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The Line of Dichotomy: Standpoints and Meaning in Anne Truitt's Art

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Art History from
William & Mary

by

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Introduction: Anne Truitt's work is not reducible

In writing this introduction I will respond to a variety of popular interpretations of Anne Truitt's artwork, such as James Meyer's account of her artwork as visual synecdoche and Kristen Hileman's interpretation of Truitt's meaning as located in viewer experience. Although the arguments I respond to differ in their conclusions, they all share a common charge that I believe, perhaps unintentionally, reduces Truitt's works to their objecthood, the literal properties of her structures like size and shape. These arguments bring the act of interpreting Truitt's artwork out of the realm of authorial intention and into viewer experience and physical affect, which are constantly changing. I seek to push back against interpretations that imagine Truitt's art as incomplete without a present viewer. I suggest we should look at intended effects, which are visible in the works themselves to develop a more robust interpretation of Truitt's artistic statement. Truitt's artworks avoid being reducible to their objecthood through their dependence on conventions and interpretation.

In James Meyer's essay, "The Bicycle," from the Hirshhorn's catalogue, *Anne Truitt Perception and Reflection*, Meyer attempts to situate Anne Truitt in a field of positions loosely described as minimalism. In distinguishing Truitt's work from artists like Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Carl Andre, Dan Flavin, or Sol LeWitt, Meyer describes Truitt's practice as a synecdochic pursuit. In discussing Truitt's practice broadly, Meyer asserts, "The stripes and bands of paint semanticize her armatures. Rather than reveal the gestalt, her colored planes counterpoint, even contradict it."¹ Meyer quotes an unpublished 1965 statement from the Truitt estate where she says, "What is important to me is not geometrical shape per se, or color per se,

¹Kristen Hileman and James Meyer, *Anne Truitt Perception and Reflection* (Washington, D.C: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, 2009), 52.

but to make a relationship between shape and color which feels to me like my experience. To make what feels to me like reality.”² This description, though not tied to a specific work, characterizes an effort to transform an object, the wooden support, into a convincing image of a different time or place with the greatest economy of relationships between shape and color.

Formally, Truitt’s 1968 work *A Wall for Apricots* (Figure One) organizes color with the most saturated yellow at the bottom and the brightest hue, the whiteish-blue, at the top. It stands on small risers slightly above the floor, separating the work from the room in which it is installed. As is frequently noted, the work derives anthropomorphic qualities from its presence, or the space it takes up physically. Standing a little over six feet tall, the work is scaled to the human body. Under Meyer’s account of Truitt’s art as synecdoche, the rhetorical device where a part stands for the whole, the title and colors of blue-white green and yellow bands of paint in a work like *A Wall for Apricots* evoke a chain of references to a remembered dinner party, a word game, the tragic death of her friend Mary Pinchot Meyer, and the fact that white walls and apricots were among Pinchot Meyer’s favorite things.³ James Meyer writes that Truitt’s remembered encounter with a mirrored garden ball acts as an archetype for the kind of synecdoche he sees at work in a sculpture like *A Wall for Apricots*. Truitt describes her encounter with the mirrored ball in a passage from her published journal, *Daybook*.

One of the byways I explored on my bicycle in ever-enlarging concentric circles around home was an alley that ran along the back of an immense tangled garden. There, in a ragged round rose bed, a short cement pedestal held aloft an ornamental ball of mirror. I used to ride over and look at that reflection; my own barely recognizable stretched face if I stood close, and if I stood apart, a fascinating miniaturized picture of towering trees converging over a sumptuous pattern of surging plants. Once I had grasped how this

²Hileman and Meyer, *Anne Truitt Perception and Reflection*, 52.

³ Hileman and Meyer, *Anne Truitt Perception and Reflection*, 52.

worked, I used to maneuver my distance so that I could study this strange device by way of which the world was at once reduced, distorted, and made magical....

The variety of scale illustrated in the ball of mirror initiated a lifelong habit of looking at what I see from many different points of view, each potentially fascinating. I took in the fact that the world was not fixed, that its meaning changed as its appearance changed and that these changes had something lawful about them so I could hope to learn how it all worked if I paid attention. I noticed too that by moving around something, moving toward it or moving away from it, I had some control of its meaning to me.⁴

In Meyer's analysis, the mirrored ball contains both the space of its surroundings and the self that looks into the ball, these surroundings then stand in for the neighborhood as a whole, like a visual synecdoche. And that synecdoche stands, for Meyer, for Truitt's artistic enterprise. What I want to ask is, Is the mirrored ball an effective metaphor to describe Truitt's artistic pursuit?

Like Meyer says, the garden ball depends on its surroundings to do the reflecting. The mirror does not reflect what is not in front of it. Truitt's work, in her own words and in Meyer's words, seems to work differently from a mirrored ball in a crucial way. Truitt frequently refers to ephemeral or changing conditions in her work, through titles like *Sandcastle*, structures which disappear with the tide or *Moon Lily*, a flower that's only visible at certain hours of the day. I want to say Truitt is interested in temporary conditions, like what you might see in a mirror, but she is interested in those conditions as far as she is able to render them be permanently accessible by representing them or evoking them through her chosen medium.

Unlike a mirrored garden ball, what you see in Truitt's sculpture doesn't literally change at different distances. As I shall argue throughout my thesis, the formal articulation of Truitt's works makes a strong case that the artist intends and hopes for a viewer to move all the way around the sculpture, perhaps stopping at different points to notice different aspects of the work,

⁴ Anne Truitt, *Prospect: the Journal of an Artist* (New York, NY: Penguin, 1997), 31-32.

but despite the relevance of the work's situation to its meaning, the work is not reducible to its objecthood. The work is not reducible to literal qualities or to an individual's experience of the work because Truitt frames the work's content independent from the artist, the beholder, and the situation of the artwork. Truitt's artwork means the same thing when it is installed in New York as it does when it is installed in Washington, D.C. Importantly, it means the same thing whether or not anyone is looking at it, and throughout this thesis I will offer a series of interpretations of how Truitt accomplishes this and what content she makes available for the beholder.

Perhaps the artist intends, as she writes of her white *Arundel* paintings in the '70s, for a viewer to see the work from certain vantage points, where lines are spaced out so that they can only be apprehended at the same time using peripheral vision. Truitt writes, "the lines in them are sometimes so widely spaced that they cannot be seen simultaneously, and the fields of white in which these lines act depend for their understanding on peripheral vision; that is, on the entire range of sight from all the way left to all the way right."⁵ The series of white paintings share three basic components, organized to different results. Each *Arundel* is composed of white canvas ground "at once active and inert," faint lines of graphite at precise intervals, and dabs of white acrylic paint, often edged against the graphite lines. As Anne Wagner writes in her essay, "Threshold," the *Arundel* paintings, which mark the "tip of [Truitt's] conceptual iceberg," catalyze a particular mode of seeing. "It is as if the paintings are giving one's vision a test or a workout, in the process widening the physiological operations required not only to take in a painting's surface, but to see it as a surface."⁶ *Arundel XXVI* (1975) (Figure Two) offers a

⁵ Truitt, Anne, and Anne Middleton. Wagner. *Anne Truitt - Threshold: Works from the 1970s*; New York, NY: Matthew Marks Gallery, 2013, 19.

⁶ Anne Truitt, and Anne Middleton. Wagner. *Anne Truitt - Threshold: Works from the 1970s*; New York, NY: Matthew Marks Gallery, 2013, 19.

specific example of this type of painting Wagner discusses in her essay. The placement of graphite and acrylic both potentializes the inert surface to read as spatial and challenges the viewer to attend to the specific discontinuities of the piece—where exactly does the line end? Where the line tapers off the faintly hinted space reverts to inert planarity.

If a viewer were to see the object from the desired vantage point, using their entire field of vision to try to apprehend each line simultaneously, like in 1978's *Prima* (Figure Three) where visually salient lines at the top and bottom of the work can be seen together in the periphery of the work, then the central blue of *Prima*, combined with Truitt's placement of framing lines at the top and bottom of the work suggest access to a sort of illusionistic depth, bounded by lines at the top and bottom of the work and cemented by associations with blue in the natural world, be it sky or water. The placement of lines and relative brightness or lightness of color in *Prima*, encourages, but does not require, the use of peripheral vision to see the whole image at once, which could temporarily alter a literal condition of the work. From the right perspective, a viewer may be able to temporarily, if for a moment, imaginatively suspend the work's woodenness, its flatness, and other facts of its construction. As a viewer in a more embodied, attentive state moves around the work, perhaps they may feel convinced of the "world" the work presents, of the meaningful subject matter that the object represents through its formal qualities. The horizontal bands that continue around *Prima* imply an infinite extension of a horizon. *Prima*, too, lifts up from the floor slightly, distancing itself from the room. Truitt's choice of colors for *Prima*, and her choice of colors generally, demonstrate an openness to decision-making less present in popular abstraction of the '60s, '70s, and '80s.

In American painting of the 1960s, composing through deduction, or not composing at all becomes a dominant mode of abstraction. In "Some Notes on Not Composing" Michael Fried

points to this when he discusses the deductive structures of Kenneth Noland's chevron paintings, which take the shape and size of the canvas support as their starting point and tries to relate the painted image to those dimensions, so the lower boundary of the chevron touches the upper corner of the painting and the tip of the chevron connects to the middle of the bottom framing edge.⁷ Fried discusses Anthony Caro's manner of non-composition in similar terms, but for Caro, Fried says, not composing largely consists of not seeing the sculpture being worked on.⁸ This type of deduction is visible in Frank Stella's line paintings, which deduce their composition from the shape of the support, or even popular accounts of Helen Frankenthaler's poured acrylics as composing the painting for her. Frank Stella himself spoke in a 1966 interview with Alan Solomon of wanting to avoid organization, which became "arbitrary or fussy" in his cramped studio.⁹ Clement Greenberg follows Fried's praise of the impersonal guise in "After Abstract Expressionism," writing that in Rothko and Newman, color "no longer fills in or specifies an area of even plane, but speaks for itself by dissolving all definiteness of shape and distance."¹⁰ Truitt's work in one sense deploys a similar style of deductive reasoning in that it takes the size and shape of the wooden support as a starting point to "counterpoint or even contradict,"¹¹ but on the whole, Truitt appears more open to making decisions than many of her contemporaries, like Barnett Newman.

⁷ Michael Fried, Anthony Caro and Kenneth Noland—Some Notes on Not Composing. III/IVed. (The Lugano Review, 1965), 2.

⁸ Fried, Anthony Caro and Kenneth Noland—Some Notes on Not Composing, 3.

⁹ Frank Stella, and Alan Solomon. "Frank Stella: Portions of an Interview." *Members Newsletter (Museum of Modern Art)*, no. 8 (1970): 3. Accessed April 20, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4380589>.

¹⁰ Greenberg, C. (1962). After Abstract Expressionism. *Art International*, VI(8).

¹¹ Kristen Hileman and James Meyer, *Anne Truitt Perception and Reflection* (Washington, D.C: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, 2009), 52.

