New Objectivity

MARIA LIND TALKS WITH DOUG ASHFORD

Both pedagogue and painter, Doug Ashford is a founding member of the collective Group Material, whose radical work defined an era of activism in art. In his current solo practice, Ashford explores the means by which abstraction—despite its historical baggage—might still be an effective and empathetic tool for social reform. Curator Maria Lind sat down with Ashford to talk about his recent work, including his installation at Documenta 13, and the ways in which such projects continue and extend his earlier activist ideals.

MARIA LIND: A highlight for me from last summer's Documenta 13 remains your *Many Readers of One Event* [2012], a group of small, abstract geometric paintings with black-and-white photographs of people who are physically supporting one another. These were installed in one of the huts in Karlsaue Park, with a glass front so that they could be seen even at odd hours, hanging on the wall and leaning against shelves. How did you come to make this work?

DOUG ASHFORD: The project started with a desire to create a more theatrical experience than I have in the past in singular paintings. It involves a tableau or a condition of multiple points of view on the documentation of a specific catastrophe. This is connected with an open-ended question of how we respond to the disasters of the present.

The documented event I began with was a particularly awful experience of a group of parents finding their dead children in a Camden, New Jersey, parking lot. In the installation, there is a single news photograph from the *New York Times* of the parents collapsing in one another's arms at this discovery. All of the many other photographs in the project are of actors reenacting this physical pose, of people grieving to the degree that the coherence of their bodies gives way.

Corresponding to those reenactments is a group of eighteen paintings that explore how abstraction and identification work together to inform human responses and politics. These works embody a way of looking simultaneously at two different kinds of intellectual organization of affect: one identifying with an experience—the act of empathy—and another that is off-center, examining the ways in which abstraction might create a condition for sharing an experience of something without a reference.

ML: One way of understanding abstraction today is to look at its etymology, *abstrahere* in Latin: to withdraw, to step aside. This stepping aside from the mainstream by many artists and other cultural producers is a new form of performative, social abstraction. It seemed to me that the way you used the hut in the park was unusually well suited to the body of work, as if it were a jewelry box closed to itself. What is the lure of abstraction for you?

DA: The hut's isolation is related to the idea that abstraction has a capacity to model things in ways that become difficult to instrumentalize, redefining utility. As a cabinet or an aquarium, the glass-fronted house served as a way to look at documented facts as concurrent with the ideal models of abstract pictures.

Part of my background is in creating exhibitions with Group Material. In a sense I'm always in the audience, and the experience that I have as a producer of these pictures is still related to aspirations I have about how audiences can question social meaning through the condition of display. In this case, it's an experience that I'm hoping will create an emotional response in which people are able to share those mediations of feelings with one another and see them as something that might actually change historical conditions.

ML: Certain abstract traditions, for example, Constructivism, have arguably employed abstraction with instrumental aims—for the purpose of creating a better human being, not to mention a better society. There is still a trace of this mix of idealism and utilitarianism in your approach to abstraction, which links back to Group Material. You have described your trajectory in terms of community identity: starting from addressing the social together with your peers through its own methods, then having to step outside the social in order to continue to talk about it.

"We live in a time in which abstraction as a programmatic condition of modernist economies has taken on an overwhelming and oceanic darkness." —Doug Ashford

DA: We live in a time in which abstraction as a programmatic condition of modernist economies has taken on an overwhelming and oceanic darkness. The violent terms of the debt economy have made finance the sole determination of who and where we are, even before we

Left and below: **Doug Ashford, *Many Readers of One Event*, 2012**, eighteen tempera paintings on wood and eleven ink-jet prints on wooden shelf, hut. Installation views, Karlsaue Park, Kassel. From Documenta 13. Photo, left: Nils Klinger.

Left: **Doug Ashford, *Many Readers of One Event—p.9*, 2012**, ink-jet print on wood, 8¾ x 7⅝". From the work *Many Readers of One Event*, 2012.

Right: **Group Material, *AIDS Timeline* (detail), 1989**, artworks, magazines, and statistics. Installation view, University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, Berkeley, CA.

arrive. But strangely, at the core of democracy there is another, perhaps inverted, aspiration of abstraction: the idea of the empty room of politics. This is a nonspecific space where nothing exists other than agonism. Known as the parliament, the forum, the congress hall, it is a place that demands to be filled with forms—with anything that can be said within the conditions of that room. From that place, ideas about how history could change or how subjectivity could reform itself would become thinkable.

