

Situational Diagram

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Atomic Time: On Karin Schneider's Black Paintings

Aliza Shvarts

In the art-historical narratives of twentieth-century painting—discourses resonant with the long-standing biases of Western aesthetic theory and steeped in the material histories of colonial conquest—there is an over-determined relationship between blackness and nothingness. Blackness is darkness, the absence of light. Blackness is the repudiation of color. Blackness is the negation of form. Blackness is emptiness, void. Yet for those of us whom this art history does not serve, for those of us categorically excluded from the axioms of value, power, and beauty through which white supremacy and heteropatriarchy endure, black painting offers a powerful site of contention.

Karin Schneider's new body of work, *Situational Diagram*, explicitly invokes three iconic approaches to black painting within the history of modern art: Ad Reinhardt's black square paintings (1953–67), Barnett Newman's black "zips" or lines in his fourteen-canvas series "Stations of the Cross" (1958–66), and Mark Rothko's fourteen black color-hued paintings (1964–67) installed in the Philip Johnson–designed Rothko Chapel in Houston, Texas. Schneider engages these modernist monuments in order to turn them into resources for her production. Distilled in the pigment of Reinhardt's squares, Newman's "Stations," and Rothko's Chapel is not just a history of modern art practice, but a longer tradition of perceptual and ideological distinction. Black appears in these works at the upper and lower poles of color experience, as either achromaticity

or chromatic saturation. None of these iconic black paintings are monochromatically black; rather, each uses black pigment with formal or tonal variation to interrogate a limit of the painted surface—the limit of the image, the limit of abstraction, the limit of representation. Black appears as a formal abstraction and as a marker of value; it is an extreme against which difference can be calculated and against which distinctions can emerge. For Schneider, black becomes a lens through which to parse the genealogies of value and valuelessness that mediate systems of global capitalism and everyday lived experience. In this sense, these modernist masterworks provide not only a resource for production but also a methodology for critique.

Let us consider the black painting a measure, a medium that registers the sub-visible narratives of power that structure the over-determined meanings of the pigment. Black is a metonym of that Manichean logic that separates light from dark, meaning from non-meaning, value from valuelessness, or in Reinhardt's infamous phrasing, "art" from "everything else."¹ In the context of modernism, black paintings are always at least partially an archive: a crystallization of that binary that positions blackness as darkness, emptiness, void. As such, black paintings register what I want to propose is an *atomic time* of aesthetic production—a historical record and time-keeping mechanism embedded in bare matter, in its most elemental units. The atomic clock and black post-painterly abstraction were both developments of the American midcentury, both effects of the nuclear age. Both are premised on a confluence of materiality and measure—on the capacity for elemental physicality to bear ideological meaning. As a heuristic, atomic time is a way of making tangible, making material, the historicity of matter. It throws into sharp relief several modes of labor expropriation that enable the illusion of freely circulating value: colonial conquest, genocide, enslavement, sexual discipline, and patriarchal domination. This labor continues to be disproportionately extracted from brown, black, and effeminate bodies—bodies that are evacuated from the aesthetic projects of abstraction but are

1. Ad Reinhardt, *Art as Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt*, ed. Barbara Rose (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 51.

foundational to its value, bodies that atomically inhere. To speak of an atomic time of painting is to speak of those movements, those histories, that inhere in the medium. Through the lens of atomic time, we can see the ways in which black painting as a genre can be used to either maintain or recalibrate a binary logic of value that continues to structure our current geopolitical moment.