Newman's *Whose Afraid of Red Yellow and Blue III* (1968), like Truitt's *Prima*, uses the traditional palette of primary paint colors, but where Newman moves to take personal decisions out of the picture, Truitt adds more. Newman decides on a size for the canvas and decides the widths of blue and yellow at the end of his expanse of red, but Newman's use of the same three colors, of the exact same saturation and value, in pure primary colors seeks to minimize the sense that he is making decisions about his paintings. Truitt's willingness to make decisions, about color and about composition, while still employing deductive forms, is part of what gives her works credibility as referencing a world beyond themselves. Newman's standard issue, medium cadmium red seems chosen to avoid outside referents, where Truitt's selection and inflections of color vary in their relative hue, value, and saturation, so that the yellow band at the top, for example, might bleed into the similarly pale strip of white, but that the crimson band at the bottom might stand out as salient against the same white. These slight differences evoke atmosphere, air, and depth. The specificity of the colors' inflection seems descriptive—the sea, the sand, the sun. Truitt's focus on subtlety and specificity emphasize types of decision-making painters like Newman or Noland suppress. While Truitt reduces the images on her unitary objects with great economy to thin strips of color, she is more open to decision-making than many of her peers.

When Truitt describes her experience seeing Barnett Newman's *Onement VI* at the Guggenheim in 1961 in *Daybook*, an often-repeated conceptual origin story for Truitt's mature work, she describes "a universe of blue paint" into which she felt herself lifted. Truitt says, "Even running in a field had not given me the same airy beatitude."¹² To Truitt, this tipped the

¹² Anne Truitt, *Daybook*, (London: Simon & Schuster, 2013), 155-156.

balance from “physical to conceptual,”¹³ and set her thinking of what meant most to herself that she could make.¹⁴ I think the significance of Truitt describing her apprehension of the work as surpassing the openness of running through a field cannot be overstated, especially as we discuss Truitt’s work in relation to minimalist or literalist art. This description of a work of art runs almost entirely opposite to Tony Smith’s now-famous description of a car ride at night on the unfinished New Jersey Turnpike as quoted in Michael Fried’s 1967 essay “Art and Objecthood.”

Smith says,

The road and much of the landscape was artificial, and yet it couldn’t be called a work of art. On the other hand, it did something for me that art had never done. At first, I didn’t know what it was, but its effect was to liberate me from many of the views I had about art. It seemed that there had been a reality which had not had any expression in art. The experience on the road was something mapped out but not socially recognized. I thought to myself, it ought to be clear that’s the end of art. Most painting looks pretty pictorial after that. There is no way you can frame it, you just have to experience it.¹⁵

Smith’s description of the turnpike and his takeaway from the overpowering vastness of his experience driving on the seemingly endless strip of dark pavement couldn’t be more opposed to Truitt’s takeaway from *Onement VI*. For Smith, the pictorial nature of painting, and art broadly, couldn’t compete with the raw scale and power of the unfinished turnpike. Smith’s solution was to take a turn towards experience, the beholder as subject, and bodily sensation. In Truitt’s description of the Newman painting, the painting is powerful precisely because it is not as literally vast as the pictorial vastness—running in an open field—had convincingly evoked for her. For Truitt, part of the power in modernist conventions lies in the opportunity and ability to

¹³ Truitt, *Daybook*, 156.

¹⁴ Truitt, *Daybook*, 156.

¹⁵ Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews,” (Chicago, Ill, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 5

overcome the work's literal qualities, the qualities that make it an object like any other object. Smith gives up on presenting a fiction of anything in favor of embracing certainty of objecthood.

What I mean by all this is that some of Truitt's formal strategies—such as using the separate faces of the work to force the viewer to engage in it sequentially—build or depend on real or literal facts of the “situation” of the artwork. If this is the case, how do such works escape being reducible to their objecthood? And how do they produce effects that are not mere experience or mere affective response? The answer I will offer throughout this thesis is that they depend on conventions and interpretations. While I see the utility in Meyer's analysis of Truitt's works as syntagmatic fragments, I assert that to see Truitt's works by analogy with a mirror specifically is to replace content or meaning with the experience of the work itself. A mirror reflects its surroundings the way in which the Jersey Turnpike overpowers Tony Smith: free of intention and with an immediacy that is the result of its status as purely an object in its context, the space. I assert that to see Truitt's works as just a mirror reduces a set of intended effects that the work is meant to elicit to the experience of the work itself.

That Truitt's artworks depend on conventions and interpretation can be seen in the failure of many visitors to the 1975 Baltimore Museum of Art exhibition to “get” Truitt's works. R.P. Harriss was misinterpreting Truitt's artwork when he wrote a mocking review of the *Arundel* white paintings in the Baltimore paper *The News American*, comparing them to the emperor's new clothes.¹⁶ The potential of failure, in the case of the *Arundels*, the critic's failure to notice Truitt's smallest graphite marks spread far across the inert white ground of the long thin canvases, and the critic's failure to then try to see each mark at the same time as a system of

¹⁶ Harriss, R.P. "White Paintings Fit for That Emperor." *Baltimore News American*, February 9, 1975.

relationships, just barely perceptible as spatial, is a failure to interpret Truitt's intention to suggest an expansive space with the most sparse marks, a failure to interpret that the work is about sight. Of course, literalist artists also get mocked, so incomprehension is not itself proof of non-literalism. Instead, that a beholder must figure certain things out to see what's going on with Truitt's work proves its non-literalism. That there is something to understand is what makes Truitt's art non-literalist. To use an extreme example for the sake of comparison, let's consider James Turrell's sensory deprivation chambers, which literally cause Ganzfeld disorientation. You don't have to understand them to feel disoriented. In fact, it is almost impossible to understand them in terms of anything besides mere experience because of their extreme emphasis on bodily sensation.¹⁷ The point of the Turrell chamber is experience itself. Truitt takes facts about experience, about the situation the beholder finds herself in, and puts them to the service of a larger meaning. I believe this larger meaning cannot be accessed entirely by appealing through experience alone or through biography alone, and that it demands a close look at the work itself.

While perception remains a focus of Truitt's practice, the beholder's presence is not a structural element of the work—the work and the meaning it holds exist completely independent from an attentive observer. Walter Benn Michaels talks about the distinction I am trying to make in his remarks on the painter Larry Poons in the “Prehistoricism” chapter of *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History*. Michaels describes a series of paintings made by Poons where colored dots are placed in patterns on a colored field, kind of like a color-blindness test. Michaels talks about how Fried critiqued these paintings in terms of a “coercion” they exercise

¹⁷ Gordon Hughes (University of Chicago Press, “Tangled Up in Blue: James Turrell's Virtual Vision,” Nonsite.org (Nonsite.org, September 28, 2020), <https://nonsite.org/tangled-up-in-blue/>). Gordon Hughes goes into more detail on Turrell here, confirming my point about sensation.

over the spectator, that they were “literally irresistible.”¹⁸ Michaels suggests that for Fried “the real problem is not that the tests render the differences between spectators irrelevant; the real problem is that, in functioning like tests, the paintings make the spectator as such irrelevant: their ‘mode of address,’ he [Fried] says, is ‘to us as subjects, not spectators.’”¹⁹ The distinction is based in the relevance of our experience to the meaning of the work of art. The problem is not that the human eye has an automatic response to color blindness tests, but that the automatic aspect of the Poons paintings makes our response too relevant to the work, like they are so singularly committed to eliciting an optical response, they cannot really be understood outside of private sensation.²⁰ The problem for Fried and Benn Michaels is when the presence of the beholder is structural to the work of art rather than empirical. In Truitt, the beholder’s experience is relevant, but only when that experience is applied to interpret a meaning that is based in the work itself, through an appeal to authorial intent. Experience without interpretive application is irrelevant in Truitt, because it is outside the work, which is importantly framed as separate from its beholders and its context.

Towards the end of Miguel de Baca’s *Memory Work*, de Baca writes that Truitt’s *Return* “delivers an experience both visual and embodied, both virtual and spatial.”²¹ I agree that Truitt intends a negotiation of these polarities. Later, in his conclusion, de Baca writes, “Ultimately what distinguishes Truitt from other minimalists is the idea that bodily encounters are mediated by the existential facts of our surroundings and also frequently and profoundly by past

¹⁸ Michaels, Walter Benn. *The Shape of the Signifier : 1967 to the End of History / Walter Benn Michaels*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004, 85.

¹⁹ Benn Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier*, 87

²⁰ Benn Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier*, 87

²¹ Miguel de Baca, *Memory Work: Anne Truitt and Sculpture* (Oakland, Calif, CA: Univ. of California Press, 2016), 67.

encounters.”²² Setting aside whether we want to label Truitt as a minimalist, I think it is important to clarify *whose* past encounters are being mediated. What makes experiencing a work of art different from everyday experience, and therefore available to “mean” something, is the idea that the work of art was made intentionally, by an author or authors. An interpretation of what a work of art might mean then appeals to what the author(s) possibly intended. Popular accounts of Truitt’s work, like Kristen Hileman’s essay “Presence and Abstraction,” describe Truitt’s work as the melding of the objective qualities of Truitt’s work with the viewers’ subjectivities to create another entity, comprehensible through experience but not explanation.²³

I want to take a closer look at one of Hileman’s claims towards the end of her essay, with which I partially agree, but which I disagree with in its conclusion. In clarifying how I interpret the same set of evidence, we can discuss Michael Fried’s idea of presence, and how it differs from his idea of presentness, both of which Hileman discusses in conceptualizing what Truitt took presence to mean. The distinction has everything to do with the place of experience in a work of art and with the difference between the modernist and the minimalist work of art.

Hileman connects Truitt’s mention of arctic explorer Ernest Shackleton’s sensation of a phantom man, the reassuring presence of an immaterial figure who in times of extreme hardship seemed to guide their small party to safety to Truitt’s writing in *Daybook* that the sculptures “stand as I stand; they keep me company” and that she was “glad in their presence.”²⁴ Hileman

²² Miguel de Baca, *Memory Work: Anne Truitt and Sculpture* (Oakland, Calif, CA: Univ. of California Press, 2016), 108.

²³ Kristen Hileman and James Meyer, *Anne Truitt Perception and Reflection* (Washington, D.C: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, 2009), 42.

²⁴ Kristen Hileman and James Meyer, *Anne Truitt Perception and Reflection* (Washington, D.C: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, 2009), 41.

suggests, from this relationship to bodily sensation, a semantic reclamation, or reappropriation of the term presence: “‘Presence,’ in this sense, is not limited to the concrete aspects of color, shape, and size as delineated by Greenberg and Fried, but might be seen as being achieved when the objective qualities of Truitt’s artwork meld with the artist’s and viewers’ subjectivities to create another entity, comprehensible through experience but not explanation.”²⁵ Hileman supports this idea of presence as merging of artist/viewer subjectivity through experience with a quotation from Truitt, explaining that while it would be relatively easy to specify the emotional and intellectual history of her works:

beyond that meaning, each has a meaning of its own that I myself do not know, the meaning of its final presence, nameless because it is an echo of the pure intuition out of which it originated. No matter how lucidly this cleared the way, this meaning would remain untouched. I have thought the matter over and decided to remain silent—as each sculpture is silent, available to the viewer’s insight.²⁶

In this passage, Truitt opposes “final presence” to “pure intuition out of which it [the work] originated.” This aligns intuition with Truitt’s initial idea and final presence with the finished work. Both the original intuition and the final presence are relevant to making the artwork, but it seems important to note that Truitt is drawing a distinction between two modes. Truitt’s assertion that the meaning of the final presence is an “echo” of that original idea seems important to note too. The “pure intuition” Truitt describes is not what we call “authorial intention” because clearly it changes into something else during the work’s execution. On the

²⁵ Kristen Hileman and James Meyer, *Anne Truitt Perception and Reflection* (Washington, D.C: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, 2009), 42.

²⁶ Kristen Hileman and James Meyer, *Anne Truitt Perception and Reflection* (Washington, D.C: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, 2009), 42.

other hand, the final presence's meaning depends on—or rather is—that transformation into the work. This use of the term “final presence” then, is nothing like the sheer presence Fried invokes in his critique of minimalism. Instead “final presence” here describes the transformation of materials into meaning through the act of creation.

