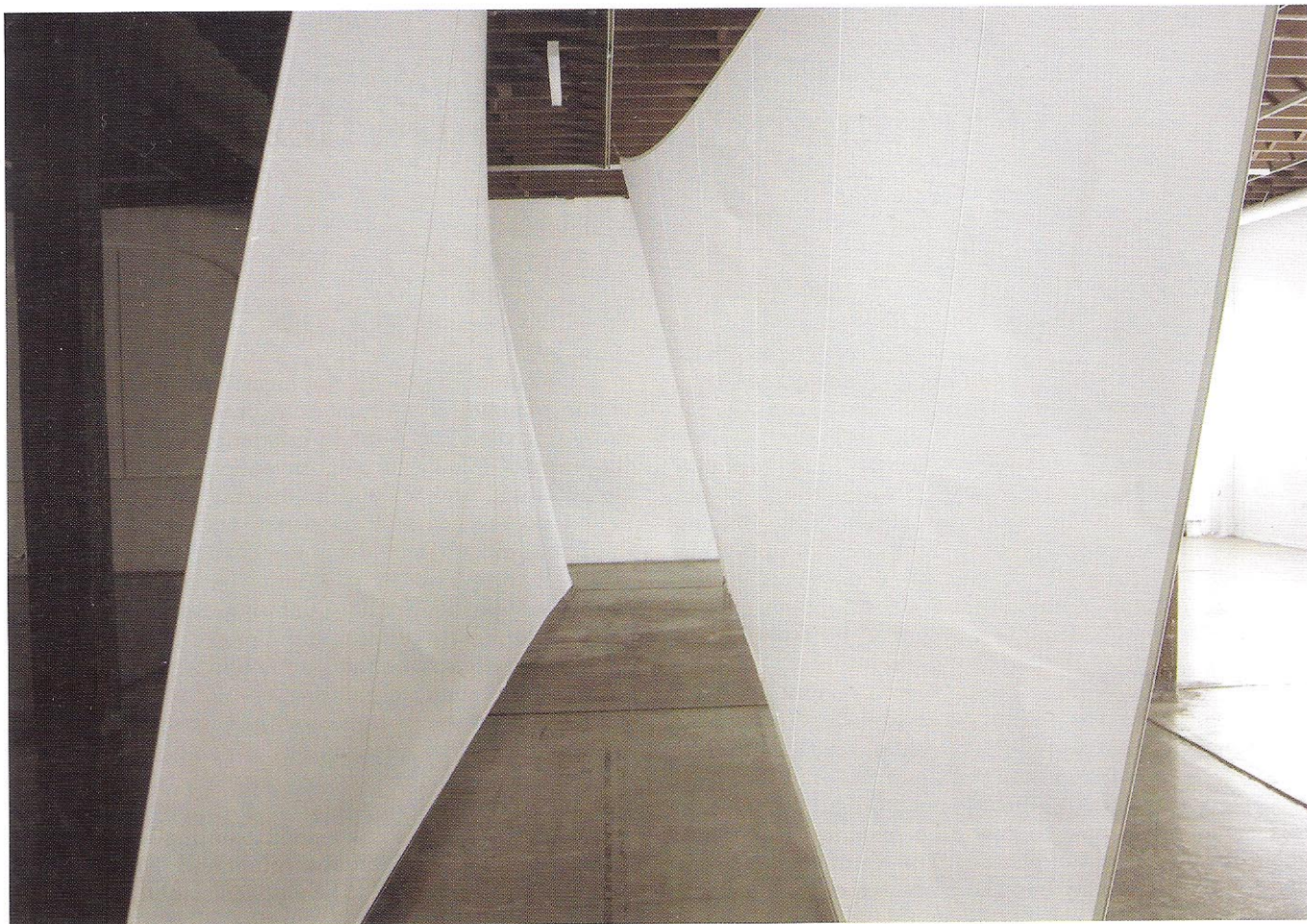
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Installation view of Richard Dunn's *Shadowzone*, Artspace, Sydney, 2005. Courtesy of Artspace.

