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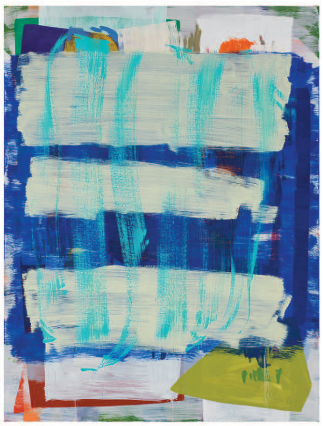
Jon Pestoni: Follow the Mark
by Janet Kraynak

> Initially, the move to a larger size was a way to further distance the hand from the mark, both in scale and cumulative application. Removing my own hand from the otherwise expressive or gestural marks has always been a concern, and the larger scale literally made it so that my hand could not complete or resort to its own natural tendencies.[1]
>
> What interests me most are the layers of failure and fallout that the hand leaves behind...[2]

A lot of ink has been devoted to describing the formal richness of Jon Pestoni's paintings. And why not? They certainly prompt such a treatment, with complex surfaces that slowly reveal layers of visual incident, and assertive brushstrokes that unabashedly mark their pictorial territory. Over the past few years, with an increase in scale, the introduction of other materials beyond oil paint, and the development of more defined contours (that some say suggest figurative elements), Pestoni's paintings seem to court even more rhetorical play. Take *Fallout* from 2012, a cacophonous surface of varying planes of thinly applied colors, which range from intense cobalt to milky white.[3] Hanging only a few inches from the floor, with a tripartite division of horizontal bands of color, the large painting mimics the structure and scale of a Mark Rothko abstraction. Yet any relation to Rothko's precedent soon proves to be fleeting. While Rothko's fields of saturated color invite total visual absorption, seducing the beholder's perception into the painterly field, Pestoni's gossamer layers, with their dry application of

1. Jon Pestoni quoted in Jan Tumlir, “Brand New: Jon Pestoni,” *Flash Art* (Nov.–Dec. 2012): 107.

2. “Artists on AbEx: Jon Pestoni,” *Artforum* (Summer 2011): 343.



3. Jon Pestoni, *Fallout*, 2012. Oil on canvas, 103 × 78 × 2¾ in. (261.6 × 198.1 × 5.7 cm)

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paint, ***repel*** vision as much as they attract it. Pestoni's insistent execution of a studied brushstroke purposely conveys a certain sketchiness, yielding surfaces that give none of the sumptuous richness and finish of oil paint, the pictures' dominant medium. Moreover, this deliberate application of brush marks—some which travel across or up and down the picture plane, others which stop as intermittent gestures somewhere in-between—undermines the conventional association of painterly gesture with improvisation and psychological expressiveness. In ***Fallout***, even the occasional drip of paint appears premeditated, as if not to jeopardize the painting's restrained disorder of layered lines. Just looking at the edges of where each mark begins and ends, one has a sense of the artist as mathematician, making careful equations out of each additive application of paint.

What then do we make of Pestoni's paintings? To answer this question is to first confront the limitations of visual description, which tells us little about what the works mean, and even less about what they ***do***, and it is this "doing" that I would like to explore in these pages. Pestoni's brushstroke, in its very hesitancies, achieves a dialectical feat. Both improvisational and orchestrated, spontaneous and highly planned, his mark hovers between the distancing effects of mechanization and the proximities of gesture—the twin tendencies of all painting since the advent of modernism, but ones that have taken on a different set of meanings in the "total flow" (to paraphrase Fredric Jameson) of contemporary culture.[4] Occupying such unsettled territory, Pestoni's paintings continuously deflect or distract the viewer's attention to ***somewhere else***, so that "painting" moves outside of itself—or beyond the medium of painting entirely, thereby touching upon one of the primary paradoxes of our time. In the face of diminishing primary experience (or something we might loosely identify as "real"), there is now an increased commodity placed upon, or even fetishization of, the authentic. In the face of such a loss, surrogates for intimacy, propinquity, and the slow touch of being connected now abound. Pestoni's objects (for I want to think of them as objects, or as things that appear in our world and tell us about our world) both bring light to this diffusion, while visualizing its terms.