In her statement on final presence, Truitt says she herself does not know its meaning, because it is an echo of “pure intuition.” Truitt says that the meaning would remain untouched, and that each sculpture is silent and therefore available to insight. I interpret this statement, not as a denial, but an affirmation of intended meaning within a mediated world. Truitt knew the act of seeing a work of art through from idea to realization involves a dynamic movement between intuitive action and thoughtful observation. Truitt is not describing the absence of embedded meaning in her artwork, but the complicated nature of trying to understand one's own evolving intentions, while trying to negotiate those intentions through (or against) a resistant physical medium. This is about how a meaning—the author's working out of an intuition—gets into a work, into a fixed form. To situate meaning in experience is to situate it as the viewer's identification with the shape and scale of Truitt's columns, which is to situate it in changing, contingent terms.

The version of Truitt's “final presence” that she writes about, to me, resembles more closely Fried's idea of “presentness” than Hileman's idea of meaning as experience. If presence for Fried is a soliciting quality of a work of art that derives from its physical status as an object, then presentness names the effect of immediacy through conventional pictorial means, rather than or in addition to its literal attributes. This chimes with Truitt talking about alternating light brush strokes to “make a kind of shallow space within which the paint was set free to breathe on

its own.”²⁷ In making a shallow space, Truitt keeps her fictional space independent of a viewer’s ability to perceive it, meaning it is there whether or not you experience it. This is an overt example of Truitt securing an effect of immediacy by using a technique that suggests a type of depth but prevents complete access to it.

Insisting on the formal autonomy of Truitt’s sculptures to mean something independent of a present viewer is an insistence on the independence of the formatted, pictorial world, the artwork, from the world at large. Truitt’s artworks establish their independence from the world when they offer viewers opportunities to understand which pictorial effects are intentional, and how they are expressed. Any object in space has presence which in some way affects a viewer, as a consequence of its material objecthood, but in Truitt’s work, we can distinguish relevant pictorial effects from effects that are just a consequence of the work’s existence by appealing to Truitt’s intentions. I don’t mean to say Truitt’s primary interest was securing an effect of immediacy in each sculpture, but that, even if Truitt’s complete final statement in is unknowable, the works are available to interpretation (“insight”) through acknowledgement, and they exist independently of a viewer’s identification with them, although that might be a relevant part of the experience.

When talking about “final presence” Truitt is talking about getting the things that she meant to happen for an attentive beholder who is looking at it the right way. Hileman is describing the beholder experiencing and concretizing the work, which then becomes partly the work of the artist and partly the experience of the beholder. One way of seeing the difference

²⁷ Truitt, Alexandra (@annetruitt). “Already identified with structure, I became more and more empathetic with paint. I put it on in coats that alternated vertically and horizontally, with and against the grain of the wood. The paint “married” the wood, sank into it, saturated it. Yet, paradoxically, I felt that alternating light brush strokes made a kind of shallow space within which the paint was set free to breathe on its own.” Morning Child, 1973 #AnneTruitt #DaybookTurnProspect. 4/11/2018. Accessed 4/20/2021.

would be just to say in Hileman's view could someone get a sculpture wrong? What would that mean to say a Truitt sculpture is partially a product of your experience? With Truitt, it is clear she is trying to get a certain intention to fulfill itself. When I discuss the play of standpoints or perspectives to see Truitt's floor pieces from later on, the fact that you don't need to be in any place to understand the constructions means one's experience of the work itself is not as relevant as the constructions that produce the meaning.

Considering responses that formulate meaning as a melding of the mode of production and consumption of a work of art, I think it is important to clarify, in de Baca's conclusion, that Truitt's objects are shaped by *Truitt's* past encounters, which by their nature are hidden from most viewers. The task of the viewer might involve the activation of memory, as memory happens as a byproduct of attention, which the work requests. But an important aspect of Truitt's work, which often engages medium conventions by responding to or defying them, is that the task of interpretation is not the sharing of what memories or associations a work might trigger for the viewer, which are apart from what the work could possibly mean. The task of interpretation is piecing together the relations of form, finding Truitt's standpoints, to try to see the work from her perspective or, at least, from the one she constructs. Truitt's work reminds us that works of art don't do things to subjects as much as they afford viewers opportunities to understand them.

Truitt talked about the challenge of making a unified piece of art from a seemingly divided self in a speech upon the opening of the 1975 *Arundel* show, saying "An artist has to produce enough work to see who he his."²⁸ In saying this, she describes an internal division or gulf within the self and proposes art as a remedy to bridge that divide. It is hard say what your

²⁸ Truitt, Anne, and Anne Middleton. Wagner. *Anne Truitt - Threshold: Works from the 1970s* ; New York, NY: Matthew Marks Gallery, 2013, 87.

work is about until you have enough instances of your work to consider what it might be about. This is a description of two working modes: one of continuous, intuitive action (producing enough work) and one of conscious, reflective thought (seeing who the artist is.) Making things and reflecting on the things we have made are how we come to understand what we are trying to say. The split between the “I” that is the author and the “I” that is the grammatical pronoun is a condition of representation. Saying something meaningful is the same thing as speaking from another “I,” which changes as intentions change. If the “I” that you are and the “I” that you see represented are the same then just looking in a mirror, or a mirrored ball. The artist being absent from the image of self that is the work is a precondition for the recuperation of the self through the work.

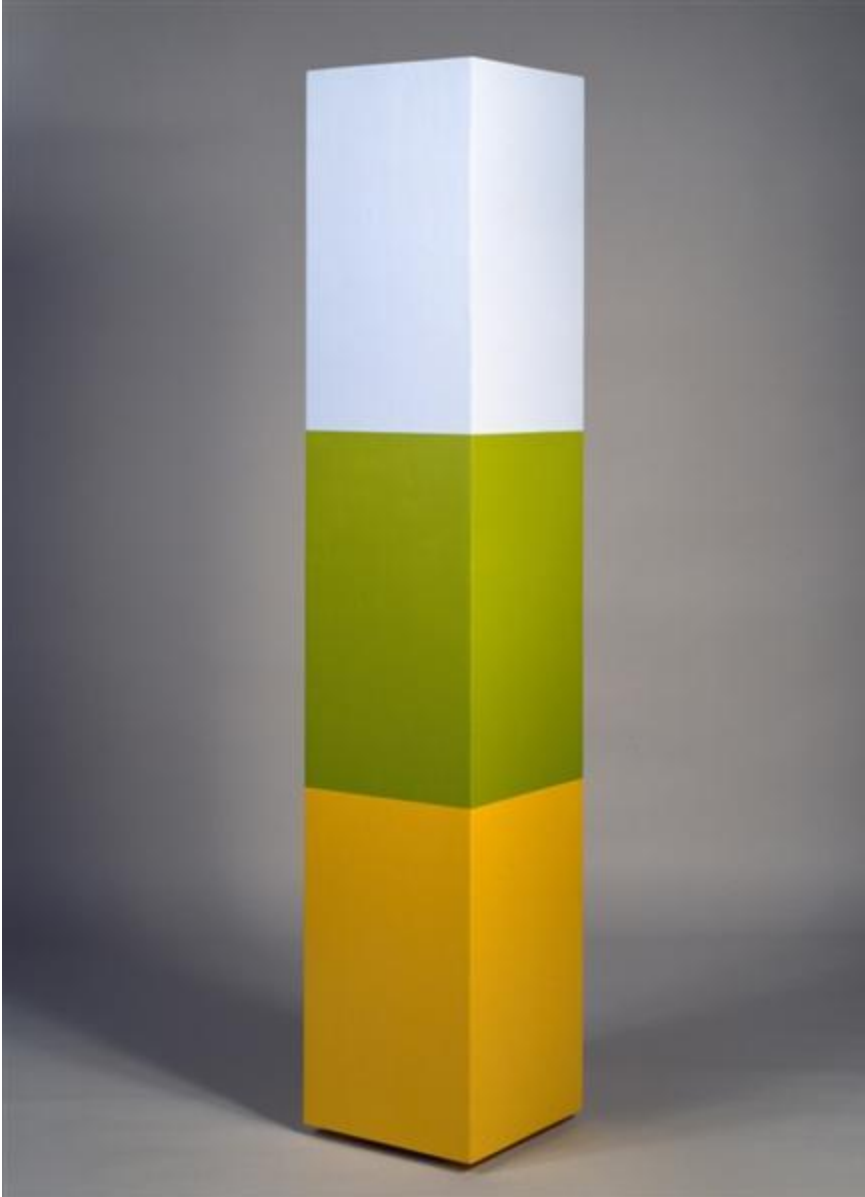


Figure One

Anne Truitt, *A Wall for Apricots*, 1968.

Acrylic on Wood.

72 5/8 x 14 x 14 in. (184.5 x 35.6 x 35.6 cm.)

Baltimore Museum of Art



Figure Two

Anne Truitt, *Arundel XXVII*, 1975

Acrylic and graphite on canvas

20³/₄ × 21¹/₄ inches; 53 × 54 cm

Matthew Marks Gallery

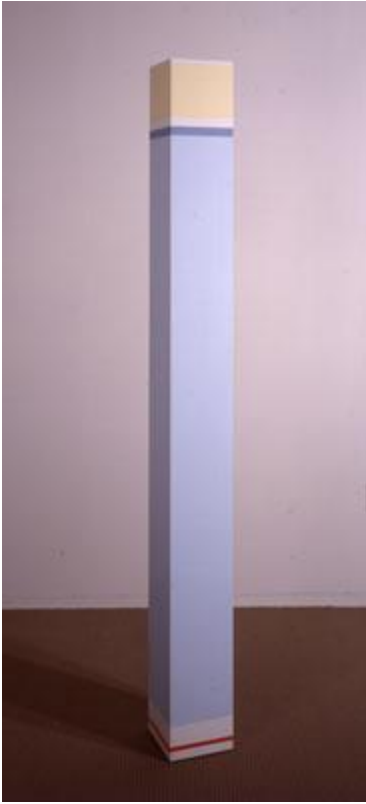


Figure Three

Anne Truitt, *Prima*, 1978

Acrylic on wood

80 ½ x 7 7/8 x 8 ¼ in.

Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington.

Chapter 1: Early Standpoints in Insurrection

Anne Truitt's 1962 *Insurrection* (Figure One) serves as an early example and a point of comparison for later works of an effort to structure pictorial space using color and an interest in projecting standpoints from which a viewer can apprehend a part of the work's meaning. While some art historians suggest Truitt leaves behind this model of disjuncture after 1963, I assert that it is not left behind, but rather developed into a wider and more complicated use of projected standpoints, which do not require a viewer in order to be understood. *Insurrection* models a type of disjuncture through its standpoints that Truitt picks up with greater conceptual heft in works like *Sandcastle* (1963) and *Remembered Sea* (1974).

Insurrection conflicts with itself. Standing a little over eight feet tall, the wooden and acrylic work involves two colors. When seen frontally, the work is partitioned into two vertical strips, a brighter red and a darker, purple-tinged red, slightly wider than the brighter red. The lower luminance of the darker red color block allows for the brain to read *Insurrection* as both a two-dimensional meeting of lines and an illusionistic three-dimensional meeting of corners: seen using focused, foveal vision, *Insurrection*'s frontal side can be seen as depicting a three-quarters view of a three-dimensional column. When viewed with unfocused, peripheral vision, the eye can perceive the red and purple lines meeting flatly at the base, more obviously revealing the artifice of the illusion.