An expanded concept of painting has identifiable roots that thread back through abject art, installation art, minimalism, conceptualism, arte povera, fluxus, Rauschenberg, Pollock, Duchamp and Picasso. In the first decade of the twentieth century the balance between painting as an object and painting as an image began to tip with Picasso's synthetic cubism. By introducing foreign objects such as wallpaper, newspaper, cardboard and rope, Picasso denied the infinitely thin surface of the image and extended the range of painterly operations. Almost immediately afterwards, Duchamp pushed the extended modes of painterly production to an alogical extreme by abandoning all the craft skills associated with painting. By continuing to exhibit readymades as an extension of painting practice, and in the context of other paintings, Duchamp challenged the 'proper name' of painting.⁷

The subsequent story of painting is a litany of abandonments. Wave after wave of painters in the following decades began withdrawing various elements from the tradition of painterly practice. Pollock abandoned brush and easel in favour of the performative act of 'doing' painting. Allan Kaprow, inspired by Pollock, abandoned painting and

all discipline-based definitions of art: 'the young artist of today need no longer say "I am a painter" or "a dancer", he (or she) is simply an artist'.⁸ Kaprow rejected Greenberg's call for purity of form in favour of the impurity of hybrid events that he called 'happenings' and performance art. At about the same time, Rauschenberg abandoned the vertical picture plane by placing his canvas on the floor where it accumulated objects rather than images. By introducing an 'aggressive physical dimension into pictorial space'⁹ painting asserted its object status over its pictorial function. The resulting conflict between painted space and physical space resulted in a whole tradition of assemblage and constructed painting. The final stage in constructed painting took place in Lucio Fontana's work where surface wounds in canvas symbolised a violence to, and an escape from the surface of painting.

The few traces that remained of painting by the late 1960s were globally erased when an entire generation of painters migrated to conceptual art and minimal art. However, it is no irony that two of this movement's major figures, Ian Burn and Donald Judd, were both trained as painters and their ongoing object practices continued



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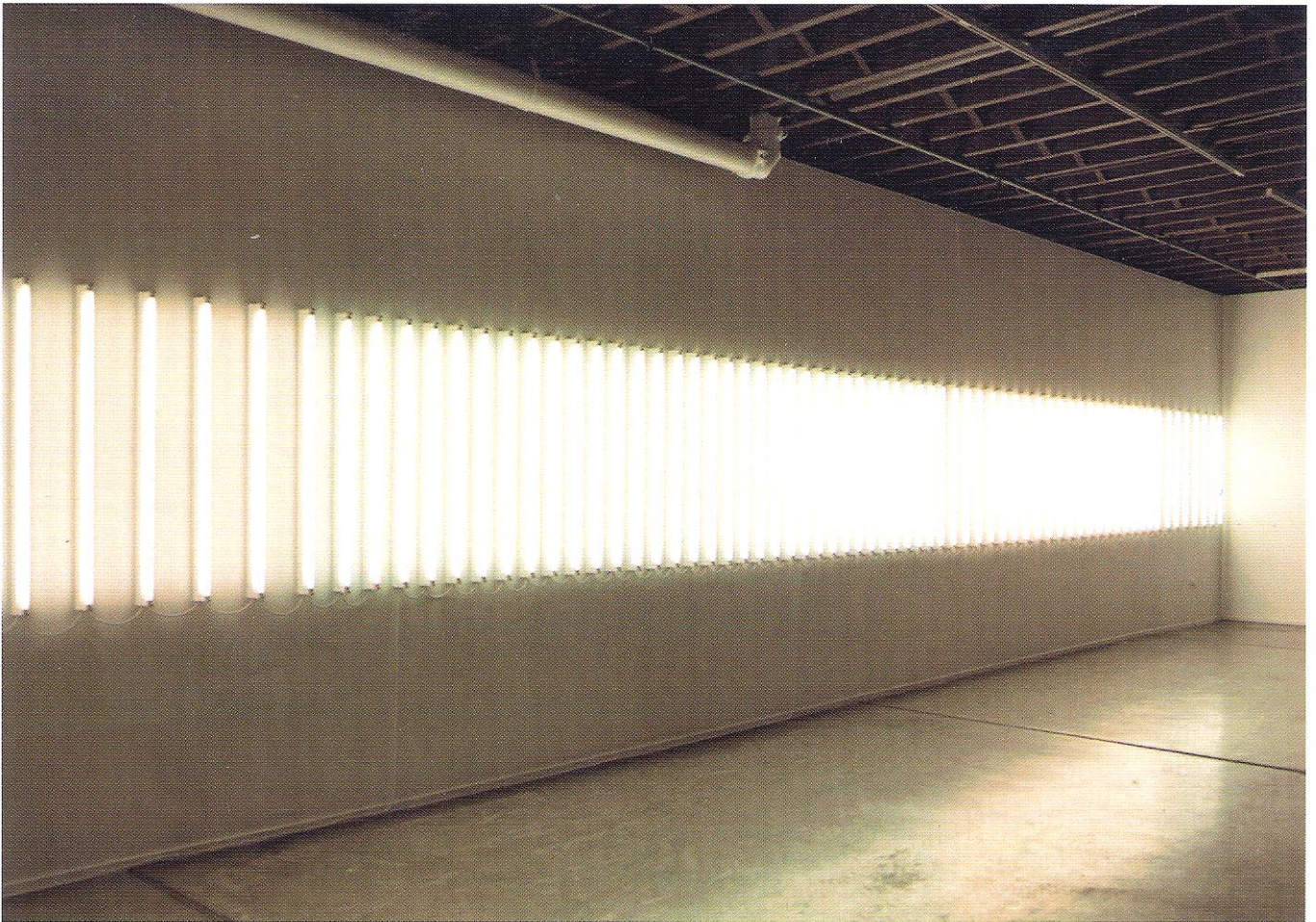
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Installation view of Richard Dunn's *Shadowzone*, Artspace, Sydney, 2005. Courtesy of Artspace.

