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Reading Foucault After Modern Painting: From Object to System'

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By his own admission, Foucault wrote with great pleasure about painting, feeling little need for polemics or strategic interpretation (*DE* II, 707). But he also thought through paintings, taking them to be exemplary objects of knowledge, uniquely indicative of transformations and discontinuities in discursive and non-discursive orders. This mixture of pleasure, preference, and analysis leaves us with a diverse body of work that might still assist in our understanding of the development of modern painting. Of particular interest is that during the period in which Foucault wrote, what counted as painting was radically questioned, leading to an expansion that marked painting's discontinuity with previous practice and criticism. My aim in this paper is to show that we can use elements of Foucault's analyses of painting to study this expansion, in a way that Foucault's preferences perhaps did not allow him to do at the time.

Foucault traced something of this discontinuity, from his analysis of modern painting, exemplified for him by the *painting-objects* of Edouard Manet (*La peinture de Manet*, 2004) and the archaeological "excavations" of Paul Klee (*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*, 1973; *DE* I, 554), to his analysis of postmodern painting, exemplified by the "photogenic" works of Gérard Fromanger (*DE* II, 707-715). However, throughout these analyses, Foucault remained committed to what Stefano Catucci calls "pictorial thought" ('La pensée picturale,' 2001). As Cattuci notes, this allowed Foucault to assign considerable importance to pictures as "diagrams" of the present. Yet this also limited his analyses at the historical moment that, through challenges to its pictorial integrity, painting acquired a changed epistemological and discursive status. Key among these challenges was the recognition that paintings are complexly systemic artefacts, integrated with social systems of distribution, communication, interpretation, and display. I ask how this expansion from *painting-objects* to *painting-systems* changes painting's status as an exemplary object of knowledge.

There are two parts to the paper. Firstly, I identify what analysis of modern painting Foucault provides. In *La peinture de Manet*, Foucault describes the *painting-object* as a precursor of painting that is distinctly modern insofar as it no longer accepts the demands of representation. Instead, painting plays with the material properties of painting and displaces the spectator before the canvas. However, in a 1966 interview, it is the work of Paul Klee that Foucault selects to exemplify contemporary thought. This is because Klee carries out an archaeology of painting, "composes and decomposes painting into the elements which, for all that they are simple, are no less supported, haunted, and inhabited by the knowledge [*savoir*] of painting" (*DE* I, 544). Klee also collapses the post-Renaissance distinction between plastic representation and linguistic representation, demonstrating new relations between the visible and the sayable.

The works of both Manet and Klee remain consistent with the pictorial *dispositif* even as they decompose it. In his 1975 essay on Fromanger, Foucault laments that this decomposition has now gone too far and celebrates the reinstatement of the image that has emerged from the other side of modernism. Yet this decomposition also leads to expansion, to *painting-systems* that are both consistent and discontinuous with the *painting-objects* of Manet and the archaeological excavations of Klee.

In the second part, I discuss three examples of these *painting-systems*: Yves Klein's *The Specialization of Sensibility in the Raw Material State into Stabilized Pictorial Sensibility, The Void* (1958), Yoko Ono's *Painting to Hammer a Nail* (1961), and Mel Bochner's *Theory of Painting* series (1969-70). In different ways, each of these *painting-systems* organises painting itself as a recursive and distributed system open to discontinuity and contingency and to second-order investigations into its conditions. Neither modernist "object to see" (Catherine Perret, 'Le modernisme de Foucault,' 2004) nor postmodern hybrid image, these *painting-systems* are significant investigations

into painting as an object of knowledge and as a *complexus* of the visible and the sayable. In spite of his pictorial preferences, elements from Foucault's analyses of modern painting can offer us unique insight into such works. *Painting-systems* consist of material objects, events of communication, and what Focuault himself termed "discursive systematicities" (*L'Ordre du discours*, 1971). Studying their development allows us to further the Foucauldian attempt to "think discontinuity," as Judith Revel has described it (*Foucault : une pensée du discontinu*, 2010), and to reconsider what critical tools Foucault's analyses of painting might still provide.