When looking at the center of the object, it can appear convincingly spatial, when the eye drifts, it snaps back into frontal flatness. When moving around the work, as Michael

Schreyach notes Truitt's art often compels us to, the back side exposes the front's armature.²⁹ The two wedges propping up the flat board are completely exposed, making the conceit of the work not only available to viewers, but part of its theme. At the same time, by painting the wedges propping up *Insurrection*, putting them in play as part of the work, Truitt regains a three dimensionality that the work's front projects and then negates. If a viewer moves between a set of implied standpoints, the frontal view of the work and later the rear view of the work, *Insurrection* at first asserts a trompe l'oeil three-dimensionality, then announces its real flatness, then calls attention to its real volume, acknowledging both its real and projected dimensionality as parts of the work. This work shows that, in the early days of her mature works, Truitt was interested in putting perceptual effects to the service of a larger meaning beyond illusion.

In *Memory Work*, Miguel de Baca writes:

Insurrection was built to the same specifications as *Hardcastle*, but in two asymmetrical vertical segments of primary red and purplish red. Through the addition of the blue, the purplish red segment recedes in the optical plane. Truitt gave it greater surface area to achieve an apparent covalence between the stripes, adjusting for color with volume. Truitt conceived of color as a way of structuring spatial relationships, both between parts and, just as importantly, relative to the viewer.³⁰

I think de Baca keenly notes *Insurrection* as an early example of Truitt structuring pictorial space in her sculptures using color. In this case, the line that acts both as a flat line and a corner effectively implies space and models disjuncture. I focus on *Insurrection* as an early example of Truitt's structuring of pictorial space through color and her dramatization of it as part

²⁹ Michael Schreyach, "Moving Vision: Anne Truitt, Paintings 1972-1991," Trinity University Digital Commons (Matthew Marks Gallery, 2018), 4.

https://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1031&context=art_faculty

³⁰ Miguel de Baca, *Memory Work: Anne Truitt and Sculpture* (Oakland, Calif, CA: Univ. of California Press, 2016), 56.

of the work. In other words, Truitt makes the difference between the flatness and volume implied by the face of the work part of the work's meaning.

James Meyer notes that many of the works shown at Truitt's 1963 show at Andre Emmerich gallery (*Insurrection* among them) "primarily establish two points of view, and the formal meaning of the object lies in the syntactical disjuncture of the two terms."³¹ Meyer goes on to suggest that in Japan "Truitt left behind the model of disjuncture of the early work for a more ambitiously syntactical structure."³² I think the "disjuncture" Meyer talks about here is the difference between the front and back sides of flat works like *First*, *Hardcastle*, and *Insurrection*. I take this to mean the two points of view established by the early works are the front and rear view and the formal meaning lies in their contrast or seeming incompatibility. I agree with this interpretation of the 1962 works, but I think for Truitt, the front/back disjuncture transforms into a disjuncture between the work's face and the standpoints Truitt gives, which are often on corners. Perhaps this is what Meyer means by a more ambitious syntax.

While talking about the '62 and '63 works, de Baca argues that because Truitt's works defer experience, or divide the image into multiple surfaces, they contravene a formal tenet of high modernism, which is an instant grasp of the work, or visual immediacy. De Baca traces this convention to Clement Greenberg's "The Case for Abstract Art."³³ De Baca writes "Truitt denies absolute simultaneity between vision and comprehension because movement is required to see

³¹Kristen Hileman and James Meyer, *Anne Truitt Perception and Reflection* (Washington, D.C: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, 2009), 58.

³² Kristen Hileman and James Meyer, *Anne Truitt Perception and Reflection* (Washington, D.C: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, 2009), 59.

³³Miguel de Baca, *Memory Work: Anne Truitt and Sculpture* (Oakland, Calif, CA: Univ. of California Press, 2016), 67.

all the surfaces and time is required to perceive multiple hues of inflected color.”³⁴ At the risk of repeating myself, I would like to rephrase an argument from my introduction, which is that even though Truitt uses formal strategies that build or depend on literal facts of the “situation” of the artwork, their dependence on conventions and interpretation frees them from appeals to mere experience or mere affective response.

In my view the type of visual immediacy de Baca talks about as literal and therefore halted by Truitt’s use of multiple surfaces is not literal but secured as a pictorial effect, conventionally. I think this is an important distinction to make, because Truitt dramatizes immediacy as well as separateness in her works, and downplaying fictional immediacy because it is not literally evident diminishes what I believe to be an important conceptual drive in works like *Sandcastle*, *Remembered Sea*, *Moon Lily*, and *Summer Remembered*. That conceptual drive is a dramatization of continuity and separateness, or continuity and consciousness. Early works like *Insurrection* show an interest in relating color and structure in a way that makes content or meaning. *Insurrection* also shows an interest in providing viewer standpoints from which to access the content produced through the relation of color and structure.

In a 2002 conversation with James Meyer for *Artforum*, Truitt describes how, in 1962 she realized certain combinations of colors could imply certain shapes:

I realized that changes in color induced, or implied, changes in shape. That though color and structure retained individuality, they could join forces rather as independent melodies can combine into harmonic whole. And that when I combined them in a particular way, they had a particular content—particular to me, that is, a meaning that was important to me.³⁵

³⁴ Miguel de Baca, *Memory Work: Anne Truitt and Sculpture* (Oakland, Calif, CA: Univ. of California Press, 2016), 67.

³⁵ James Meyer and Anne Truitt, “Grand Allusion,” *Artforum* 40, no. 9 (May 2002), <https://www.artforum.com/print/200205/grand-allusion-2756>.

Truitt stresses that while her works contain meaning stemming from her personal life, they must remain separate from her. In the same interview, Meyer says he thought her work has elements of self-expression, that a work like *Hardcastle* alludes to a horrible event from her childhood. To this Truitt responds, “No. This was about trying to objectify my life. It wasn’t about me myself. That was the whole virtue of it.”³⁶ So what’s the difference between self-expression and self-objectification? It seems that an act of self-expression is harder to translate than an act of self-objectification. In my reading, transforming one’s life into objects means anyone can see and experience how *Insurrection* puts two proportions of color against each other to articulate three-dimensional form, which is part of the “harmonic whole” Truitt describes above. We can understand visual qualities of the work, even if we cannot necessarily know the work’s real-life referent. Truitt’s work is dialectical in its efforts to reconstitute a whole out of contradictions. Especially in the ’62 and ’63 works where a binary front/back division is worked out, Truitt identifies literal and conceptual disjuncture and provides situations where these divisions can be worked out by a viewer. Flatness and dimension, front and back, Truitt pairs opposites as part of a conceptual whole, which in the flatter ’62 and ’63 works suggest resolution in moving from one end of the work to the other as a sort of synthesis. Furthermore, by distancing herself from her life, by turning remembered fragments into objects, Truitt could obtain a distanced understanding of life and selfhood.

³⁶ James Meyer and Anne Truitt, “Grand Allusion,” *Artforum* 40, no. 9 (May 2002), <https://www.artforum.com/print/200205/grand-allusion-2756>.

While Truitt considered her 1962 objects as the first of her mature work, her engagement with the object's relationship to the floor is notable, as the theme of a work's relationship to the ground reappears frequently throughout her career. In the case of *Insurrection*, there appears to be a slightly smaller rectangle under the base, slightly separating the column from the floor. The whole work, in addition to assuming a verticality and approximate size larger than but scaled to the human body, asserts the figure in its relationship between parts, where the wedges provide structure to the boards. The work is divided, literally partitioned into two colors, but also partitioned into halves, that ask a viewer to experience each side one at a time, literally prolonging complete apprehension of the work. The work is divided in a third sense as well, where it projects and negates a fact about itself—three-dimensionality. By moving around *Insurrection*, a viewer can resolve its contradictions, but the whole of the image cannot be seen from one perspective.

Insurrection involves an early engagement with producing standpoints from which a viewer might grasp Truitt's meaning. In making a work with a front and a back, Truitt suggests two vantage points, the front and the back. From the front vantage point, the meeting of colors, one darker and bluer enough to suggest volume and imply shadow. From the back vantage point, the wedges announce their role in supporting the frontal flat board so it can work as an illusion. In this way, *Insurrection* looks to manage viewer expectations to an extent—perhaps elicit surprise at its spatial artifice, but more so, *Insurrection* marks an early point in the development of Truitt's dramatization of painterly and sculptural conventions. *Insurrection* displays an object in tension with itself, and ultimately a turn towards unity. To fully distinguish how Truitt's approach differed from that of other freestanding, frontal sculpture in postwar American art, I would like to provide a brief overview of Truitt's professional relationship with her peer David

Smith (1906-1965). I will then draw contrasts between their works, with the hope of better understanding Truitt's position in the field.

Truitt met Kenneth Noland (1924-2010) in 1949 while enrolled at the Washington Institute of Contemporary Arts, where he was also studying. Noland eventually became a mentor and friend to Truitt. He introduced her to Clement Greenberg, David Smith, and Andre Emmerich, all of whom, as Richardson notes, played significant roles in Truitt's life.³⁷ Later, in 1954, juror David Smith awarded Truitt's cast cement sculpture *Elvira* a prize for an exhibition at Washington's National Collection of Fine Arts. Truitt and Smith finally met in person in 1960.

Truitt first encountered David Smith's *Cathedral* (1950) on view at the Willard Gallery after moving back to New York City from Dallas in 1951. Truitt visited the Museum of Modern Art and the Guggenheim frequently, as well as the commercial galleries that showed modern art, like Curt Valentin, Martha Jackson, Sidney Janis, and Willard.³⁸ Brenda Richardson asserts *Cathedral*, along with Giacometti's *Palace at 4 a.m.*, "defined Truitt's subsequent path as a sculptor."³⁹ Richardson notes both works are titled after specific architectural structures that come to life only when inhabited by communities of people, which implies space and time. Richardson also notes both works emphasize vertical forms rising from an integral floor, a floor that is notably not a pedestal.

When discussing Truitt's rejection of "the implied heroism of the artists who for their own good reasons have brought the materials and methods of industry into the service of art," Richardson mentions that Truitt's strongest artistic empathies were with Smith, whom she

³⁷ Anne Truitt and Brenda Richardson, *Anne Truitt: Drawings* (New York, NY: Matthew Marks Gallery, 2012), 13.

³⁸ Anne Truitt and Brenda Richardson, *Anne Truitt: Drawings* (New York, NY: Matthew Marks Gallery, 2012), 10.

³⁹ Anne Truitt and Brenda Richardson, *Anne Truitt: Drawings* (New York, NY: Matthew Marks Gallery, 2012), 11.

viewed as genuinely heroic.⁴⁰ As Richardson again points out, Truitt wrote that both her life and her work might have been different had Smith not died prematurely in 1965. I mention these details with hopes not to overstate Smith's influence on Truitt, but to establish they were each thinking about the other's work, and in dialogue about their work, while working through similar formal challenges in different ways.

David Smith's polished stainless-steel *Sentinel* (Figure Two) (1961) serves as a good example of the kind of back and forth I am talking about. It is also worth noting Truitt has at least two works also incorporating the word "sentinel;" *Summer Sentinel* (1963-72) and *Sentinel* (1978). Smith's *Sentinel* stands nine feet tall, 21 inches wide, and 24 inches deep. *Sentinel* is about a foot taller than Truitt's *Insurrection*, which stands on the taller end of her catalogue. In any case both Truitt and Smith frequently make elongated forms that engage but slightly exceed human proportions. Smith's *Sentinel* establishes a mostly flat, frontal vantage point, but breaks expectations by its slight articulation of depth when viewed from the back and side planes. Parts of steel in the middle of the sculpture that seem flush ever so slightly break up the established flatness. Truitt and Smith have in common a vertical, seemingly frontal system of parts that sit directly on the floor of the viewer without a pedestal, or rather, incorporate the relationship with the floor into the work itself. The irregularities of Truitt's and Smith's forms also use abstraction to suggest anthropomorphic qualities.