to resonate with the absence of painting. Both artists were fascinated with box-like structures and the power of colour until their deaths in the 1990s.

Neo-expressionism in the early 1980s was a brief resurgence of traditional painterliness. Very soon afterwards painters returned to ritualistically abandoning their craft in favour of object-based practices. The result, by the end of the 1980s was the creation of a new medium, installation art, but 'installation' art remains an unsatisfactory provisional term that has struggled to hold together various incompatible elements.

To abandon painting continues to be the most radical move a painter can make. While abandoning sex might result in the end of a species, abandoning painting results in a tantric transmogrification of painting. Barry Schwabsky notes in *Vitamin P: New perspectives in painting*, that to 'not paint' has become a 'fully institutionalised practice'.¹⁰ In the current decade young artists are thrown into painting practice where 'not painting' is their starting point. Consider the brilliant response to this situation staged every fortnight at the artist-run-initiative, MOP Projects in Sydney. Schwabsky

also argues that painting is no longer concerned with problem solving, rather its problem is to find ways to do something other than solve a problem. He suggests that if you are not problem solving then you are probably directly engaged with the immediate visual world in the form of 'billboards, video games, magazine ads, pornography, instructional diagrams, television and an infinite number of other things'.

Yet contemporary painters involved in the expanded domain do seem to be engaged with a problem of the need to define the essence, the primordial, existential element of what painting 'is', or continues to allow it to 'be'. Like an existential riddle or a zen koan painting subjected to this kind of questioning becomes uncanny, obsessional, infinite, in flux, riddlesome, spatio-temporal, and ultimately not contained by common sense definitions of painting.

If painting has broken free of its traditional boundaries and can incorporate video, photography, installation, architecture, social relationality, how do we identify it as opposed to other practices that have also expanded, such as expanded sculpture, expanded film, video installation, conceptual photography, deconstructed

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Installation view of *Intersecting geometries* by Mimi Tong and Nuha Saad, Artspace, Sydney, 2005. Courtesy of Artspace.

architecture and so on? When historically separated disciplines do develop common boundaries then our language for discussing them becomes challenged and inadequate. Kaprow sought to short-circuit this dilemma by arguing that discipline boundaries are no longer meaningful, that one is simply an artist making art. Yet even conceptual artists like Mel Bochner maintained that 'without the history of the practice of painting as the background for all my work, it becomes a series of disparate gestures'.¹¹ His practice from the 1960s to the present affirms the idea that something not recognisable as a painting but nevertheless fully engaged with painting is possible. The convergence of the work of Hany Armanious and Mikala Dwyer around the common boundary of expanded painting and expanded sculpture also attests the fact that while work may look quite similar, the studio discipline in which an artist trains, has significant though subtle impact on the final work no matter how far it develops away from the source.

