

**SVEN LÜTTICKEN**  
**LIVING WITH ABSTRACTION**



**According to the teleological model of formalist art theory, aesthetic modernism was tantamount to the orientation towards the autonomous self-reflection of a medium. Correspondingly, viewers of post-war Color Field painting were meant to encounter the apotheosis of modern art in the mode of monochrome abstraction. From the perspective of critical theory, however, the history of abstract art cannot be detached from the processes that abstract social and economical conditions under the capitalist regime of a universal law of exchange.**

**But what, then, is the relation of abstract art to an increasingly “abstract world”? And how can this relation be conceived of today, when the formal vocabulary of abstraction is happily revived in the guise of corporate design, and the information encoded in abstract signs has advanced to the leading currency of immaterial economies? Can the globalization of abstraction be represented at all by artistic means or even surveyed diagrammatically?**

**THE ABSTRACT WORLD**

For his 2002 poster project commemorating the attack on the World Trade Center, Hans Haacke produced an edition of monochrome white posters from which the silhouettes of the Twin Towers had been cut out. These were glued onto New York poster walls, with the underlying printed matter partly visible in the negative volumes.<sup>1</sup> For the design of his “negative” poster, Haacke

used an advertisement for a Broadway production from the *New York Times Magazine* as background, and on the city’s poster walls there were likewise fragments of ads that were visible in the towers’ silhouettes — often ads for shows, films or records. Although ostensibly commemorating 9/11, the project in effect problematized and questioned the destroyed building itself, which had made visible the abstract, aniconic tendency of advanced capitalism in the form of a spectacular icon. As an image of deterritorialized streams of capital, in Haacke’s project the destroyed WTC becomes the empty frame of commodity-images which, according to Marxian theory, are themselves merely pseudo-concrete manifestations of abstract exchange-value: as Terry Eagleton put it, “the commodity erases from itself every particle of matter; as alluring auratic object, it parades its own unique sensual being in a kind of spurious show of materiality.”<sup>2</sup>

In a process that is as liberating as it is destructive, capitalism abstracts people and goods from feudal social bonds, replacing them with the abstract bond of exchange-value. This means that all modern — commodified — art is fundamentally abstract, regardless of whether it consists of squares and rectangles or represents cute kittens: “As uninteresting as obsolete postage stamps, and offering as little variation as these, literary or artistic productions are now signs of nothing but abstract commerce.”<sup>3</sup> Formal abstraction thus would seem to offer no privileged insight into a society where abstraction is triumphant. In 1937, Meyer Schapiro argued that there are problems with theories that derive abstraction in art either from the forms of industry or from “the abstract nature of modern finance, in which bits of paper control capital and all human transactions assume the form of operations on numbers and titles”<sup>4</sup>, since abstract art did not emerge in the most industrially advanced nations or in the main

centres of finance — and moreover, many early abstract artists positioned their work squarely in opposition to what they perceived as the *materialism* of modern society.

One way out of this quandary was offered by Adorno's sophisticated argument that formal abstraction is the result of a new "interdiction" of representation which stemmed from the imperative for the work of art to absorb its "deadliest enemy, exchangeability", resisting abstraction by representing it negatively.<sup>5</sup> Abstract art is thus positioned as perhaps the modern art par excellence — its "windowless monads" showing the abstract nature of society by refusing to represent its glimmering surfaces, or even its dark underside, giving back a blank stare rather than attempting to adjust traditional representation to a post-traditional world. However, this negative theology of abstraction — of which Gerhard Richter's reading of the gestural abstraction of *art informel* as befitting a post-traditional world is another instance — has increasingly been challenged by practices that seek to give a more precise social and political meaning to be abstracting structures.<sup>6</sup> This development occurs at a time when capitalism seems to abstract itself beyond recognition, entering a post-visual, "conceptual" phase in which even pseudo-concrete appearances are abandoned. In the 1970s, Baudrillard used the "binary" towers as signs for the transition from a regime of production to one of pure semiosis, of capital becoming coded information circling the globe — the ultimate abstraction.<sup>7</sup> Can such abstraction still be made visible, however inadequately, now that Baudrillard's double icon is gone?