Smith's *Sentinel* works very differently from something like Truitt's *Insurrection*. Perhaps most obviously, because of the steel materials, Smith's work is heavier and shinier, and he burnishes the surface instead of painting it. Both works have "feet" that cue a viewer to face

⁴⁰ Anne Truitt and Brenda Richardson, *Anne Truitt: Drawings* (New York, NY: Matthew Marks Gallery, 2012), 33.

the work's front and to acknowledge that the work holds three-dimensional space, just like the viewer. The "feet" on *Insurrection*, and even more so for Truitt's later sculptures, instead of emphasizing downward gravitational heft, like *Sentinel*, act to distance the work even from the ground itself. Richardson argues that in the '70s, Truitt used risers to achieve a weightlessness that keeps "color and structure coherent."⁴¹ If by this, Richardson means that the two proportions, color and structure, need framing as a part of an object with limits, separate from the world, I completely agree. Miguel de Baca argues the 1963 *Hardcastle*'s pediment "asserts bodily coherence as separate from viewer space."⁴² I agree. I think the bottom of Truitt's works perform a crucial framing function, which is present from *Hardcastle* in '63 as well as the works Richardson discusses in the '70s. I think Truitt goes on to expand that framing function through the '80s in *Moon Lily*, too.

Additionally, Smith's sculptures use real space to create the illusion of a flattened space—that is, from the front the sculpture looks flatter than it really is. Moving around *Sentinel* cues us to the ways Smith's unexpected angling of his steel plates breaks the flat plane he establishes in the work's frontal view. In contrast, Truitt uses pictorial, painted space to create the illusion of real space. Truitt in '62, and especially after returning from Japan in '67, uses properties of color and line to suggest to our eyes a spatial environment that is different from the physical environment her columns inhabit. In *Insurrection* there is tension between virtual and literal space instead of between literal space and a different kind of literal space, as it is in

⁴¹ Anne Truitt and Brenda Richardson, *Anne Truitt: Drawings* (New York, NY: Matthew Marks Gallery, 2012), 27.

⁴² Miguel de Baca, *Memory Work: Anne Truitt and Sculpture* (Oakland, Calif, CA: Univ. of California Press, 2016), 42.

Sentinel. This tension between virtual (or pictorial) and literal space becomes especially apparent as Truitt transitions to even more reduced supports.



Figure One

Anne Truitt, *Insurrection*, 1962.

Acrylic on wood

255.27 × 106.68 × 40.64 cm (100 1/2 × 42 × 16 in.)

National Gallery of Art, DC



Figure One (alternate view)



Figure Two

David Smith, *Sentinel*, 1961
Stainless steel
9' x 21" x 24" (274.3 x 53.3 x 61 cm)
Museum of Modern Art

Chapter 2: Standpoints on Floor Works

Sandcastle (1963) and *Remembered Sea* (1974), as two unconventionally shaped, mostly horizontal floor works within Anne Truitt's wider production of mostly vertical forms, demonstrate Truitt's development in the same line of thinking over a ten-year period. Both works thematize an internal division between the artwork's sculptural status as an object and the artwork's conventionally secured status as pictorial, a picture of something, or more than its material facts. I argue both works dramatize this distinction as an internal contradiction and propose the active inhabitation of constructed standpoints as a solution to resolve the image. I also assert this drama of sculptural and pictorial corresponds to a drama of separateness and continuity, both within the self and between the self and others that is fundamental to the act of expression.

I plan to make my argument first by introducing precedent for Truitt's interest in standpoints in her contemporary works of the '70s. By the term standpoints, I mean Truitt gives formal cues in the work for how it should be seen, often including a perspective for a beholder to stand and look at the work from. By establishing Truitt's relationship to medium conventions, I hope to draw a contrast between modernist and minimalist or literalist relationships to medium conventions, situating Truitt on the modernist side. Michael Fried uses the term literalist to describe the group Clement Greenberg calls minimalists (Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Tony Smith, Sol Lewitt) and I will use the terms interchangeably. Finally, I plan to compare the unfolding tension between *Sandcastle* and *Remembered Sea*'s pictorial and sculptural qualities to the competing sense of continuity and separateness that underscores human action and artistic production.

In his essay “Moving Vision: Anne Truitt, Paintings 1972-1991,” Michael Schreyach asserts that in many cases, Truitt’s technical choices determine a point of view from which a beholder might grasp the meaning of the artwork.⁴³ This point of view, which I call a standpoint, speaks to Truitt’s interest in considering multiple viewpoints in the work. Truitt’s production of multiple viewpoints with which to see certain works traces changing relations to a singular point, and in the case of her floor works, uses those changing relations to reflect on the combination of continuous intuitive action and separate conscious thought involved in the process of making art.

Schreyach discusses the standpoints Truitt constructs in her art with a couple examples, including the 1973 painting *Noon Place* (Figure One), where an elongated rectangle spanning the top of the canvas leaves a relatively wider margin on the right side of the work, constructing an offset viewpoint. As Schreyach says, “we sense ourselves being shifted to the left as we instinctively strive to counterbalance the composition.”⁴⁴ In another example, a working drawing for Truitt’s 1971 sculpture *Sun Flower* (Figure Two) shows viewpoints at the work’s corners, which “signpost the combinations of yellow that are visible when two planes are viewed simultaneously.”⁴⁵ For example, if a viewer were to see the work from the northeast, they would see color one turn a 90 degree angle where it would meet color three or color four.

In private correspondence, Truitt objected to the influential critic Clement Greenberg’s claims that she anticipated the minimalists or that she “inverted minimalism,” writing in an August 1980 letter to Greenberg: “Your statement ‘You inverted minimalism,’ is not, I think

⁴³ Michael Schreyach, “Moving Vision: Anne Truitt, Paintings 1972-1991,” Trinity University Digital Commons (Matthew Marks Gallery, 2018), https://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1031&context=art_faculty, 12.

⁴⁴ Schreyach, *Moving Vision*, 6.

⁴⁵ Schreyach, *Moving Vision* 12.

(with due respect), entirely true but it drove a straight hook into my earliest line of feeling and from that lancing trajectory I was able, as I struggled in the studio, to free myself into a recapitulation of my development since that period and out into a space which has set my hand free.”⁴⁶ Without misrepresenting Truitt’s interests, I would like to suggest that while both Truitt and the literalist/minimalist artists like Donald Judd made work in three dimensions that partially stems from a logic about painting conventions, Truitt deploys conventions of the medium in a positive instead of a negative logic. Truitt maximizes the potential of being understood by freeing herself to use appeals to convention in both painting and sculpture to let both into the interpretive conversation. Literalist art conceives of itself as “neither one nor the other,”⁴⁷ instead being motivated by reservations about both painting and sculpture. Anne Wagner’s account of how Truitt’s work overcomes the physicality of its structure through skeins of color sounds a lot like Michael Fried’s definition of the modernist work of art, specifically as he contrasts it with the literalist work of art.

In her review of the Hirshhorn exhibition, *Anne Truitt Perception and Reflection*, “Disarming Time: The Art of Anne Truitt,” Wagner discusses critical reception of Truitt, including Michael Fried’s 1963 review for *Art International*. Fried wrote that he found the interplay between shape and color “a bit confusing” as if “there were two rationales to look for.”⁴⁸ I think Wagner correctly points out that “In Truitt’s work there are always at least two

⁴⁶ Clement Greenberg papers, 1937-1983. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

⁴⁷ Donald Judd, “Specific Objects,” *berkeley.edu* (*Arts Yearbook* 8, 2002), <http://atc.berkeley.edu/201/readings/judd-so.pdf>, 1.

⁴⁸ Anne Wagner, “DISARMING TIME: THE ART OF ANNE TRUITT.” *Artforum International*. (*Artforum International*, January 1, 2010), <https://www.artforum.com/print/201001/disarming-time-the-art-of-anne-truitt-24448>.

rationales.”⁴⁹ Wagner notes that the multiple rationales, Fried’s source of apprehension, are a consistent feature of Truitt’s work. Wagner goes on to describe the relationship between the wooden structure and the painted sculpture: “If sculpture is a vehicle for presence then color does its best to challenge or undo that presence over time. Color, which she conceived of as *painting* remains optical—a retinal phenomenon—but is nonetheless deployed to undo the earthbound intransigence of shape, its effects only visible as time goes by.”⁵⁰ This is a powerful and I think accurate description of how Truitt’s wooden columns frequently assert through their shape a materiality or an object-like quality that Truitt seeks to temporarily suppress or elide through painted color. I am also struck by how this account harmonizes with Michael Fried’s idea of modernist art. While Fried was one of the first critics to write about Truitt after Greenberg’s review in *Recentness of Sculpture*, he mostly uses Greenberg’s account of her work to describe his idea of presence. A closer consideration of Truitt under some of Fried’s ideas about objectness will better reveal her position in modernism.

In *Art and Objecthood*, Fried writes, “Modernist painting has come to find it imperative that it defeat or suspend its own objecthood...Whereas literalist art stakes everything on shape as a given property of objects, if not a kind of object in its own right. It aspires not to defeat or suspend its own objecthood, but on the contrary to discover and project objecthood as such.”⁵¹ This complements Wagner’s idea of Truitt’s suspension of objecthood in paint. I would assert Truitt’s suspension of objecthood is just the first step in each work, an intentional effect, but also a condition for its meaning. Fried notes a sharp contrast in modernism’s self-imposed imperative

⁴⁹ Wagner, *Disarming Time*

⁵⁰ Wagner, *Disarming Time*

⁵¹ Michael Fried, “MICHAEL FRIED ‘Art and Objecthood’ (1967),” (Berkeley.edu, 2012), <http://atc.berkeley.edu/201/readings/FriedObjcthd.pdf>, 2.

that it defeat or suspend its own objecthood through the medium of shape with the literalist espousal of objecthood or shape as an art in its own right. In crude terms, the modernist painting tries to suppress the literal fact that it is an object made out of wood and canvas of a certain size and shape, to try to compel belief in the painting as a painting of something. Fried is saying the literalists, instead of suppressing the literal qualities of the work, are trying to remove everything but the literal qualities of the work, and in doing so, remove the frame between the artwork and its situation. Despite Fried's concern that a painted surface in modernist sculpture would emphasize its objecthood by calling attention to surface, Truitt's work in making explicit its "conventional, pictorial essence"⁵² suspends objecthood. In showing how Truitt's works establish an independence from an audience, I seek to align Truitt's intuitive conceptual developments with Fried's concluding remark that "I want to claim that it is by virtue of their presentness and instantaneousness that modernist painting and sculpture defeat theatre. In fact, it is above all the condition of painting and sculpture—the condition that is, of existing in, indeed of secreting or constituting, a continuous and perpetual present—that the other contemporary modernist arts, most notably poetry and music, aspire."⁵³

The opposition Greenberg hints at in his 1968 essay "Recentness of Sculpture," and that Fried makes explicit and polemical, between "modernist art" and "literalist art," wasn't clear from the outset. Around 1967, essays like "Art and Objecthood" codified a difference that was first felt by artists. Truitt rose to prominence in the moment where writers like Fried started to position modern art in opposition to the new literal art, rather than an extension, and Truitt's correspondence reveals this opposition wasn't merely theoretical, but something felt by artists. In

⁵² Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 6.