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In order to follow this line of thought, we must first address the question that has been most urgent in recent critical discussions: what is the status of "painting" in an era of digital reproducibility? The latter phrase I invoke in an intentional echo of Walter Benjamin's now canonical essay regarding

4. See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).

the nature of the work of art in the era of “technical” (i.e. mechanical) reproducibility. Written in 1936, in the wake of Hitler’s ascent to power and on the cusp of genocidal war, Benjamin pondered the effects of photography on art—or more broadly, the effects of the *photographic* as a condition of endless, industrialized reproduction and copies. For Benjamin, art becomes favorably democratized due to its loss of “aura”—an attribute that defines the unique object such as a painting—shattering tradition and following the revolutionary path of “contemporary mass movements,” by which he intends socialism.[5] “The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity,” he notes, adding that such a concept is undermined by the very nature of photographic reproduction, where to ask for the “‘authentic’ print makes no sense…”, as follows:

> [T]he instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice—politics.[6]

Similarly, in today’s “post-Internet” world, where the sharing, downloading, recycling, and recirculation of images (and “information” more inclusively) are ubiquitous and infinitely accessible phenomena, Benjamin’s prognosis, in one regard, has arguably materialized.[7] The seamless collapse of formerly distinct production methods—in that the same techniques now equally represent advanced artistic production and mass or popular culture—defines much contemporary art, reshaping not just how it is made, but its means of circulation and reception. As a result, the question of the purpose, value, and “authenticity” of painting (the most intimate of the fine arts) inevitably surfaces. Particularly suspect is a genre of painting that harkens back to high modernist abstraction, with its ideals of autonomy and transcendence.

For critic Walter Robinson, the question of painting’s value in the face of digitization and commodification has led to what he calls “zombie formalism,” endless, if not woefully clichéd, iterations of past modernist tropes that are now empty of anything but decorative surface.[8] Robinson’s observations are certainly worth considering, in that they also sharpen the distinctions I am drawing here in relation to Pestoni’s work, with its breech of the internal confines of the frame by situating painting in a world of objects. At the same time, Pestoni’s paintings clearly make use of and reference the language of abstraction and, more specifically, *gestural* abstraction. It is thus imperative to consider seriously these precedents—or, more accurately, their use value

5. Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968): 221.

6. Ibid, 220, 224.

7. The critical legacy of Benjamin’s essay has been formidable, despite the author’s early tragic death while fleeing the Nazis; but because of the latter, its techno-optimism remains ossified in the past, prior to the unfolding of a truly technical society. Benjamin might have reassessed his thesis along the lines of his Frankfurt School colleagues, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, who in their 1947 book *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, translated by John Cumming as *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972), warned of the dangers of mass culture’s elimination of politics and consciousness.

8. Walter Robinson, “Flipping and the Rise of Zombie Formalism,” *Artspace* (April 3, 2014), http://www.artspace.com/magazine/contributors/see_here/the_rise_of_zombie_formalism-52184. Accessed October 26, 2015.

to the artist, given that “abstraction” exists as a readymade or as a site of appropriation (albeit in Pestoni’s case, not in the vein that Robinson suggests as a hollow formalism).

Art-historically, the advent of abstraction in the early 20th century represented a radical reductiveness in painting’s fundamental language that, in turn, signaled a purification of the medium, now freed from any obligation to represent that which stood outside of it. Devoid of story, narrative, or recognizable subject matter, abstraction betrayed a resistance to language, and (putatively) was addressed solely to the optical field or the viewer’s plane of vision (as if, Rosalind Krauss once quipped, the beholder is a disembodied eye devoid of subjectivity gazing before a canvas—an ideal but impossible state). The “will to abstraction,” to paraphrase the German art historian Wilhelm Worringer, whose 1908 book *Abstraktion und Einfühlung* (*Abstraction and Empathy*) became an intellectual reference point for the emergent modernist avant-garde, represented an urge to *separate*: to remove art from the imperatives of mundane, material existence.

From the inception of abstraction as a genre, *painterliness* and facture (i.e., the visible heft of paint upon the canvas surface) took on a specific set of meanings. For Wassily Kandinsky, in his search for the spiritual in art, expressively sweeping, unrestricted brushstrokes not bound to any figurative purpose were privileged for their raw spontaneity and ability to reveal other than intellectual faculties. The gesture was not about rational thought, but about “spirit” in the Hegelian sense (of “mind”): meaning the highest fulfillment of consciousness towards the purely immaterial. Over the course of the 20th century, this understanding of the gestural mark persisted, the latter becoming seamlessly identified with the interiority of the maker. As later celebrated in the monumental canvases of Rothko, Jackson Pollock, and their contemporaries, painting became a psychological medium. Correspondingly, such readings did much to shore up the mythic ideal of a particular form of (male) subjectivity affiliated with the “triumphant” American postwar avant-garde and its subsequent revivals, as in neo-expressionist painting of the 1980s.