#### **ABSTRACT ART AGAINST ABSTRACT THOUGHT**

Starting in the 1980s, Peter Halley decoded abstract art as being "nothing other than the reality of the abstract world": abstraction in art was

"simply one manifestation of a universal impetus towards abstract concepts that has dominated twentieth-century thought."<sup>8</sup> Historically, things are far more complicated; for Adorno, modern art is precisely about *resistance* to the concept (*Begriff*). Modernism in art amounted to a fight for the rights of the "non-identical" in the face of the triumph of the concept — which is, against Hegel, seen as an abstraction.<sup>9</sup> Whereas Hegel saw the concept as "the truth of being", as an active principle that manifests itself objectively, Adorno set out to examine the non-identical remainder of this philosophical assimilation of being to the concept.<sup>10</sup> Art was crucial for Adorno because it operates not conceptually but with a latently "magical" procedure, one harking back to the dawn: it is fundamentally mimetic. As such, art corrects conceptual knowledge (*begriffliche Erkenntnis*).<sup>11</sup> It mimics rational procedures and uses them against purposive rationality; art is reason turned against itself.<sup>12</sup> This is why works of art are quasi-linguistic; they are hieroglyphic writings whose code has been lost.<sup>13</sup>

The voluminous textual output of early abstract artists notwithstanding, a resistance to language as a medium of conceptual thinking was central to their practice. Even though Mondrian opened his groundbreaking 1917 essay with the statement that "life is becoming more and more abstract", he took care to point out that his art stands "between the absolute-abstract and the natural or the concrete-real. It is not as abstract as abstract thought, and not as real as tangible reality. It is aesthetically living plastic representation: the visual expression in which each opposite is transformed into the other."<sup>14</sup> Abstract art thus is conservative, shying away from ultimate abstraction. It represents the failure, or the refusal, to abstract itself beyond the visual. It does not deal with concepts; it creates a new plastic expression by juxtaposing color and line, horizontal and

vertical, outwardness and inwardness, nature and spirit, individual and universal, female and male; it gives a determinate or concrete expression to the universal by putting “purified” forms and colors in rhythmic compositions. Mondrian thus tries to mediate between two realms, the stuff of the senses and “abstract thought”. His adherence to the archaic and stubbornly material medium of easel painting implies a conservative protest against the onward march of abstraction — a decision to confront the concept with its refuse, with corrections and imperfections, with blotched and botched areas of paint.

The 1928 “Picture-Poem” is a rare case in which Mondrian integrated text into his art; it is a gouache and ink drawing on paper in which a Michel Seuphor poem is set in a typical Mondrian composition (not too elegantly; two of the poem’s lines are broken off clumsily at the end). Even if the piece can be said to prefigure Conceptual Art in its use of graphically arranged language and in being suitable for reproduction in various formats, the piece retains traces of its hand-made nature, and the text is a poem. Compare, by way of contrast, recent pieces by Joseph Kosuth titled “Mondrian’s Work”, in which graphic reproductions of Mondrian compositions are inscribed with quotations from Mondrian’s writings. While the principle may at first sight seem similar to “Picture-Poem”, it is in fact diametrically opposed: here statements by Mondrian become *content* for a managerial approach to language, one that effectively reduces a sustained writing effort to soundbites; these are then integrated in compositions that are used as typographic clichés, as Flusserian “programmed surfaces”.<sup>15</sup> Such Conceptual Art mirrors an economic regime in which “abstract thought” itself becomes increasingly operative and concrete, in the process largely leaving behind language as the master medium of abstraction: “abstract thought”, Paolo Virno puts