⁵³ Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 9

a letter to Clement Greenberg from March 14, 1967, sent while Greenberg was writing “Recentness of Sculpture,” Truitt writes: “I’m not surprised that Tony Smith’s work is going over in a big way. Did I write you that I went to see the Bryant Park things, and thought them linear and disappointing? In some curious way that I cannot explain I felt that they insulted my intelligence. Also that they were hostile, at the same time arrogant and careless. But I felt that way about most of the Primary Structures.”⁵⁴ While Truitt doesn’t frame this opposition in theoretical terms, she describes a sensed hostility that maps closely with Fried’s idea of literalist art’s soliciting theatricality. Truitt confirms even further a conscious effort to elevate her works from their literal status as objects in describing Robert Morris’s practice as overly theoretical, and “somehow beside the point,” in September, 1980, long after the 1967 publication of “Recentness of Sculpture.” So how specifically does Truitt represent her intentions through the combined conventions of painting and sculpture after suppressing the materiality of her wooden column supports?

Schreyach writes about a dialogue of conventions when he talks about Jackson Pollock’s *Mural* in his Chapter “Anamorphosis” from *Pollock’s Modernism*. Schreyach describes a set of standpoints, where shifts of position establish the character of the work’s identity. In Pollock’s *Mural*, any standpoint will produce a sense of all the other available standpoints, which generalizes the convention of a point of view. Rather than locking into place from one perspective, each perspective gives a sense of the other perspectives. In this way, Pollock’s *Mural* imagines the possibility of seeing the visual field from another point of view.⁵⁵ In Truitt’s work, the construction of standpoints or points of view, often on the corners, as in the *Sun*

⁵⁴ Clement Greenberg Papers

⁵⁵ Michael Schreyach, *Pollock’s Modernism* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2017), 53-59.

Flower drawing create a discrepancy with the frontal view, or what a viewer could assume to be a standpoint. The *Sun Flower* drawing illustrates this, where the expected standpoint could be seen as the frontal view, but the constructed standpoints around the corners provide the beholder a set of positions the work is intended to be seen from, which involves moving around the work.

A comparison of two sculptures, somewhat unconventional for Truitt's body of work in their horizontal relationship to the floor plane, *Sandcastle* (Figure Three) and *Remembered Sea* (Figure Four) demonstrate a clear relationship between standpoints and meaning in Truitt's work. The two works, one made before Truitt's 1964 move to Japan, the other made after her 1967 return stateside, chart a ten-year development in thinking about positions to resolve contradictions in lowered, horizontal forms.⁵⁶ While Truitt destroyed many of the shaped aluminum sculptures she made in Japan, declaring them "simply intelligent, lifeless,"⁵⁷ she also spent her time in Tokyo producing works on paper using new materials, which revitalized her art practice. Truitt began experimenting with rice paper, sumi ink, and thin baths of dye, repeatedly soaking the rice paper in shallow trays of ink.⁵⁸ Truitt termed this process "glazing" and continued this technique after returning to the United States, including in the work *Summer Remembered*, which is discussed later in this thesis. Anna Lovatt, in her essay "Turning" from *Anne Truitt in Japan* provides a fuller argument that Truitt's time in Japan, rather than being wasted, was a period both of disorientation and great productivity.⁵⁹ Lovatt convincingly argues that the changes including a more advanced play of two and three dimensions and change in materials are visible throughout her subsequent works, and I am inclined to agree.⁶⁰ The glazed

⁵⁷ de Baca, *Memory Work*, 80.

⁵⁸ Anne Truitt and Anna Lovatt, *Anne Truitt in Japan* (New York, NY, NY: Matthew Marks Gallery, 2015), 22.

⁵⁹ Truitt and Lovatt, *Anne Truitt in Japan*, 26

⁶⁰ Truitt and Lovatt, *Anne Truitt in Japan*, 26.

works on paper introduce a tension between the paper's materiality and the ink's thinness, which would shape the rest of her career.

Of *Sandcastle*, Truitt writes: "18.5 inches high by 109 inches long by 8 inches wide, it is a long, low rectangle punctuated by two small towers, the whole structure counterpointed by three colors, two tans and a yellow."⁶¹ There are four colors in the work if you count the long swath of olive green at the bottom of the work. The middle strip of darker tan is noticeably darker than the two lighter colors on top. The two lighter colors appear similar at first, but the hue covering most of the top is ever so slightly more yellow than the visibly whiter and more tan hue coating the shorter, wider tower. The title and placement of towers evoke both architecture and landscape associations. It seems like the fundamental question of a work like *Sandcastle* is, "How am I supposed to look at this?" What standpoints does Truitt provide a viewer with to understand her statement?

Viewed from the end of the work, *Sandcastle* shows a literal distance between towers, the difference between the near tower and the far tower is an actual recession in space. Another way to look at *Sandcastle* would be to view it parallel with the long side, where the low horizontal lines of the work, their colors, and the space around the towers start to suggest a horizon. There, the towers are still spatially differentiated, but through pictorial means, rather than literally. The difference between the painted tan and the yellow top layers can seem like a difference in light falling on a closer object (the wider, shorter tower) and a farther object (the thinner tower).

Sandcastle, then, compares the literal distance in the work indicated by the end view to the

⁶¹ Truitt, Alexandra (@annetruitt). 2017. "'Eighteen and a half inches high by one hundred nine inches long by eight inches wide, it is a long, low rectangle punctuated by two small towers, the whole structure counterpointed by three colors, two tans and a yellow' Sandcastle, 1963 #AnneTruitt #DaybookTurnProspect." January 9, 2017. <https://www.instagram.com/p/BPC4-tKD3dG/?igshid=ys9zj1y3etwd>

pictorial distance expressed in the frontal view. In this case, an oblique, $\frac{3}{4}$ view of the object, achieved by moving from the end view to the frontal view becomes a way of “reading the scene.” Truitt constructs a perspective from which a beholder can see the work as simultaneously literally recessing into space and depicting recession into space. *Sandcastle* thematizes a dualism around how artwork should be seen, whether as a picture or as an object) and proposes its resolution through embodied movement between intended standpoints as a way of acknowledging the difference between the sculptural and pictorial qualities of Truitt’s work.

About a decade later, after returning from Japan and continuing to work in Washington, D.C., Truitt returned to the horizontal format with *Remembered Sea*, another floor work. *Remembered Sea* includes three shades of blue, the brightest on the bottom, and then two darker, dimmer blues that are much harder to parse apart, but the top layer appears a little darker, and maybe a little greener than the middle layer. Already compared to *Sandcastle*, and in line with much of her work since her period in Japan, Truitt has pared down the support further, so that most of the incident in the work happens in paint. Where *Sandcastle* had its jutting towers, *Remembered Sea* takes on the same sculptural/pictorial distinction but with the physical shape of the object further suppressed or downplayed.

Truitt later remarked on the idea behind *Remembered Sea*: “*Remembered Sea* has to do with Homer’s “wine dark sea.” It has to do with my concept of that sea and the sea and to see. It’s what you see with the inner-eye.”⁶² Scholars famously dispute the meaning of the descriptive epithet ‘wine dark sea’ which appears frequently in Homer’s epic poetry. Some took the phrase

⁶² Truitt, Alexandra (@annetruitt). 2015. “Remembered Sea has to do with Homer, his ‘wine dark sea.’ It has to do with my concept of that sea and the sea and to see, it’s what you see with the inner eye.” #AnneTruitt #painting #sculpture.” September 22, 2015. <https://www.instagram.com/p/77pxpOTaQk/?igshid=1teuze911321a>

literally to mean the ancient Greeks could not perceive blue or that the Aegean Sea was literally blue. Other scholars contested that the use of “wine” describes the glossy texture of the sea rather than its literal color. Most historians today view it as just an instance of poetic language.⁶³ In any case, already in her description Truitt evokes problems of interpretation and perception, as well as uncertainty about an author’s intent.

Remembered Sea involves the qualified delineation of the three shades of blue mentioned earlier. Seen the long, horizontal way, starting from the right side (of the first illustration), the line separating the top blue from the middle blue is first created by the literal edge of the work: the side plane is the middle blue and the parallel top plane is the darkest blue. Literal delineation becomes pictorial as the actual edge of the object becomes a line made in masking. On the left end of the work, the line made in masking comes back up to almost meet the literal edge of the plane but lies just beneath it. It feels as though the difference between the line acknowledging the edge of its structure on the left and the line being the edge of the structure on the right is something Truitt wants us to notice. It appears Truitt partially burnished the masking tape that marked the line that separates the top layer and the mid layer, by pressing on it with a metal tool, as she has in other works to create a physical ridge of a line that partially asserts itself as pictorial only to stubbornly disappear in its partial suggestion of horizon. Truitt allows the tape to bleed a little in the line separating the middle hue from the brighter bottom hue, so the difference in lines aren’t produced by the crispness of the painted line but the crispness of the two colors meeting each other. It seems like Truitt wanted the beholder to notice the different ways lines come

⁶³ Wilford, John Noble. “HOMER'S SEA: WINE DARK?” The New York Times. The New York Times, December 20, 1983. <https://www.nytimes.com/1983/12/20/science/homer-s-sea-wine-dark.html>.

together in a work like *Remembered Sea*, marking the difference between the literal and the pictorial edge, the difference between the literal burnished line and the distinction of the bottom and middle colors that is produced by contrast alone. It is important that small differences count.

Remembered Sea loses the explicitly referential towers visible in *Sandcastle*, but it still sets a standpoint for the beholder. The top layer of the structure, the middle part that's a step higher than either end, is not centered in the middle of the structure, but offset unevenly. A viewer following Truitt's cue to offset their viewing position to counter the work's asymmetry, as she cues in *Noon Place*, might move to see the work from an oblique $\frac{3}{4}$ view. As in *Sandcastle* there is a play of sculptural and pictorial space depending on the standpoint viewed from, where the top piece, which recedes into pictorial depth if one is looking at it from the long view like a landscape, is still literally further back in space when viewed from the end, but here the cue for resolution is subtler. The standpoint given by the offset top piece on *Remembered Sea*, formally similar to the offset top of *Noon Place* is enough to acknowledge and synthesize the opposition between pictorial and sculptural conditions of art that Truitt sets up.

In both *Sandcastle* and *Remembered Sea*, Truitt is committed to establishing the dual identity of the work as both an object literally recessing into space and as a picture, which through conventional means like the use of colors and titles that evoke the landscape (*Remembered Sea*, for instance might imply the ocean), or the slight differences in place implied by lighting and line, suggests or depicts a kind of naturalistic, qualified space. The difference between seeing the work as its pictorial qualities versus the seeing the work as its sculptural qualities seems like the difference between a sense of continuity with or immersion in the space of the work and a sense of separation or outsidership from the work. The partial suggestion of a space a viewer might imaginatively inhabit functions as the continuous aspect of the work. The

literal or sculptural aspect of the work as taking up real space corresponds to the separateness of being outside the work.