The drive towards a convergence of all disciplines into 'Art' has itself become institutionalised. A reaction against it involves reasserting the difference that is painting. But this is not to be confused with a reactionary return to the purity of painting or an aesthetics of the beautiful. Ex-painters have projected the concerns of painting into object practices, and these practices have

irrevocably shifted the boundaries. The challenge now is to identify the shiver of painting within a convergence of materials and practices, or to be able to see a building, an installation or photograph within the discourse of painting. As Michael Fried put it, 'The essence of painting is not something irreducible. Rather, the task of the ... painter is to discover those conventions that, at a given moment, alone are capable of establishing ... (the) work's identity as painting'.¹² Works are identified as painting not on the basis of flatness or canvas or brushwork, but by a hermeneutics of painting: what at an historical moment can be proposed as painting.

In a trilogy of exhibitions at Artspace, Sydney, in March 2005 the complexities of these issues were played out by contemporary artists from three different generations of practice. *Shadowzone* by Richard Dunn, *Diorama* by Matthys Gerber and *Intersecting geometries* by Nuha Saad and Mimi Tong were all installations concerned with the spatial and conceptual implications of painting. *Shadowzone* is described by the artist as an installation; *Intersecting geometries* was an architectonic fusion of painting, sculpture and installation. Of the three shows only Gerber's actually contained paintings on canvas and these were meaningfully entombed behind a wall.

Much of the terminology used by these artists is based on the historical convention of calling works that

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Installation view of *Intersecting geometries* by Mimi Tong and Nuha Saad, Artspace, Sydney, 2005. Courtesy of Artspace.

occupy space an installation. Conceptual art influenced many painters and sculptors in the 1980s to converge toward the same spatial domain, such that conceptual painting and conceptual sculpture were both called installation art. Through the medium of installation, painting asserts itself in spatial terms, and colonises the third dimension.

Dunn's *Shadowzone* was constructed from two large white translucent screens that ran down the centre of the gallery and a bank of fluorescent lights occupying the wall behind. The fluorescent lights were the only source of light within a darkened room. The intense light pumped out by them filters through the screens to create an opalescent alley of light running down the corridor space between the screens. The white screens exaggerated the dimensions of the canvas to the almost limitless proportions of sail cloth. Typically, canvas is the barrier between the viewers world and the world of the painted image, whereas here the screens functioned as a safety zone, a 'shadow zone', that invited the viewer and enveloped them in a spatio-temporal event.

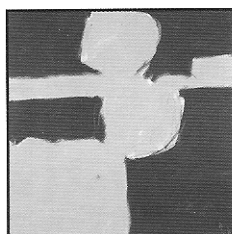
In this work every act of moving away from painting was a way of modifying or extending painting. Every act of deconstruction, that breaks painting down into its primary elements of support surface and light source was nourished by a constructive relationship with the

discourse of painting. The final layer of the work, the ambient sound component by Marcus Kaiser, extended *Shadowzone* into a work of total painting, in relation to the Wagnerian concept of a Gesamtkunstwerk.

In Gerbers *Dio rama* painting was made problematic in terms of a spatial construction that distances painting while at the same time calling back and forth between painting and other modes of visual presence. The title of the work encouraged us to see it as something like a natural history museum diorama where painting is made the subject of an objectifying and archeological gaze.

The primary subject matter of the diorama, two abstract paintings, were obscured by string that ran from floor to ceiling in a ricochet path. The viewing windows reinforced our focus on the paintings by being directly opposite the paintings and of identical proportions. The biomorphic abstraction of the canvases is challenged and interrupted by the geometric abstraction of the string in 'real' space. The viewing wall of the diorama served as a barrier between the world of the viewer and the world under observation.