it, “has become a pillar of social production.”<sup>16</sup>

In the late 1960s, when Sol LeWitt characterized the idea as a “machine that makes the art”, he was effectively mimicking the corporation’s attitude towards its patents and brands, which are “machines for making products” — the latter activity possibly being farmed out to others, just like LeWitt would soon have assistants all over the world.<sup>17</sup> Abstract thought thus reveals its complicity with that other fundamental form of abstraction: exchange. Adorno already argued against the fetishization of “scientific reflection” as the sole agent of abstraction; abstraction also takes place in the “universal implementation” of exchange, which abstracts from qualitative aspects of the relation between producer and consumer, reducing all relationships to abstract links of exchange.<sup>18</sup> In the decoding of ancient structures, monetary and conceptual abstraction go hand in hand; while both predate capitalism by a long time, what is crucial is that only capitalism allows for a truly “universal implementation” of the exchange system, doing away with traditional limitations, transforming God-given hierarchy into mobile capital. In the process, conceptual abstraction moves from philosophical notions to the mathematical abstractions of modern science, and from the blueprints of industrial technology to the programs of the digital age; abstraction thus becomes increasingly operative and transformative.

Recent publications emphasize the role of scientific discourse and experiments, particularly in optics, in the emergence of abstract art.<sup>19</sup> Particularly interesting is the use, in nineteenth-century optical research, of abstract colors and patterns to abstract the fundamental laws of perception from the plenitude of sensuous experience. Around 1800, some panels were prepared for Goethe’s study of color that could pass for studies made by Bauhaus students more than a century later. And

is not the dissolving of particulars, their conversion into interchangeable units — freeing, as Mondrian might say, forms from their limitations and putting them in “purer relationships” — precisely the *modus operandi* of the capitalist economy? Perhaps history can be graphically represented as the merger of different lines of abstraction; in advanced capitalism, concept and coinage reveal their historical complicity.

Marx already noted that money, liberated from precious metals in the form of paper currency, becomes a pure sign.<sup>20</sup> “Scientific reflection” gave rise to an information technology that enabled the abstraction of the money sign even beyond paper; in becoming software that can be sold over and over again, the concept itself becomes currency. In the hyper-abstraction of conceptual capitalism, the *logos* triumphs over the non-identical refuse that is sensory experience. Does this mean that abstract art is nothing more than a pseudo-concrete relic of bygone times?

#### **ABSTRACTION, CONCRETELY**

Although Mondrian’s brittle surfaces and pentimenti oppose the onward march of abstraction, Mondrian accepted the term *abstract art* — contrary to many of his colleagues.<sup>21</sup> In the 1930s, Van Doesburg’s term *art concret* became popular among abstract artists, though one might argue that pseudo-concrete art would have been a better name. Perhaps the technocratic bent of “concrete art” à la Max Bill or Richard Paul Lohse is a tacit acknowledgement of this: this art already seems “programmed” rather than composed, and in the 1960s and 1970s artists associated with the *art concret* tradition would be among the first to embrace computers for art-making, inaugurating the triumph of the abstract concept turned operative code. In the process, form radically changed its status. From being a manifestation of sensuous

thinking, form becomes design — that is to say, an implementation of a concept by coding or programming surfaces rather than an extraction of form from an engagement with a surface’s properties. The more “orthodox” and generic forms of Conceptual Art partake in this becoming-design of artistic form.<sup>22</sup>

This did not, of course, spell the end of painting as a successful commodity, but it became ever more clear that the painting as physical object is a stand-in for its own value, and as such radically contingent. In this respect Yves Klein’s legendary 1957 exhibition in Milan, in which eleven more or less identical blue monochromes were offered for sale at different prices, is crucial. The monochrome is the end of painting as formal articulation, and here structure is not integral to an individual painting, but a matter of abstract relations between different pseudo-concrete objects. No wonder that since the 1970s, from Blinky Palermo to Günter Förg and from Peter Halley to David Reed, the paintings become elements in an installation, parts of a larger structure — a form of interior design. As a response to the loss of meaning of the individual painting, the painting installation was highly successful. What was missing was any sense that these spaces were models for a reconstructed aesthetic life, as in dreams of or proposals for abstract environments, from Mondrian to Oiticica.