Artistic challenges to the premises and commitments of high modernism simultaneously came from multiple fronts. Most notable was the Russian avant-garde artist Aleksandr Rodchenko whose seminal triptych *cum* manifesto of 1921, *Pure Red Color, Pure Blue Color,* and *Pure Yellow Color*, comprised of monochrome canvases of the three titular colors, was accompanied by the following declarative statement:

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I reduced painting to its logical conclusion and exhibited three canvases: red, blue and yellow. I affirmed: it's all over.
Basic colors.
Every plane is a plane and there is to be no representation.

—A. Rodchenko

Rodchenko's painterly decree signaled an “end” not just to abstraction, but to painting as a medium—or, more accurately, as an ideological system, tied as it was to a form of “useless” bourgeois culture that privileged the individual over the collective and denied the “true” conditions of the world (denying, as a result, politics and political consciousness altogether, something Benjamin's “Work of Art” essay similarly decries). The legacy of Rodchenko and his fellow Russian avant-garde artists, as well as other modernist movements such as Dada, with its extensive employment of mass media, texts, graphics, and other forms of reproduction, was revisited and furthered in post-Abstract Expressionist forms of painting. Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein, and then Gerhard Richter, Sigmar Polke, and others each systematically engaged with the nature of the painterly mark, now mechanized and tied to a gamut of serial structures and methods. Repetitions abound.

The crucial issue of painting's obsolescence, invoked by Rodchenko's assertion “it's all over,” subsequently has been a persistent theme in modernism. This is painting's dark underside whose repressions, as scholar Briony Fer contends, are precisely embodied in the abstract work.[9] During the 1980s, the collective critique of “postmodernism” (in the work of Richard Prince, Barbara Kruger, Sherrie Levine, Troy Brauntuch, and others) made extensive use of media strategies and images—the decidedly un-painterly in the face of neo-expressionist revivals. Their efforts importantly were accompanied by (and in dialogue with) critical assessments by such scholars and critics as Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, Craig Owens, and Douglas Crimp. The latter's “The End of Painting,” published in 1981, offered a pointed, polemical response to recent attempts to restore a mythical ideal of painting, seemingly untouched by contemporary reality and by the incursions of the photographic that had firmly taken hold in the decades since Benjamin's writing.[10] For Crimp, painting itself was ideologically suspect given its inevitable association with a delegitimized humanism as well as its denial of the very property of life, namely time. The latter modernist belief in the “eternal essence” of man (and decidedly only men) and “the artist as unique creator” necessarily held time in suspension in a heightened state of pure presence.[11]

9. Briony Fer, *On Abstract Art* (London: Yale University Press, 2000).

10. Douglas Crimp, "The End of Painting," *October* 16 (Spring, 1981): 69–86.

11. Ibid, 75.

For artist and writer Thomas Lawson, however, these critics got it quite wrong. The best vehicle in which to critique painting and its mytho-poetical status, as he argued in his essay, “Last Exit: Painting” (published in the same year, 1981, as Crimp’s text cited above), was through painting itself.[12] While similarly leveling an attack on the “cynicism” of contemporary practitioners (Julian Schnabel, Francesco Clemente, et al.) who at the time were garnering the most media glare (as Lawson inveighs, their “debased version of modernist practice is vigorously opposed to the very idea of critical analysis since it is simply a declaration of presence signifying only the ambition of the artist to be noticed”), he nonetheless maintains that painting represents the “last exit for the radical artist.”[13] As he explains: “It is painting itself, that last refuge of the mythology of individuality, which can be seized to deconstruct the illusions of the present. For since painting is intimately concerned with illusion, what better vehicle for subversion?”[14]

I want to revisit Lawson’s argument as it provides prescient insight into the current conditions in which Pestoni paints, and the sly subversions his objects proffer. In *Blue Sweep*, 2011 (p. 77), to start with one example, intermittent slashes of cool aqua march down the deep cobalt surface in semi-parallel verticals. Both regular and irregular, each stroke reveals points of compression, where the paint becomes denser and acts as a highlight against the dark field, and displays moments of scratchy unevenness, as if the paint was applied with a completely dry brush and the fatigued hand could no longer sustain its movements. So cut off from the mark, the hand thus engages in moments of delay, thereby interrupting the circuit that is supposed to guarantee the presence—and thus authenticity—of the artist.