Time is a measure of movement, and most clocks work by counting the motions of a regularly oscillating mechanism known as a resonator. In mechanical clocks, the resonator is the regular swing of a pendulum, controlled by gears. In digital clocks, it is the oscillation of electric current through a quartz crystal. In atomic clocks, it is the resonant frequency of atoms themselves. As a technological discovery of the nuclear age, atomic time reorients temporality around the movements in matter. The atom is at once a measure of duration as well as the thing that endures. This nuclear logic makes possible a critical premise previously unavailable: it's not just that time can be told from atoms, but that matter itself can be a measure of historical movement. These developments in nuclear science ran concurrently with the rise of abstraction in postwar American art: physicist Isidor Rabi first theorized the possibility of an atomic clock in a 1945 lecture given to the American Physical Society and the American Association of Physics Teachers; the first working atomic clock was developed by Harold Lyons at the US National Bureau of Standards in 1949.² While there is no evidence of a direct causal relationship between these two midcentury innovations, both reflect an ideological turn to objective rather than interpretive values—a belief in material forms and substrates as the determinants of meaning. This nonpartisan stance of science and abstraction testifies to a politics held in common. As Eva Cockcroft argues in her article "Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War," originally published in *Artforum* in 1974:

The alleged separation of art from politics proclaimed throughout the "free world" with the resurgence of ab-

2. Michael A. Lombardi, Thomas P. Heavner, and Steven R. Jefferts, "NIST Primary Frequency Standards and the Realization of the SI Second," *NCSL International Measure: The Journal of Measurement Science*, 2, no. 4 (December 2007): 77–78.

straction after World War II was part of a general tendency in intellectual circles towards ‘objectivity.’ [...] Abstract Expressionism neatly fits the needs of this supposedly new historical epoch. By giving their painting an individualist emphasis and eliminating recognizable subject matter, the Abstract Expressionists succeeded in creating an important new art movement. They also contributed, whether they knew it or not, to a purely political phenomenon—the supposed divorce between art and politics which so perfectly served America’s needs in the Cold War.³

Throughout her text, Cockcroft emphasizes the mobilization of artwork as a cultural export in programs developed in collusion by museum heads and government bodies, which often trumped the politics of individual artists. The political activism of artists such as Barnett Newman did not prevent the use of their work for these propaganda purposes; rather, “from a cold warrior’s point of view, such linkages to controversial political activities might actually heighten the value of these artists as a propaganda weapon in demonstrating the virtues of ‘freedom of expression’ in an ‘open and free society.’”⁴

No artist understands themselves as an operation of ideology. From romantic models of individual expression to the postmodernist paradigm of critique, the premise of art practice is the possibility of subjective agency. Yet the stark materialism of atomic time offers a lens through which to reexamine aesthetic production—a type of absolutism grounded in the endurance of matter. It offers the possibility of reconfiguring art practice from the perspective of the object, where the object is a condensation of something happening in time. Through this lens, we might understand that in addition to being innovative experiments in negation and perception, the black paintings of Reinhardt, Newman, and Rothko are also a measure

3. Eva Cockcroft, “Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War,” in *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, ed. Francis Frascina (New York: Routledge, 2000), 154.

4. Cockcroft, 151.

of their ideological moment, of the aesthetics and politics of the nuclear age. Indeed, it is perhaps the absolutism of black as a color, concept, and symbol that interested Reinhardt. For him, the color offers both a historical record of metaphysical and ideological associations, as well as the negation of those meanings. As he writes in “Black as Symbol and Concept”:

I suppose it began with the Bible, in which black is usually evil and sinful and feminine. I think a whole set of impositions have affected our attitudes toward white and black—the cowboy with the white hat and white horse, the villain with the black gloves. And then the use of black all the way through the Bible, through Chaucer, Milton, Shakespeare, and a few others. Even in terms of color caste there are blacks and colored, what Harold Isaacs in *Encounter* once called a yearning for whiteness in the West, like high yellow and so on. There is a relation in Christianity to the black hell void and the white heaven myth, the blackness of darkness that is involved with formlessness or the unformed or the maternal, the hidden, guilt, origin, redemption, faith, truth, time. Black can symbolize all those.⁵

Even without reference, black is steeped in the social histories of religious warfare, Western domination, and gendered labor discipline that condition moral value. What seems at stake for Reinhardt is whether the color can be used in isolation from the narratives with which it is imbued—whether it can function performatively as a mode of negation removed from the contexts of metaphysics, morality, or lived experience. As he goes on to assert,

I want to stress the idea of black as intellectuality and conventionality. There’s an expression “the dark absolute freedom” and an idea of formality. There’s something about darkness I don’t want to pin down. But it’s

5. Reinhardt, 86–87.

aesthetic. And it has *not* to do with outer space or the color of skin or the color of matter.⁶

Yet even as an intellectual operation or convention, as a negation of representation or spectacle, blackness remains an atomization of histories that cannot be parsed from space, matter, or skin.