I would like to argue that, in dramatizing pictorial and sculptural qualities of the work, Truitt also dramatizes her own sense of continuity with and separation from the self and the world that underscores human action. The act of making a work of art is a dialogue of continuity and separateness. When the artist is close to the work, painting from intuition, she, by the nature of her actions, acts continuously with the artwork and the world. The action is in the present. When the artist steps back from the work to reflect on her intuitive actions, she stands separately from the world and the artwork in contemplation, comparing the current iteration of the work with her mental image of the work. Continuous intuitive action and separate contemplative thought, seemingly contradictory impulses work together to create the work of art and its meaning. This, I believe is what Truitt meant when she said “I have fairly thoroughly explored the union of my feeling with what my hand can make.”⁶⁴ I assert that *Sandcastle* and *Remembered Sea* are two points of development in exploring the union of feeling and hand, at the same time dramatizing the act of making.

By acknowledging the sculptural qualities of the work and discerning them from the intended effects of the work, Truitt claims those literal qualities as part of the work’s meaning. The blue on the left side of the *Remembered Sea* illustration that almost reaches the edge but announces its separateness from the literal edge acts as an example of this kind of acknowledgement. Unlike a minimalist work of art, which treats literal qualities like shape as an

⁶⁴ Anne Truitt, *Turn: the Journal of an Artist*, (New York, NY, New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 184.

end goal, Truitt uses the work's literal qualities to stand in for a part of the artistic process, which is the literal separateness between the beholder (who is often the artist) and the work. This thematized separateness visible in the literal distance between *Sandcastle*'s towers counters the pictorial continuousness established in the work's various effects, like the qualified evocation of space that stands for a beholder's continuity with the work and the world. This gives the two floor pieces a self-reflexive quality. They are about their own making, and they resolve a contradiction between separateness and continuity inherent to their making by suggesting a standpoint showing how both aspects form the whole of the artwork.



Figure One

Anne Truitt, Noon Place, 1973.

Acrylic on Canvas

56 × 245.7 cm (22 1/16 × 96 3/4 in.)

Yale University Art Gallery

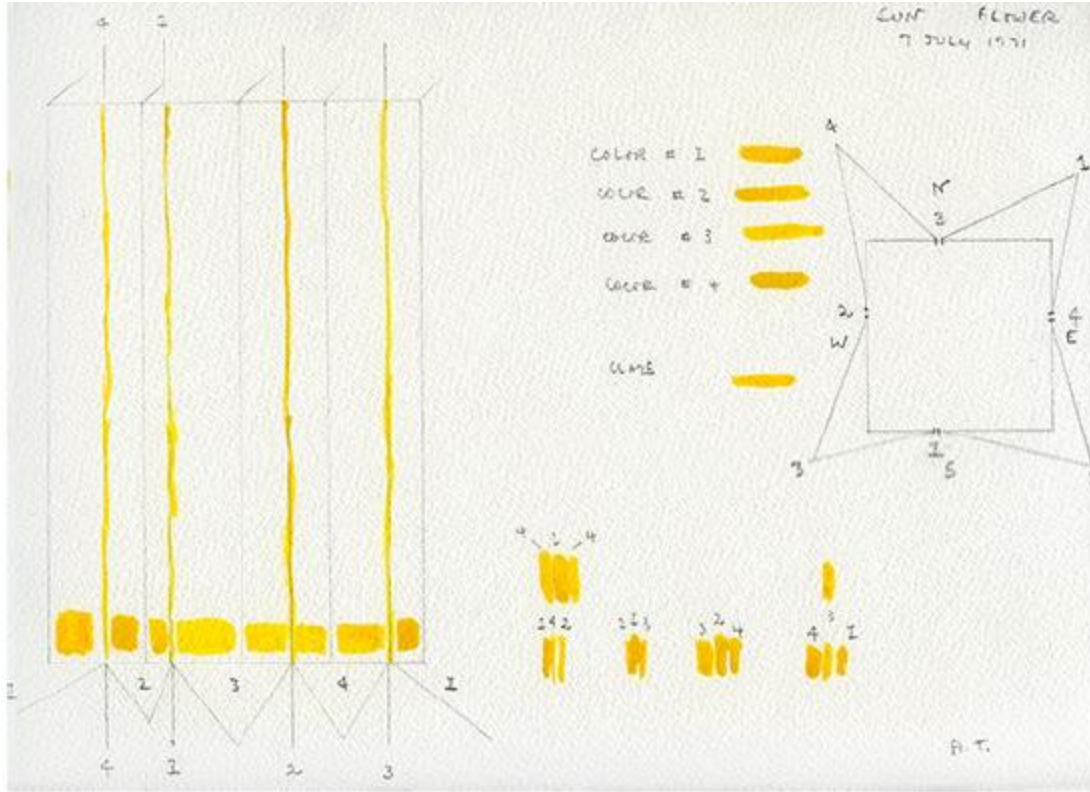


Figure Two

Anne Truitt, *Working Drawing for Sun Flower*, 1971

Acrylic on Paper

Dimensions not given

Private collection

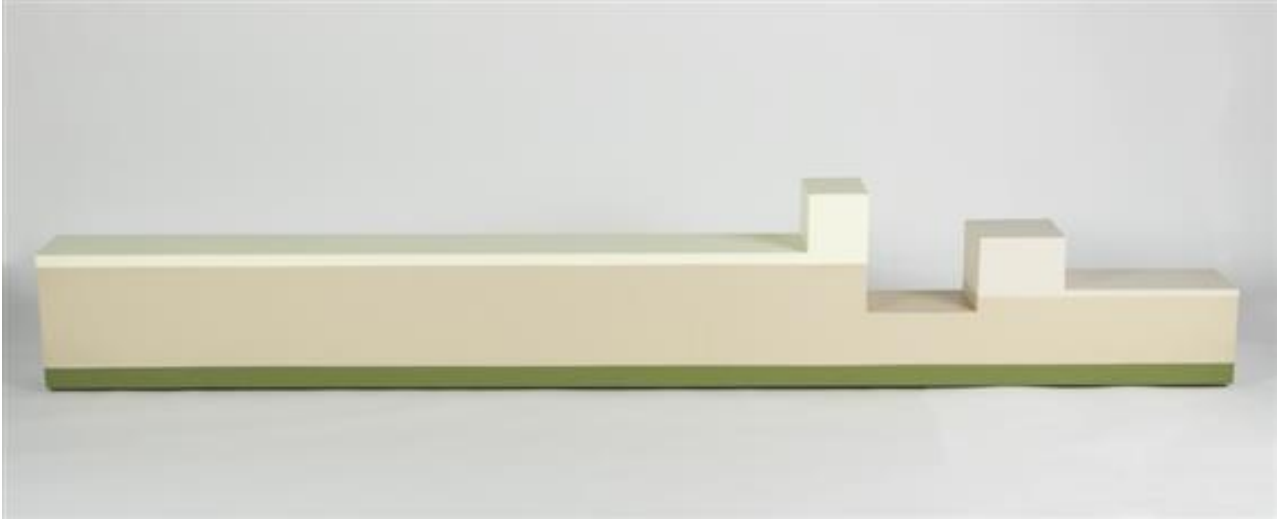


Figure Three

Anne Truitt, *Sandcastle*, 1963.

Acrylic on Wood

19 x 110 x 8 in.

University of Michigan Museum of Art



Figure Three (Alternate view)

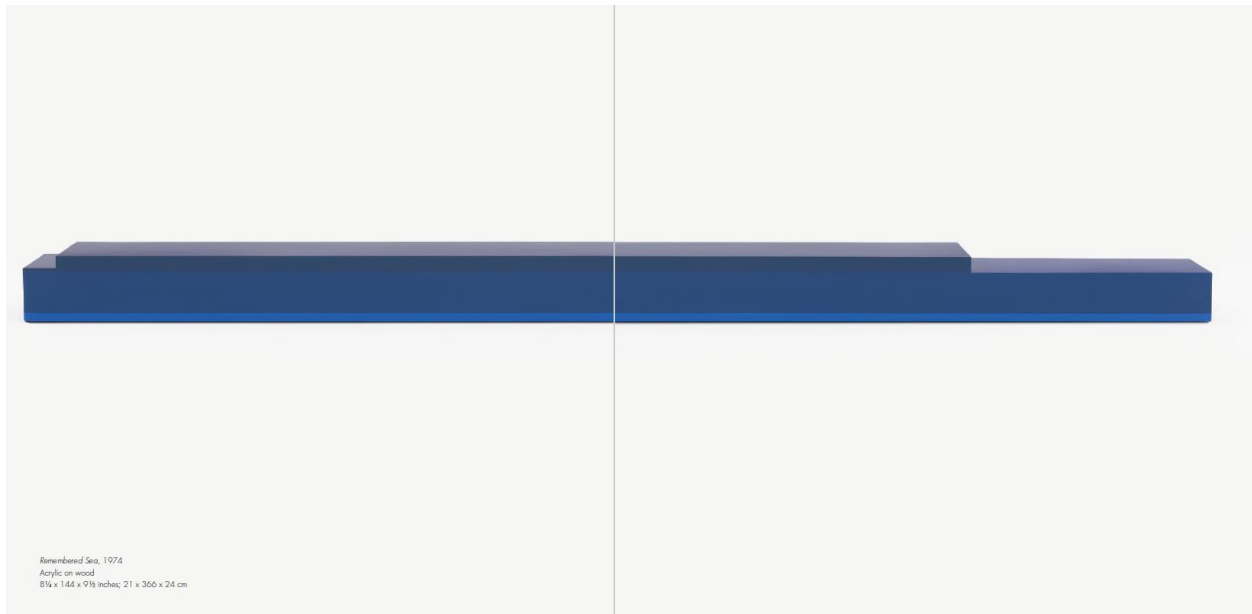


Figure Four

Anne Truitt, *Remembered Sea*, 1974

Acrylic on wood

8¼ × 144 × 9½ in.

Matthew Marks Gallery



Figure Four (Installation view)

Chapter 3: Anne Truitt's Standpoints in the 1980s

In the earlier phase of Truitt's mature work, which I think can be exemplified in *Insurrection*, I describe a circumstance where the work reveals an internal contradiction and suggests the resolution of that contradiction through embodied movement. The works of the '62 and '63 era that *Insurrection* emerges from typically have a binary front/back structure and the whole of the work is revealed in moving around it, from the front to the back of the work.

For the floor works discussed in chapter two, Truitt departs from the binary front/back opposition of the flat board structure for a similar comparison of sculptural and pictorial qualities of the work, in this case the illusion of space versus actual space for *Sandcastle* and *Remembered Sea*. In the case of both works, I assert Truitt constructs an oblique $\frac{3}{4}$ standpoint as a point of view which resolves this contradiction, that a viewer does not have to occupy to understand.