The temporal unfolding of paint (and thus of meaning) in Pestoni’s work does not, however, merely revisit settled territory from decades ago; rather, it intervenes into this moment where, since the dawn of the 21st century, the conversation has decidedly shifted. Debates that raged in the pages of *Artforum* or *Art in America* about painting’s “death” have seemingly been eclipsed, or perhaps more accurately, a distinctly different temporality has arisen. From painting’s “end” (and all the critical weight with which this idea operated), testimonials now proliferate about its *currency*. The arguments about the ongoing validity of the medium of painting are numerous and diverse, but what they share is a conscious incorporation of the spatiotemporal coordinates of a “now” or other signifiers alluding to contemporaneity.[15] Curator Laura Hoptman most vigorously maintains this position, writing in the catalogue accompanying her exhibition, revealingly titled *The Forever*

12. Thomas Lawson, "Last Exit: Painting," *Artforum* (October 1981): 153–166, reprinted in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984): 153–165.

13. Ibid, 159, 160.

14. Ibid, 162.

15. Among the most nuanced treatments is Suzanne Hudson’s *Painting Now* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2015), which considers the viability of contemporary painting after conceptual art. As she notes, her use of the term “now” in the title is highly self-conscious, and refers in part to Richard Serra and Nancy Holt’s seminal 1974 video *Boomerang* (originally broadcast live on television), in which Holt wears a large pair of headphones into which her words are instantly sent back to her through a feedback loop, trapping her in a clutch of “now.” As Hudson explains, Serra and Holt’s “precedent helps me think about how to grasp the contemporary, in that it not only admits the present as fugitive, crossing into history just as it comes into being, but begs for reflexivity about this process” (Hudson, 31). Also of consideration is the exhibition *Painting 2.0: Expression in the Information Age*, curated by Achim Hochdörfer and David Joselit, with Manuela Ammer, which opened at Museum Brandhorst (Munich, Germany) on November 14, 2015, as I was putting the finishing touches on this essay.

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Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World, that the "cultural product[s]" of today (painting included) are "***atemporal***."[16] In a somewhat startling statement, she notes that "[t]he atemporal song, story, or painting contains elements of history ***but isn't historical***; it is innovative but not novel, pertinent rather than prescient."[17] For Hoptman, this idea of the atemporal is neutral, merely facilitating a pluralistic freedom to borrow, recycle, appropriate, and repurpose "styles, subjects, motifs, materials, strategies, and ideas from an array of periods on the art-historical timeline," all largely made possible by digital technologies.[18] As she further elaborates, "It would be more accurate and more poetic to understand [atemporal works of art] as existing in the ***eternal present***."[19]

The concept of painting (or art or culture for that matter) existing in a "forever now," however, is both predictable and disconcerting. Predictable as it stems from a particular understanding of globalism approached through a technological framework (i.e. the insistent value of newness and nowness); disconcerting as it insists upon a "presentness" that exists outside of history and historical claims in the constant "refresh" of the digital zone, where hyperreality functions as an incessant loop effectively outside of or beyond time, and thus immune from its pressures. Hoptman's invocation of the "eternal present," while not stated in such terms, implies the premise of "forgetting" (forgetting history, forgetting its forms, both artistic and otherwise) which, as many past commentators have warned, is a highly dangerous move. The theoretician Guy Debord, writing in the heady days of the revolutionary sixties in France, argued that such a forgetting characterizes what he terms the "society of the spectacle," in which the "real" (or whatever tentative grasp one can have upon that concept) gives way to the image, which can be exchanged and consumed at will. This orientation toward the image world, driven by the commodification of those zones of life previously immune from its grasp (the "colonization of everyday life," as he describes it) threatens to supersede the urgency of historical reflection.[20]

Debord's warnings have proven extremely prescient. The collective known as Retort, writing upon the condition of culture and society after the events of 9/11, in which the image played a significant role in the terrorist attacks, relays:

> [Debord's] deepest fears as a revolutionary derived from the sense [...] that this elaborate machinery [of forgetting] might now have been built, and really be turning the world into an eternal present. That was the key to his hatred of the image-life; that what it threatened,

16. Laura Hoptman, *The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2015): 16, emphasis added.

17. Ibid, 14, emphasis added.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid, 16, emphasis added.

20. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994) [originally published *La societé du spectacle* (Paris: Buchet-Chastel, 1967)].