In his article “The Case of Blackness,” Fred Moten contextualizes Reinhardt’s remark as part of a larger conversation on the subject of blackness between Reinhardt and five other interlocutors, which was published by the journal *artscanada* for their special “Black” issue in 1967. Moten focuses specifically on the exchanges between Reinhardt and the jazz musician Cecil Taylor. As he notes, the “chromatic saturation” that is blackness refers to fundamentally different material experiences for the white painter and black musician. Reinhardt’s focus on the visual appearance of color is distinct from Taylor’s engagement with the sonic scales of sound. Accordingly, blackness as a concept takes on different stakes. As Moten writes:

Unfortunately, as we’ll see, Reinhardt reads blackness as sight, as held merely within the play of absence and presence. He is blind to the articulated combination of absence and presence in black that is in his face, as his work, his own production, as well as in the particular form of Taylor.⁷

What Reinhardt does not see, according to Moten, is the lived experience of blackness, which confronts him not only in the figure of Taylor, but also in the formal operations of painting. Painting, for Moten, as a formal negotiation of color, can be a site of contestation for the political theorization of lived experience, particularly the lived experience of race. Or, as he puts it, “chromatic saturation in painting” can put “the set of questions that are black social life into relief.”⁸ Moten’s critique reminds us that chromaticity, as a

6. Reinhardt, 87 (emphasis in original).

7. Fred Moten, “The Case of Blackness,” *Criticism*, 50, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 190.

8. Moten, 189.

formal element, is both material and temporal. Even without reference, color exists in relation to time—in relation to the matter and movement of atoms and light that produce the physical experience of color, as well as the materiality of history that conditions its perception, meaning, and use.

What moves Moten from the focus of his essay—black social life—to his analysis of Reinhardt’s black paintings is a formative interdiction that he situates at the beginning of his essay, an excerpt from an oft-quoted chapter in Frantz Fanon’s 1952 book *Black Skins, White Masks*: “I came into this world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects.”⁹ Analyzing Fanon’s fall from subjecthood to objecthood, Moten considers the difference between objects and things through Martin Heidegger’s concept of “The Thing.” Simply put: an object exists for a subject and contains a potential for use; the thing, on the other hand, sits beside this hierarchal organization of subjecthood and objecthood, and is temporally displaced from this capacity to be used. Either before it is fixed to a particular use, or after it can no longer be used, the thing is filled with “an always already mixed capacity for content that is not yet made,”¹⁰—a capacity immediately annihilated once or when the thing becomes an object for a subject, which is to say, useful. From this philosophical discussion, Moten concludes that “perhaps the thing, the black, is tantamount to another, fugitive, sublimity altogether. Some/thing escapes in or through the object’s vestibule; the object vibrates against the frame like a resonator, and troubled air gets out.”¹¹ Here, in the resonator’s “troubled air,” there is not only a reference to music, to the vibrations of sound, but also to the mechanism of time’s measurement—to what I am calling atomic time.

9. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (1967; London: Picador, 1970), 77–78. These lines come from a chapter titled “The Fact of Blackness,” from which Moten’s essay, “The Case of Blackness,” takes its name. As he notes, the English title of Fanon’s chapter is a mistranslation of the original French, which is closer to “The Lived Experience of Blackness”—a telling misprision which Moten takes up in his analysis of blackness.