Mondrian’s conception of the future Neo-Plasticist culture was messianic in the sense that all would be the same, yet completely transformed and transfigured. In 1921–22, when struggling with the question of the possible end of painting and its integration in a Neo-Plasticist architecture to come, he showed a keen awareness of his art’s ambiguous position.<sup>23</sup> For the time being, a true Neo-Plasticist architecture seemed impossible; while economic imperatives and modern production methods favored straight lines and a lack of

ornamentation, these same economic imperatives curtailed the use of the “purified” new idiom for the development of the harmonic architecture that Mondrian envisaged. Capitalism as it were created an anticipatory mockery of Mondrian’s abstract future. No wonder that Mondrian’s “determinate relations” would be simplified and bowdlerized into generic patterns suitable for product design — the very opposite of Mondrian’s practice of thinking with and through form.

The becoming-design of abstraction is reflected in the installations of Liam Gillick, which utilize post-painterly design elements, coded implementations of a concept that can be re-used and adapted to different situations. Gillick’s 2005 show at the Palais de Tokyo, “Texte court sur la possibilité de créer une économie de l’équivalence”, is informed by what has become Gillick’s master myth, his narrative about unemployed workers of a closed-down factory transforming this former site of production into one of “post-production”, now “constructing ideas rather than cars”. The formal intervention — a floor with red glitter, an abstract landscape of cut-out metal mountain silhouettes, and cages in sundry colors — relate to this narrative and to the workers’ interventions in the factory and its environment, but without losing or dissimulating their status as speechless stand-ins, as contingent décor. Gillick’s props have liberated themselves from the fetishistic illusion of concretion in a much more radical manner than the painting installations of a Förg; no wonder that his current series of quasi-retrospectives, “Three Perspectives and a Scenario”, contains only indirect representations of his work in an architectural setting that makes the space look like a trendy mausoleum. The hermetic (non-)relation between Gillick’s written scripts and his neo-modernist structures rhetorically foregrounds the impotence of formal abstraction to fully signify; thus they become a

strategic, post-Fordist, programmed version of the Adornian pseudo-sign.

Gillick’s broken allegories suggest that abstraction has now progressed so far as to reduce Modernist abstraction to a ruin of its former self. Abstract art was based on the supposition that abstracting from visible appearances enabled one to reach a higher truth, but abstraction now penetrates society to the core; since there is no outside to abstraction, there would seem to be nothing to abstract from or to abstract to. As Vilém Flusser noted, to abstract means to subtract, and specifically to subtract from objects. Throughout history, abstraction has been a movement away from objects and towards information. Flusser avers that this movement has now reached its apogee, as the number of *non-things* has exponentially increased; we live in a world of images that might just as well be termed post-images, since they are coded, the result of programming rather than of traditional representation. In a situation in which the “non-thing” and thus abstraction has triumphed, to abstract can no longer mean to abstract non-things from things, but rather to abstract *Sachen* from abstraction.<sup>24</sup> A *Sache* is not some seemingly self-evident physical object, but a matter of convention, of social agreement or dissent. The aim is not so much to oppose abstraction with “concrete facts”; rather, it is to make concrete the omnipresence of abstraction. One practice that seems to address this need for is that of Krijn de Koning; the colored walls of his installations penetrate pre-existing architectural structures in often supremely illogical ways, effecting cuts in the sites and objects they engage in a dialogue with (a sink, for instance, may suddenly be situated at floor level). Thus they suggest that abstraction already penetrates everything, and that this state of affairs may hold a liberating potential: what exists, exists to be tampered with and pushed to its limits.<sup>25</sup>