> ultimately, was the very existence of the complex, created, *two-way* temporality that for him constituted the essence of the human.[21]

Retort’s invocation of a “two-way temporality” as a weapon against the atemporality of the pure image is worth exploring, for what I am arguing here is that Pestoni’s paintings function in such a zone. For one, they are nothing but deeply historical (thus it is not surprising they are not included in Hoptman’s exhibition or essay, as they challenge and even undermine the very premise of the “atemporal”), rejecting the solipsism that endless proclamations make about the persistent “newness” of something proscribed *as* painting. The move out and beyond of Pestoni’s paintings, as I introduced at the outset of this essay, begins from a set of precedents that are received as a given, but they have to be confronted. As Pestoni notes:

> I try to use figuration as a resist [*sic*] to the more strictly painterly. That is, by painting the figurative in and out, it helps contrast, develop, question and specify the painterly. Instead of any outside object, I try to use figuration to ultimately locate the actual painting. I try to introduce problems into my practice, and figuration is just one among many others that include material, process and scale.[22]

As the artist conveys, such motifs—even the “painterly” itself—are treated as “problems” to be solved rather than as “styles” to adapt, or to exchange in a form of seamless, synchronic integration. These problems, moreover, begin with a fundamental question concerning the status and nature of the mark and the activity of mark-making: *what does it mean to make a mark?*

It should first be acknowledged that there are many types of “marks”—pictorial, yes, but also graphic, notational, mechanical, and graffitied, to name a few—that come from many different disciplines. With this reorientation, the conversation shifts away from a limited framework, in that “marks” belong to many other fields and contexts than painterly abstraction, encompassing a whole range of cultural phenomena. To recall one of the quotes by the artist opening this essay:

> Initially, the move to a larger size was a way to further distance the hand from the mark, both in scale and cumulative application. Removing my own hand from the otherwise expressive or gestural marks has always been a concern, and the larger scale literally made it so that my hand could not complete or resort to its own natural tendencies.[23]

21. Retort (Iain Boal, T.J. Clark, Joseph Matthews, Michael Watts), *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War* (London and New York: Verso, 2005): 23.

22. Cited in Tumlir: 107.

23. Ibid.

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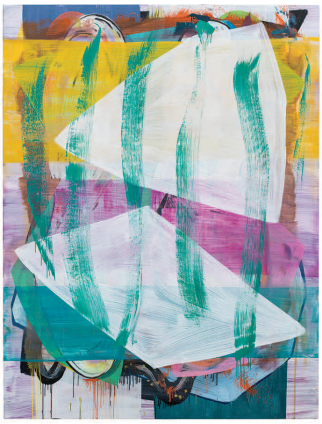

24. Jon Pestoni, *Family Plot*, 2013. Oil on canvas, 78 × 60 × 1⅛ in. (198.1 × 152.4 × 3.8 cm)

Two things here are noteworthy. First is the impulse to *distance the hand from the mark*, rather than bind them more closely together or collapse one into the other. The mark, therefore, is more than and possibly even independent from the hand, the bodily appendage that garners “touch” and intimacy. In this way, Pestoni’s removals operate in a manner that echoes Gerhard Richter’s abstractions, with their insistent dialectics of the painterly and the photographic. But, secondly, Pestoni also relays the (seemingly) counterintuitive decision to increase the scale of his canvases not as a means to shore up their assertiveness as painting—or as ego revealed via gesture (pace any number of neoexpressionist paintings of the 1980s)—but on the contrary, as a means to demonstrate the hand’s inability to fully execute the mark with any sense of completeness and control.

The sheer energy and variety of brushstrokes found in *Gone Blonde*, 2012 (p. 27) take on, in this context, a different cast. The central collection of black strokes blots out layers of high-keyed planes of color and a chaotic assortment of lines and drips, some of which seep out of the edges of the black field, providing clues as to what lies below. But dominating the center are five large vertical swooshes of yellow paint, which, in their passage up and around the center, vary in thickness and direction, a format found across Pestoni’s paintings. These yellow lines, prominent yet modest, betray the painting’s message of systematic attempts toward a fulfillment that just never arrives, that is always already *deferred*. There are pauses. There are spaces in between. *Family Plot*, 2013, offers almost a visual exercise of such procedures: horizontal bands loom behind, large white geometric shapes never meet, and then there are those telltale vertical strokes, their edges never touching, moving up and down in regular yet erratic intervals.[24] *What does it mean to make a mark?* It means to move in fits and starts, and to potentially fail.