10. Moten, 184.

11. Moten, 181–82.

Can the painting itself function as a resonator—a vibrational ground, a troubling site, from which some/*thing* might escape? I want to be careful in my use of Moten’s work not to repeat the erasure he critiques—that is, not to conflate subjects for objects, the lived experience of blackness for chromatic saturation in painting. Rather, what I take from Moten’s critical intervention, and what I find in Schneider’s Situational Diagram, is the understanding that black painting has social and performative dimensions. Those dimensions give painting political relevance and stakes. Blackness, as an abstraction in both art and social life, is not simply a record of discursive erasures, but also an accumulation of enduring materialities. It’s this materiality that makes it possible to talk about an atomic time in painting—a way of apprehending the medium as both an archive and an operation, as a history that is still happening. In Situational Diagram, something quite literally escapes the black paintings. Strewn about the gallery floor are figures, paper-thin stainless steel and neoprene sculptures that have been extracted from canonical paintings in art history. These figures thrown onto the gallery floor are the crumpled bodies of historically significant nudes: Henri Matisse’s *Nu Bleu III* (1952), and importantly, Tarsila do Amaral’s *Abaporu* (1928), which inspired Oswald de Andrade’s concept of *antropófago* (the critical cannibalizing of European culture—an important image in postcolonial critique). Rather than maintaining the coloring of the paintings from which they were extracted (and abstracted), these figures are all black. Through the continuity of black paint, Schneider creates a point of contact between two seemingly opposite aesthetic sensibilities: modernist figuration and hard-edged abstraction. In doing so, she invites us to consider what historical figurations are embedded in the abstract surface. In a broader sense, she asks us to consider what bodies, what labors, power the abstractions of value.

The extraction of three-dimensional figures from the two-dimensional ground of painting parallels the logic of liquid extraction that is found in the mechanisms that power capitalist configurations of monetary value. After all, capitalism functions through a series of extractions and abstractions: the extrication of life from the body in the form of labor power from the worker; the expropriation of the

commons from the community through systems of accumulation and dispossession; and the ongoing search for new grounds upon which to stage the former—from the “discovery of New Worlds” that euphemized genocidal colonial conquest, to the continued privatization of public assets, such as the corporate mining of natural resources. Through her mediations on blackness, Schneider isolates the alchemy that turns bodies into time, time into money. She lifts those discursive erasures that cloak the surface of the black canvas, concealing its enduring materiality, its reproductive ground. By rendering black painting operative and active, she shows it to have bodily dimensions; she shows its force to be both figurative and temporal. Calibrated to the historical expropriations of life and labor, the colonial legacies of conquest that continue to impact daily life, these black paintings tell an atomic time: they make visible the history of movement that exists in material form. These black paintings act as a vibratory ground, a troubling force, which provides an interface between the walls of art history and the social world. As a mechanism, a resonator, they connect abstracted materiality and lived materiality—that is, the concomitance of “art” and “everything else” that cannot be overlooked.

Decanted from the programs of modernism, the black paint in Situational Diagram thus functions as a material substrate for art-historical discourse, as a physical calibration of the ideological, social, and economic relations that inhere in color. Its chromaticity tells an atomic time. As a site of heterogeneity, the black painting becomes a materially reproductive ground—a site in which other meanings emerge. By repurposing the midcentury trope of black painting, Schneider uses a formal operation to excavate the material history of the political present. She interrogates how abstraction can function as a relational modality, maintaining or destabilizing entrenched aesthetic and political values. Her black painting becomes a political operation: an expedient way of summoning the axiological fission that separates something from nothing—an aesthetic as well as political distinction upon which so much depends. The feminism of such a gesture is formal, embedded in the physical processes of the work rather than representations of identity. Instead of staging a contrast between the universalisms of black paintings and the

specificity of gendered experience, Schneider puts black paintings to use: she engages their active elements to produce a new lexicon of aesthetic forms. Yet in her reworking of modernist masterworks, we might recognize something even more pointed: an iteration of that unsettled question that continues to circulate in feminist and anti-racist circles, of whether the master's tools can be used to dismantle the master's house.¹²

12. The master's tools/master's house question was first raised by Audre Lorde in "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), 110–14. It is a question since taken up by other feminist scholars such as Naomi Wolf and bell hooks.