### INSIDE ABSTRACTION

If abstraction is not an exceptional operation but the rule, then is there still a point in criticizing our abstract world? Throughout the twentieth century, theorists diagnosed ever more extreme levels of abstraction; in the 1970s and 1980s, Baudrillard argued that abstraction in the age of the digital “is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror or the concept” but “the generation by models of a real without origin or reality”.<sup>26</sup> But this means, as Baudrillard was wont to emphasize, that illusion of some lingering “authentic” realm of non-alienated experience has to be given up. In the age of “social networking” sites such as MySpace, this has become more obvious than ever. Perhaps Harun Farocki’s video installation “Deep Play” (2007), with its overlay of graphic, diagrammatic abstractions of a football game on video footage, is the most elegant meditation on the concrete abstract. This situation, however, should not be taken as cause for Baudrillardian hysteria. Modern “critical” discourse on abstraction has been accused — not least by Baudrillard, in a fine case of the pot calling the kettle black — of a romantic, primitivist streak. Does criticizing abstraction not presuppose an ideal of aboriginal purity, a lost Eden untainted by abstraction? Recent artistic and intellectual practices suggest that there is an alternative: to intervene in actually existing abstraction not in the name of some ideal of authenticity, but in order to go beyond the limits and constraints inherent in this particular concretion of the abstract.

One crucial tool to emerge was the diagram. Flow-chart diagrams had risen to cultural prominence in the 1950s and 1960s, as being used both to program and to navigate complex social and technological systems; as such they were open to critical appropriation. If diagrams are (in Deleuze and Guattari’s vocabulary) “abstract machines” that program reality, diagrammatic art hacks and

turns it against the reality it produces. Informed by cybernetics and semiotics, Stephen Willats pioneered this practice in his work since the 1970s; less explicitly, practices such as Haacke’s and Allan Sekula’s were also in many ways diagrammatic. Haacke charted the slumlord empire of Shapolsky and Co.; later Sekula embarking on his mapping of the largely invisible streams of sea transport in his “Fish Story” project. In the 1980s, Peter Halley desublimated the squares and lines of modernist abstraction by reading them as the coded signs of a society in which abstraction is indeed the norm, the production of reality by models. In his massive paintings with their synthetic Day-Glo colors, abstraction became utterly diagrammatic, standing for hypercapitalist society as a whole, without going into specifics.

While his paintings were marketable luxury goods, they were clearly permutations of a basic concept, squashed and stretched in various ways, filled in with different color schemes. Furthermore, Halley’s installations emphasized their lack of completion by combining them with wallpaper that contained appropriated and hence more “realistic” flow charts that included words suggestive of social or technological processes — but without ever going beyond this suggestion. In the 1990s, artists rejected this version of the diagrammatic in order to analyze specific networks and structures once again. With a penchant for conspiracy theory, Mark Lombardi traced the involvement of the Bush clan in various economic networks and their political interests, whereas the Parisian collective Bureau d’études seeks to trace nothing short of the “World Government” of state organizations and think tanks, with its affiliated “global laboratory” of surveillance and technology. Bureau d’études use a “pictographic grammar” of signs denoting various social and political actors; these are connected by an intricate network of lines, in sub-systems that are placed in

an overall pattern; the results look like Piranesian flowcharts. As this bewildering structure suggests, it would be naïve to presume such diagrams have an overwhelming and immediate effect. In a lecture/performance in which he traces CIA flights in an increasingly intricate diagram, Walid Raad stressed that “revelations” about contemporary political or economical activities seem to have very little effect.<sup>27</sup>

Yet tracing relations within the regime of actually existing abstraction is a crucial step toward conceiving of alternatives not to, but within abstraction. In his “Hacker Manifesto”, McKenzie Wark detourns the “classic” leftist discourse on abstraction by arguing for the revolutionary potential of abstraction: “To abstract is to construct a plane upon which otherwise different and unrelated matters may be brought into many possible relations. To abstract is to express the virtuality of nature, to make known some instance of its possibilities, to actualize a relation out of infinite relationality, to manifest the manifold.”<sup>28</sup> In other words: one must not only make visible actually existing relations, but also actualize possible relations between matters that are usually kept separate, and break neo-feudal hierarchies and inequalities programmed into actually existing abstraction — think, for instance, of the different rules that apply to streams of commodities and stream of migrants.