ML: Abstraction as an agent of political change is clearly not new, in general or for you. Among other things, you have talked about Group Material's exhibition designs as being abstractions. In what sense is this so, and how do they relate to your current geometric paintings?

DA: In a way, they are both models, proposals. For instance, *AIDS Timeline* [1989] quite concretely placed abstract models of temporal experience and memory in friction with official history. In other words, as one walked through the exhibition, one could see the effect of the virus as a health condition but also the way that media, government, and medical indifference created an actual epidemic; an epidemic of disbelief but also an epidemic of despondency, one that wrecked our physical and social health. For me, the form of the exhibition could help reorganize hope. By investing in a reservoir of nonspecific feeling that is created through abstract form, we can see ourselves as more than specific instruments produced by ideological contexts. Within the exhibition room, Group Material could propose a display as an abstract matrix of different conditions for the real, rediagramming possible relationships to power.

ML: The way you address both your current work and the Group Material exhibitions as models is very relevant. Part of the power of abstraction—which might seem at first glance to be an obsolete visual language, style, or phenomenon—has to do with the projected, with the capacity to imagine. Many people feel the need to think more actively about the future, about prototypes and possibilities, and here abstraction still seems full of potential.

DA: But also as an actual political process. What we learned from the Occupy movement was that you could refuse to be specifically represented in terms of an agenda or a program of effectiveness and still take a position that is sincere and robust. This lack of specificity, presented as fundamental to social change, offers the possibility of agency outside existing institutional terms of "usefulness."

ML: Your current way of working, in the withdrawn solitude of the studio, is radically different from the collective work you did with Group Material. This reminds me of the icon painter Andrei Rublev, the titular character in Tarkovsky's 1966 film, a figure who is immersed in this lonely activity and completely focused on delicate, handwrought images. What is the significance of process in your paintings?

DA: I was taught that the artworks that existed before me are as contemporary as anything that is present in my own time. And in this antihistorical perspective of the production of art, I am never really alone. Your reference to the Tarkovsky film is really interesting to me because Rublev, and the circumstances of Byzantine painting, propose a painting-object that could exist outside the fixed conditions of display. If icons are paraded through the streets, they might become part of our daily decisions and begin a kind of theater of confusion and choice. I'm interested in similar experiments in the revolutionary Soviet work of Gustav Klutsis, who made works that could be carried into the streets or held in your hands as both representation and a suggestion of new life. This simultaneity of abstract sign and ethical imperative, of public interaction and an open field of abstract construction, was extremely influential to me early on. That's why I made the shelf to display some of the paintings for Documenta, to suggest that an abstract painting could become a tool, an instrument like any other. As potentially movable or stored panels, those paintings can be understood as an archive that could be physically handled and projected onto other kinds of collections.

ML: What is the significance of your precise aesthetic articulation, the technique you're using, the shapes you're opting for, the colors you decide to employ?

DA: It really depends on the work. For "Six Moments in 1967 and Some of Its Bodies" [2010–11], which offers a photograph of political manifestations in the street in each of the six paintings, the implementation of colors and shapes was an attempt to replicate the optimism of the grid. To try to see the grid as a conversion of subjective experience into an objective form that could be measured in relation to a memory of a political event. Identification with the demonstrations documented in the photos impressed on me a color imperative in which variations on a dark blue would be organized around the aspirations of those involved. The colored shapes are painted over and over again in an attempt to convey, excessively, what might have happened through political action.

ML: What about the intimacy of the paintings?

DA: I can't make a big one. There is something important to me about looking at a painting as a text, as an archive or a photo album, as a place in which you are reading through an intimate relationship with someone else's memories or experiences. Tempera creates a depth of color, but at the same time it's extremely flat. The flatness for me creates a condition of looking carefully at something that is representing nothing in particular, that's an abstraction. The material production of the painting aligns with a certain mode of attention, a desire to decipher the past while painting over or painting through real conditions, as if making a picture allows the possibility of remaking those facts. □

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