The activity of deferral is key here. For Jacques Derrida, the notion of “deferral” (or “spacing”) represents a constant deflection of fixed meaning and, thus, crucially of “presence.”[25] To explain: the idea of deferral comprises Derrida’s neologism *différance*, which plays off the French where the verb *différer* means both “to differ” and “to defer.” Rather than singularity and presence, *différance* entails a constant displacement, a never-ending temporality that works against “nowness” (or the *nun*, as he notes, using the German word). For Derrida, the compulsive belief in “presence” represents everything wrong with Western thought (and its foundation in metaphysics), which privileges mind, Spirit, the Word, God. Western thinkers are oriented towards what

25. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).

he calls “logocentrism” or “phonocentrism”, where meaning is self-evident. As he explains, such a privileging of presence over “writing” (or representation more generally) has dictated philosophical reflection upon the very meaning of “being,” which is always defined as “presence.”[26]

Acts of doubling, imitation, repetition, and reduplication thus are critical and strategic, revealing hidden biases and challenging the supreme belief in the purity of mind. Ideas, Derrida insists, have a history. To hold up the false promise of the self-evidence of consciousness lends phenomena a *natural* order, thereby denying historical contingency.

This is dense theoretical territory, so to break it down, we can go back to Pestoni’s paintings and ask how they fit into this picture and to the larger one of painting’s history I am tracing here. Looking through and over the scope of his practice and considering carefully its moves and countermoves, one will have a hard time not seeing the *repetitions*—the spaces, doublings, deferrals, and multiplications—that characterize Pestoni’s individual paintings and his greater oeuvre. There is, to put it succinctly, never *just one*: never just one swoosh of paint but so many marching together like soldiers in disorganized formation. There is never just one Pestoni painting but so many so that, while one cannot define his pictures strictly as a “series” in the conventional sense (say, Mondrian’s grids or Monet’s haystacks), they amount to an *almost* series: lines of flight within a larger body of work. This pattern of *almost the same* with significant enough variations reads as a sameness with difference, like so many Allan McCollum *Plaster Surrogates*, 1982–89, with their blank interiors and identical frames that purposively mimic the look and rhythms of commodity production—an entirely different reference for Pestoni’s “abstraction.”

Take the relentless appearance of what I will inelegantly describe as the “blob,” a semi-opaque patch of collected strokes forming an amorphous, rounded rectangular shape undergirding the compositional structure that first makes its appearance in works such as *Gone Blonde*, described above, and *Shelf Life* from 2012 (p. 45) and materializes more assertively in the dominant red patch of *No Harm Done*, 2013 (p. 33), and *Coil*, 2015 (p. 67). Between them, we have *Egg* (p. 69), *Room for Higher* (p. 79), *Pyramid* (p. 55), *Brains* (p. 51), *Underbite* (p. 47), and *Whirlpool* (p. 41), all from 2014, and all of which are dominated by the pugnacious painterly shape (not to mention rhetorically evocative titles that invite all sorts of speculation). *Coil* then marks a transition, as if the artistic testing of this set of possibilities was spent, and there was the need to move on to another direction, to more

26. As Derrida writes, “We already have a foreboding that phonocentrism merges with the historical determination of the meaning of being in general as *presence*, with all the subdeterminations which depend on this general form and which organize within it their system and their historical sequence (presence of the thing to the sight as *eidos*, presence as substance/ essence/ existence [*ousia*], temporal presence as point [*stigmè*] of the now or of the moment [*nun*], the self-presence of the cogito, consciousness, subjectivity, the co-presence of the other and of the self, intersubjectivity as the intentional phenomenon of the ego, and so forth). Logocentrism would thus support the determination of the being of the entity as presence.” Ibid, 12.

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questioning. What comes next? Another set of problems to confront, to unpack, while never completely resolving. This incompleteness becomes a virtue in and of itself in an administered world rife with the perils of results-oriented efficiency.