The status of the work of art as a special and highly auratic commodity is likewise based on a carefully preserved distinction. In order for blue-chip artworks to be as expensive as luxury yachts, they must be presented as being fundamentally different from such other luxury goods. Practices such as that of Bureau d’études by and large have a tactical approach to this context, using its funds to enable their diagrammatic investigations but staying on the margins by producing cheap and multiple printed matter — or online

pieces — that are unsuitable for financial speculation. However, a merely instrumental relation with art also leads to an impoverishment that is equally political and aesthetic. The work of art can become an exemplary — and thereby truly instructive — commodity only when it reflects on its own status within the regime of concrete abstraction. After all, abstraction can no longer be seen as some foreign world to be mapped by intrepid explorers. We are the natives of abstraction.

#### Notes

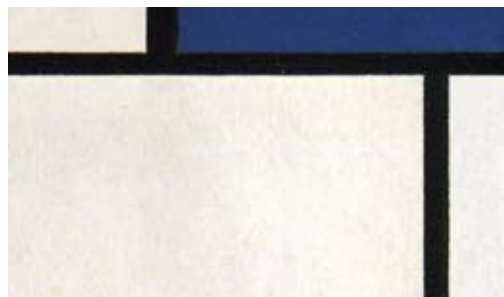
- 1 See <http://creativetime.org/archive/?p=144>
- 2 Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, Oxford/Cambridge, Mass. 1990, p. 209. The term pseudo-concrete is used by Karel Kosik in his *Dialectics of the Concrete*, originally published in Czech in 1963.
- 3 “Aussi peu intéressantes que les timbres-postes oblitérés, et forcément aussi peu variées qu’eux, les productions littéraires ou plastiques ne sont plus les signes de d’un commerce abstrait.” (Author’s translation.) Michèle Bernstein et al., “Les Distances à garder”, in: *Potlatch*, no. 19 (April 1955). See: Guy Debord présente *Potlatch (1954–1957)*, Paris 1996, p. 144.
- 4 Meyer Schapiro, “The Nature of Abstract Art” (1937), in: *Modern Art: 19th and 20th Centuries*, New York 1978, p. 207.
- 5 Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 7, Frankfurt/M., 1972, p. 203.
- 6 For Richter on the exemplary status of art informal, see a. o. Brief an Jean-Christophe Ammann, Februar 1973, in: *Text. Schriften und Interviews* (ed. Hans-Ulrich Obrist), Frankfurt/M./Leipzig 1993, p. 74.
- 7 Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1976), trans. Ian Hamilton Grant, London/New Delhi 1993, p. 69.
- 8 Peter Halley, “Abstraction and Culture” (1991), in: *Recent Essays 1990–1996*, New York/Paris/Turin 1997, pp. 27, 32.
- 9 The German term is *Begriff*, trans. into English as either *concept* or *notion*.
- 10 For Hegel, the term *idea* stands for the concrete concept — the identity of concept/notion and the real, the concept’s objective manifestation. See G.W.F. Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse I: Die Philosophie der Logik* (1830), in: *Werke*, Bd. 8, Frankfurt am Main 1970, pp. 305f., 367ff.
- 11 Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, op. cit., p. 173.
- 12 „Kunst ist Rationalität, welche diese kritisiert, ohne sich ihr zu entziehen.“ *Ibid*, p. 87.