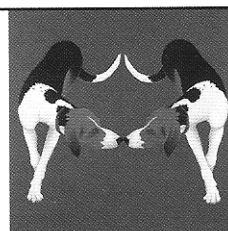
The double window view on the paired paintings is also suggestive of early stereoscopic photography. However, rather than transforming two flat images into a three dimensional scene, the reverse occurs. The curious effect of the viewing windows is that they collapse the



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complex spatiality of the installation back into the flatness of painting. The view afforded by the windows allows for limited change in angle and prohibits views from behind or to the side. The diorama windows capture space for a front on view only, reasserting the traditional frontality of painting. Likewise the windows function as a view into another world just as in the window picture plane of traditional painting.

In Tong and Saad's *Intersecting geometries*, both artists called upon their common background in painting, sculpture and installation. Their highly structured installation took its primary visual cue from the original wooden columns that make up the building that houses the gallery. Whatever remains of painting in this work had been reduced to a structural hinge between the wooden stretchers of painting and the wooden frames of building construction. The grids and geometrical structures that filled the space are partially webbed and suggested a crossover between canvas stretched on a frame and cladding on a building. The permutational extensions of the grid in three dimensional space are metaphoric of architectural modules and the grids of painterly perspective. The result is that the potentially illusionist space of painting was firmly grounded in a non-illusionist articulation of structured spacing.

These three shows, together with many other recent exhibitions evidence a groundswell of activity fuelled by a new attitude towards painting. Shows such as *Constructed colour* at Artspace in 2003 and *Post Contemporary Painting* at the Institute of Modern Art in Brisbane in 2004 were all concerned with the spatial and conceptual extension of contemporary painting practice.

Colour, composition, form, texture, luminosity and flatness were once the indivisible atoms of painting. Painting is now 'all edges, everywhere hinged, both to itself and to what it adjoins, making itself out of such relations'.¹³ Those primary elements of painting are not lost but function independently or as radical hybrids. Colour in the form of large quantities of dried paint can become a graspable solid rather than an infinitely thin surface. Composition becomes a general principle 'through which a work holds itself together and makes itself visible'¹⁴ whether it be on a flat surface or by the placement of objects in a three dimensional space. The surface of painting becomes a place rather than a window or a barrier. At the surfacing of painting objects gather and events take place.

Painting's ability to hold itself together, to show itself as painting, includes and structurally depends upon an internal detachment that makes its departure from itself a dimension of its achievement. Painting continually opens out beyond itself while maintaining a nourishing link to what it has been. The riddles of expanded painting show us that painting is not one thing but two, always separated from itself by the division between its 'thingliness' and its discursiveness. This inherent division continually displaces itself into other ways of being.

Notes

- 1 Katy Siegl, 'As painting', *Artforum*, May 2001, p. 51.
- 2 My preferred term is 'conceptual painting' as developed in a series of catalogue essays compiled in an artist's book, *Mark Titmarsh, Artist writings 1981–2004*, 2004, Sydney.
- 3 Stephen Melville, 'Counting/as/painting', in Philip Armstrong, Laura Lisbon and Stephen Melville, *As painting: Division and displacement*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2001, p. 277.
- 4 Rosalind Krauss, 'Sculpture in the expanded field', in her *The originality of the avant-garde and other modernist myths*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1985, p. 277.
- 5 Steven Melville, *Philosophy beside itself: On deconstruction and modernism*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1986, p. 10.
- 6 Michael Fried, 'Art and objecthood', in *Art and objecthood: essays and reviews*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1998, p. 169.
- 7 See Thierry de Duve, *Pictorial Nominalism: On Marcel Duchamp's passage from painting to the readymade*, University of Minneapolis Press, 1991.
- 8 Allan Kaprow, 'The legacy of Jackson Pollock', *Art News*, October 1958, p. 57.
- 9 Curt Barnes, 'Travels along the dialectic', *Art Journal*, Spring 1991, p. 26.
- 10 Barry Schwabsky, 'Painting in the interrogative mode' in *Vitamin P: New perspectives in painting*, London, Phaidon, 2002, p. 7–8.
- 11 Mel Bochner quoted by Philip Armstrong in *As painting: Division and placement*, p. 74.
- 12 Fried quoted in Melville, *Philosophy beside itself: On deconstruction and modernism*, p. 10.
- 13 Melville, 'Counting/as/painting', p. 21.
- 14 Melville, 'Counting/as/painting', p. 7.

Mark Titmarsh is a Sydney-based artist, and lectures in Visual Communication at the University of Technology.



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