27. Gerhard Richter, *Red*, 1994. Oil on canvas, 78¾ × 126 in. (200 x 320 cm) © 2011 Gerhard Richter.

In this way, Pestoni's paintings *do* two things: first, they always operate off a pre-existing set of motifs or schema (the smallest integer of which is the mark), which is, as Derrida might say, something that exists on the order of “writing,” from which the “new” expression will merely take its place amongst a series of differences (or of *différance*). Moreover, these “writings” are often buried beneath the surface yet left only partially visible, as if Pestoni executed numerous paintings that are then covered over so that only veiled traces remain. Again echoes of Richter are evident. In such works as *Red*, 1994, Richter painted and then obliterated through over-painting more than thirty versions or stages of a single painting, with each phase dutifully photographed by the artist.[27] As Briony Fer insightfully writes in an extended analysis, Richter's “method of painting over other paintings [...] immediately introduces a notion of seriality and sequence, which invokes both early abstract art's originary logic [...] as well as modernism's more recent preoccupations with diverse ordering systems.”[28] As she goes on to argue, however, Richter's complex, multiplying output raises tricky theoretical questions regarding the very status not just of the work, but also of time itself. Her analysis is worth citing at length:

28. Fer, 160.

> *Red* poses the problem of what significance these prior stages are supposed to have. Are they absent or present in the work? ‘Are’ they or ‘were’ they there? Richter's procedure even confuses the tenses in which we are able to speak of them. The picture can stand on its own, its effects sustainable in terms of ‘opticality,’ but these studio photographs (over thirty of them taken by the artist) offer another perspective on it: quite simply, they change the picture. For there is a kind of compulsive painting out; the picture lurches from one state to another and finally takes this form, but the point of termination might have been almost arbitrary. It is, of course, not a series at all but a serial obliteration.[29]

29. Ibid, 160–61.

Fer's brilliant description of Richter's picture “lurching” from state to state, and the seemingly “arbitrary” point of cessation, could equally describe Pestoni's canvases, with their own acts of duplication and deferral both within a single work and between works made in series. In pictures such as *Untitled* (p. 57) and *Inner Tube* (p. 59), both 2015, Pestoni proposes another tactic:

cleaving the canvas in two down the center to create a diptych of sorts within a single canvas or frame, a reduplication that acts against the singularity of the autonomous work. In *Untitled* two similarly swooping curved brushstrokes dominate left and right: the former an evanescent light pink, while the latter commands a deep purple, loudly echoing and partially covering its partner. Of course, underneath, all sorts of painterly activity takes (or *has taken?*) place, some of which seeps out the edges in squiggles, planes, and lines. In *Inner Tube*, on the other hand, no pretense of visual equivalence can be found between the two sides. Each is almost a distinct painting who has found itself tethered to the other. The right-side “painting,” moreover, seems discontent to remain in this state, aggressively moving over the centerline to command more pictorial terrain. On both sides, the gestures, colors, forms, and shapes are distinct, their partnering seemingly as arbitrary as Richter’s *Red*’s final resting point as a “finished” work.

What can one make of all these moves and countermoves? In one sense, Pestoni’s paintings are dialogical: they “talk” to and between each other and, in so doing, they demand that we, as viewers—or, more accurately, as interlocutors—not just *look* at them, but *question* them, asking not what they represent but what they do. In this way, I want to think of them as what philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein called language games. Each is a concept that emphasizes the pragmatics of language, or how communication is not simply the transmission of a preconceived idea, but is an activity of daily life set in relation to other utterances and outcomes. Wittgenstein describes this as a “game” in that each utterance begets another, thereby existing as a “move” (as if in chess) that necessarily changes the terms of the game. Similarly, we can consider the play of call and response both within each of Pestoni’s paintings and among them as a different mode of seriality, one that, like Fer describes in relation to Richter, simultaneously obliterates the very premise of serial production while operating off its logic. Pestoni suspends his mark within this tension.