- 13 Ibid, p. 189.
- 14 Piet Mondrian, "The New Plastic in Painting" (*De Nieuwe Beelding in de Schilderkunst*, 1917), in: *The New Art — The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian*, ed. and trans. Harry Holtzman and Martin S. James, New York 1993, pp. 28, 36.
- 15 Kosuth already quoted Mondrian in a 1996 neon piece installed at the train station of Eindhoven, "Play of advice".
- 16 Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, trans. Isabella Bertolotti, James Cascaito, Andrea Casson, Los Angeles/ New York 2004, p. 63.
- 17 For an analysis of LeWitt's linking of idea and machine in his "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art" (1967) within the context of the post-Fordist economy, see Sabeth Buchmann, *Denken gegen das Denken: Produktion, Technologie, Subjektivität bei Sol LeWitt*, Yvonne Rainer und Hélio Oiticica, Berlin 2007, pp. 48–54.
- 18 "In dessen universalem Vollzug [des Tausches], nicht erst in der wissenschaftlichen Reflexion, wird objektiv abstrahiert." Theodor W. Adorno, "Gesellschaft" (1965), in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 8: *Soziologische Schriften I*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, Frankfurt/M. 1972, p. 13. See also Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno or the Persistence of the Dialectic*, London/New York 2007, pp. 35–42.
- 19 See for instance exhib. cat. "Aux Origines de l'abstraction", Paris, Musée d'Orsay, 2003.
- 20 Karl Marx, *Das Kapital. Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, erster Band (1883), in: *Karl Marx/Friedrich Engels, Gesamtausgabe*, vol. II.8, Berlin 1989, p. 149.
- 21 A term used by Mondrian since the late 1910s is "abstract-real" art, emphasizing that in his painting the abstract is made real.
- 22 See also Camiel van Winkel, "Information and Visualisation. The Artist as Designer", in: *The Regime of Visibility*, Rotterdam 2005, pp. 107–171.
- 23 Piet Mondrian, "The Realization of Neo-Plasticism in the Distant Future and in Architecture Today (*Architecture Understood as Our Total Nonnatural Environment*)" (1922), in: *The New Art — The New Life*, loc. op., pp. 164–172.
- 24 Vilém Flusser, "Auf dem Weg zum Unding", in: *Medienkultur*, Frankfurt/M. 1997, pp. 185–189.
- 25 See also Sven Lütticken, "Krijn de Koning: Ruining Representation", in: *Krijn de Koning*, Rotterdam 2007, pp. 227–237.
- 26 Jean Baudrillard: "The Precession of Simulacra", in: *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Flaser, University of Michigan Press, 1994, p. 1.
- 27 Walid Raad's "I feel a Great Desire to Meet the Masses Once Again" is a lecture/performance held at various venues over the past few years.
- 28 McKenzie Wark, *A Hacker Manifesto*, Cambridge, Mass./ London 2004, [2008].

## SEBASTIAN EGENHOFER

### FIGURES OF DEFIGURATION

#### Four Theses on Abstraction



While Western painting since the Renaissance had conceptualized the picture as the "window to the world", modernism's abstraction represented an iconoclastic movement, insofar as in the reduction to "pure" surfaces the model of representation itself was negated up to the point where the materiality of the work claimed an autonomous presence for itself. However, this observation cannot be identified unconditionally with forms of absolute self-reference, since, after all, the destruction of representation was, conceptually as well as historically, closely linked with the domination of social abstraction in the medium of monetary value.

On the other hand, the critique of modernist aesthetics as it manifests itself from Minimalism to Pop art to Appropriation art cannot be identified as breaking with the representational critical project of modernism either, whose effect would have been that the particular and the procedural finally disavowed any form of universalism. In the following, a notion of abstraction will hence be introduced into the art historical debate that attempts to recast the opposition between self-reference and referentiality in the engagement with abstract art.

#### 1. ICONOCLASM AND MONETARY ABSTRACTION

Abstraction as iconic abstraction has been formative of the art of modernism from Seurat through cubism and Mondrian down to Newman and