So when Pestoni contemplates the relationship of hand to mark, he both sustains this connection as the fundamental act of painting—of what it “means” to be a painter—while recognizing the increasing distance between touch and defining contemporary experience. We exist in a culture where there is, to paraphrase artist and filmmaker Hito Steyerl, “too much world.” What Steyerl means by this is an oversaturation, whereby screens and images move offline into everywhere, inhabiting and defining a new space that she describes as a “sphere of liquidity.” As she goes on to argue, in this new sphere, “everyone is an artist.” As she describes:

Kraynak, Janet, “Jon Pestoni: Follow the Mark,” *Family Plot*, Los Angeles: David Kordansky Gallery, 2016, pp. 7-20

> We are pitching, phishing, spamming, chain-liking or mansplaining. We are twitching, tweeting, and toasting as some form of solo relational art, high on dual processing and a smartphone flat rate. Image circulation today works by pimping pixels in orbit via strategic sharing of wacky, neo-tribal, and mostly US-American content. Improbable objects, celebrity cat GIFs, and a jumble of unseen anonymous images proliferate and waft through human bodies via Wi-Fi. One could perhaps think of the results as a new and vital form of folk art, that is if one is prepared to completely overhaul one's definition of folk as well as art. A new form of storytelling using emojis and tweeted rape threats is both creating and tearing apart communities loosely linked by shared attention deficit.[30]

Steyerl's colorful narration is perhaps the best explanation for why Pestoni not only paints, but produces marks in a way that is incomplete in a critical way. His marks are neither seamless nor fully controlled; they move in energetic lines, but they vacillate and hiccup. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Pestoni does not, for instance, make marks digitally or with programming code or software such as Photoshop and apps like Brushes, nor does he feed his paintings through a digital interface such as a scanner, all of which would yield an entirely different outcome, removing the tensions that his gestures convey. These tensions are found within and across Pestoni's canvases, most basically, in their matte surfaces without a hint of the sheen one expects from oil. Moreover, the regular introduction onto these surfaces of a material as unrefined and abject as kitty litter (given its purpose, i.e., collecting the bodily effluence of the house pet) is debauched yet still aesthetic. Pestoni's pictures make us look and look away, stepping into Steyerl's liquid sphere and then recoiling from its false promises, pulling us back in, but with a sense of time that moves beyond the now.

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To conclude this essay, I want to step back in time, offering a retrospective view of my own first encounter with Pestoni's paintings. Contemplating their cautious application of parallel vertical lines that appeared over and over from canvas to canvas, the thought echoing in my head was “draw a straight line and follow it.” These words of course are not my own, but comprise a now famous score, entitled *Composition 1960 #10 (dedicated to Bob Morris)*, written by the experimental composer La Monte Young in 1960. Young's austere compression of a musical score into a few commands—without notes, staffs,

30. Hito Steyerl, “Too Much World: Is the Internet Dead?” *e-flux*, no. 49 (2013): np. http://www.e-flux.com/journal/too-much-world-is-the-internet-dead/, accessed August 20, 2015.

or anything typically associated with musical notation—was equivalent to his equally radical, reductive approach to sound itself, whereby he favored the singular tone. Young performed his score several times and in different realizations (at a concert at Harvard organized by Henry Flynt in March of 1961, as well as during a performance series at Yoko Ono's loft in the same year), but the point of his word scores was that they could be repeated at will by others, and in manners entirely unforeseen by the composer. The most famous iteration of *Composition 1960 #10 (dedicated to Bob Morris)* in fact was not executed by Young himself, but by Nam June Paik. Called *Zen For Head* and taking place at the Fluxus festival in Wiesbaden in 1962, the performance consisted of the artist dipping his head into a combination of ink and tomato juice, and inscribing a straight line down a scroll of long paper laid before him.[31] Paik's enactment, constrained by its score but free to realize visually, was thus not improvisational, nor was it completely predetermined. The resulting visualization is a thick sweeping “brushstroke,” albeit one produced with the head and not a brush, which offers moments of pause and interruption as Paik worked his crouching body down the length of paper.

My invocation of Paik's work—whose line finds an uncanny echo in Pestoni's—is not, however, because they *look* the same; rather it is because the Paik-Young axis not only introduces a different type of mark-making and a different historical context than that of “abstraction,” but also because each artist, in his own way, perpetuated something (music, painting, performance), while fully recognizing that that very same thing had fundamentally changed. Like Richter enacting while simultaneously obliterating his “series” of paintings, Young and Paik both sustained “music” as a discipline while the encroaching pull of technology was rupturing sound, and what it means to *listen* to sound. The artwork itself was destabilized, much in the way that the conditions that facilitated it were being put under pressure. Similarly, in this moment of “too much world” where “everyone is an artist,” Pestoni just keeps painting. Make a mark and follow it; you don't know where it might lead.

31. Nam June Paik, *Zen For Head*, August 9, 1962. Fluxus Internationale Festspiele Neuester Musik, Städtlisches Museum Wiesbaden. Photo: picture alliance/Goettert.