I want to say that here, in the '80s, Truitt is still thinking about the oblique point of view. Truitt is trying to minimize the possibility of being misunderstood and in *Summer Remembered* (Figure One), universalizes the perspective of the oblique $\frac{3}{4}$ view so that (not literally, but as an intended effect) every possible vantage point of the object is an oblique one. I suggest Truitt accomplishes this through a number of formal techniques: making color count locally but not globally, making the dividing lines asymmetrical, framing the work with the blue band, and most importantly by making the lines in the middle of each side perform the same function as the literal lines of the work's four corners. In painterly terms, Truitt has been investigating the problem of mutual facingness as a convention in painting and, using the tools of sculpture, finds

a way to take frontality out of the work and replace it with a different relationship between the work and the beholder.⁶⁵

While in conversation with James Meyer, Anne Truitt's daughter, Alexandra Truitt, describes how Anne Truitt considered the 1981 work *Summer Remembered* a successful application of a glazing technique she had worked on since the mid '60s. Alexandra says, "In Japan, she figured out a way to layer color so that it came forward and went back. There are a couple sculptures where she used the same technique from the drawing on the sculpture and *Summer Remembered* is an example of that where it's not completely brushed. Some of it is rolled, some of it is a little bit sponged, but it has a great surface on it."⁶⁶ In the same conversation, Alexandra Truitt revealed more of her mother's process, including that she worked physically close to the works, applying the paint while the existing coat was still wet. Additionally, Truitt applied and wiped layers of gesso between her colors to achieve a glowing

⁶⁵ The term "mutual facingness" comes from Fried's writing on a kind of dialectic in French painting. Fried argues in *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting in the Age of Diderot* that starting in the mid-1750s in France, the art of painting found it necessary to confront a new imperative, which was to find the means to neutralize the now suddenly distracting presence of the beholder, or to establish the fiction the beholder doesn't exist. Fried says painters like Jean-Baptiste Greuze accomplished this first through the thematization of absorption—the depiction of people felt to be entirely absorbed in whatever is taking place in the scene of the painting—and second through the promotion of the dramatic tableau, in which all elements in the painting are directed toward one dramatic end, achieving the effect of closure in relation to the beholder. In *Manet's Modernism*, Fried suggests that this problem in French painting persisted into the 19th century, until with Manet, in the early 1860s, fictionally neutralizing the beholder proved no longer tenable. Fried argues that at this point it became necessary for Manet to acknowledge the presence of the beholder with new pointedness, striving to assert the *facing* character of the painting, that the painting faces a beholder. It is this dialectic of mutual facingness I am referring to that Truitt (intuitively and not theoretically) finds a way to defer. Truitt undoes facingness altogether.

⁶⁶ *Anne Truitt in Washington: A Conversation with James Meyer and Alexandra Truitt*. Youtube.com. National Gallery of Art, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h93AouGz04o>, 56:20.

effect.⁶⁷ Alexandra Truitt also added, quite helpfully, that the subtle lines which divide many of Truitt's works are always slightly off center.⁶⁸

The corners of *Summer Remembered* seem especially crisp, as though drawn over in graphite, although the crispness is likely not literally drawn but produced by Truitt burnishing her masking tape with a blunt tool in between paint applications. The middle of each side of the work is divided vertically, slightly asymmetrically. On the front Truitt applied sponged dabs of paint across a slight color distinction between a peachier yellow on the left side and a slightly more golden, bright yellow on the right side. This obscures the faint line produced by the colors' meeting, which is partially painted over a physical ridge made by the buildup of paint around the masking tape. The sponged marks also go partially under the physical ridge, as though some of the sponging was applied before the last layer of glaze. Thus color appears to go over and behind the dividing line at the center, marking a shallow pictorial space, where the dividing line vacillates, at once seeming like a ridge, on top of the picture plane, and like a mark, under the picture plane.⁶⁹ On the back side, the peach shade and the gold shade meet at a middle dividing line that appears super crisp, flattening space in comparison to the qualified frontal side. This is because Truitt kept the lines clear instead of glazing between them, as she did the front. Color changes are locally apparent at the meeting of lines but work in relation to one another in their most immediate location and not in relation to the work as a whole. By this I mean colors take on significance based on how they meet other colors. Because each shade of yellow is so close to

⁶⁷ *Anne Truitt in Washington: A Conversation with James Meyer and Alexandra Truitt*. Youtube.com. National Gallery of Art, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h93AouGz04o>, 32:40

⁶⁸ *Anne Truitt in Washington*, 36:20

⁶⁹ By the term "picture plane" I mean the imaginary plane that divides the fictive internal space of the painting from real space. If European conventions dating to Alberti imagine painting is a window into another world, then the picture plane is the glass between the beholder and the fictional world.

the other, the task of looking becomes more about distinguishing where colors end than distinguishing what the color is exactly.

The significantly more opaque and brighter blue band at the bottom, made by a series of quick vertical brush strokes, seals over the thinner yellow paint, making the blue read as more unambiguously flat than the spatially evocative yellows. It seems that the band structures the work's mode of address by continuing around the entirety of the work, so no matter where a beholder stands, they can be oriented by the band. The band, being close to the floor, recalls both Richardson's and de Baca's discussions of the framing function of Truitt's use of incident around the bottom of her works. Perhaps the reason for keeping this color and the overall structure unitary is to offer constancy from any point of view. My claim that the continuousness of the horizontal blue band frames the works mode of address might seem at odds with my claim that the works are divided vertically, but I don't see it that way. I think the blue band marks the work's limits and gives it an internal coherence, which counters the variety and disjunction inherent in the division between corners, bisecting lines, and the meeting of colors. The blue band, echoing the line made by the bottom of the structure, establishes the pictorial limits of the work, contrasting the literal limits of edge.

The blue band also structures a very specific mode of seeing, in something like the way of seeing Truitt describes in connection with the *Arundel* paintings. A beholder looking at *Summer Remembered* might find their gaze centered between the middle and the upper middle of the work, while the blue band calls attention to the bottom of the work. To keep vision centered and to try to see the blue band at once calls for the simultaneous use of peripheral and foveal vision, which structures the viewer's mode of seeing and preserves the unity of the work as a whole. The preservation of unity is not just about vision. At a distance the blue just sets its

coherent, unitary effect. Close to the work, one feels intimacy and personal scale, but the unified mode, and the blue band within it, must shift to a mode of peripheral awareness.

The very slight differences in the various yellows that circle the sculpture, divided as they are in various ways and to various degrees, and keyed as they are to the closeness and translucency that come with Truitt's glaze techniques, work to create subtle relations within the otherwise unitary shape of the sculpture. They reward and even project a beholder who circles the work, but their effect cannot be reduced to the experience of such a beholder. It is not a matter of an established sequence unfolding according to a prescribed succession of points of view, or of an illusion activated by movement. In this case, the correspondence between corners and sides coupled with the consistency of the bands gives every possible view of the work the effect of an oblique $\frac{3}{4}$ view. By this I mean each view of the work marks distinctions of varying salience between colors that come together in vertical lines. A frontal view of the work would show color one meeting color two at a vertical line in the middle. A corner view (or $\frac{3}{4}$ view) would show color two as the corner itself, meeting color one on the left and color three on the right. The flat sides of the work suggest a corner shape while the hard corners of the work suggest linear flatness.

The main lines in the work are the physical lines on the corners and the asymmetrical center lines that mark transitions between different colors. When one sees the work obliquely, from the corners, the specific changes in color are easier to parse out because one can see the ridges left by the masking. The fact that the masked lines are defined by a physical ridge or prominence means that in acting as a physical separator between slightly different colors, looking at the work from center does the same thing as looking at the work from a corner angle.

It is important that the dividing lines are never centered because it makes it feel like you are always looking at the work obliquely.

This does a couple things. One, it universalizes a mode of address, which allows the work to mean the same thing regardless of any empirical beholder's position. Second, not only does it undo the relationship of mutual facingness Truitt inherits from painting, it takes frontality out of the work all together. The literal corners of the piece act as drawn lines while the drawn lines of the piece act as corners, suggesting changes in their orientation in space. In allowing literal and pictorial lines to function similarly, Truitt compares literal and pictorial aspects of the work differently even from *Sandcastle* and *Remembered Sea*.

Through an appeal to conventions and interpretation, I suggest this attempt to universalize obliqueness renders this meaning always available, not dependent on subjective experience. It is possible to get it wrong. *Summer Remembered* secures an effect of presentness not felt all at once, while retaining the singleness, revealedness, and self-evidence of painting. "Presentness" is a charged word in modernist art, and I think is often defined by an insufficiently narrow scope. In his monograph *Morris Louis*, Michael Fried predicts painters working after Louis will need to secure an effect of presentness to compel conviction in their work as painting, otherwise the works will have the presence of objects.⁷⁰ To Fried, painting's singleness, revealedness, and self-evidence all burden painting's ability to turn the literal fact that they show themselves all at once into a pictorial effect of presentness, which can be secured by dramatizing literal qualities of the work for a beholder to acknowledge.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Michael Fried, *Morris Louis* (Abrams, 1971), 41.

⁷¹ Michael Fried, *Morris Louis* (Abrams, 1971), 40-41.

Art historians frequently interpret the definition of presentness as taking on formal qualities of works by Helen Frankenthaler, Kenneth Noland, and Morris Louis—the staining technique, the illusion of impersonality, and the effect of immediacy. While Truitt shared a social milieu with the above-mentioned artists and I think did experiment with both staining and the impersonal approach, I would like to qualify and expand that definition of presentness. Fried is clearly talking about dramatizing literal aspects of the work so that they can be acknowledged by beholders as meant rather than as given. Because Truitt is working in sculptural conventions, the painting doesn't literally show itself all at once, and I want to say that doesn't really matter. The difference between presence and presentness is acknowledgement.

A painting like Frank Stella's 1959 *The Marriage of Reason and Squalor* (Figure Two) as an object might confer presence on the work as painting. That is, impress us—albeit differently in different circumstances. The stripes in Stella's painting, by coinciding perfectly with the canvas, make the size and shape of the canvas into the size and shape of the picture. Those qualities of shape cease to be given facts and become something meant, parts or features of the work. We might call this a case of an artist acknowledging literal features of the object and in doing so claiming them as features of the work. Stella's claiming of the literal features by acknowledging the works' form with them will either succeed or fail to convince a beholder, but only because of the relation between the painting's shape and its form. The beholder's situation will not matter. Artworks that secure presentness are artworks that secure legibility outside of changing circumstances. This legibility is found in acknowledgement of intent.

In suggesting painters after Louis will need to secure presentness, Fried doesn't mean that everyone should paint like Louis, but that artists should try to make the time of the work of art and the time of the beholder approach each other. Presentness is sharing a "here and now," which

is sharing the world of the artwork.⁷² The model for sharing the world of the artwork is acknowledgement. In my view presentness has less to do with immediacy and more to do with framing and interpretability. For example, Morris Louis *Unfurleds* are literally blank, but to Fried they dramatize blankness, by making blankness so apparent it becomes the subject of the work.⁷³ The kind of presentness I am talking about in Truitt is rooted in acknowledgement of literal facts of the work and the work's situation to claim those facts as part of the work's meaning.

In *Summer Remembered*, like many of her three-dimensional works, Truitt's work secures presentness not through literally revealing itself all at once, but through their intendedness, which a beholder can recognize or fail to recognize. Either way, this approach allows meaning to exist independently of any individual's private sensation. This model of interpretation moves away from what makes the work like any other object in the world. All objects offer themselves to our senses, but what makes a work of art unique is that it was made with a specific intent. That intent, often murky for the artist as well, can be appealed to through concepts. This is to rephrase an argument from my introduction that, by asserting their intendedness, Truitt's works escape being reducible to their shape, and that intendedness is available in the work for a beholder to acknowledge and interpret.

Truitt advanced from her earliest works, in which two sides of an object are mutually opposed and resolved by projected standpoints, to her unruly shaped aluminum structures in Japan. During her stay in Japan from 1964 to 1967, Truitt introduced a more complicated

⁷²M. Schreyach, "BARNETT NEWMAN'S 'SENSE OF SPACE': A Noncontextualist Account of Its Perception and Meaning," *Common Knowledge* 19, no. 2 (January 2013): pp. 351-379, <https://doi.org/10.1215/0961754x-2073367>, 377-378.

⁷³ Michael Fried, *Morris Louis* (Abrams, 1971), 32.

relationship between color and space. Later in the '70s, slimmer columns like *Sun Flower* establish a more economical structural approach, marking standpoints in the meeting of two yellows at the work's corners. Truitt continued her exploration of fixity and variance, as well as the separation between art and the world, with the 1988 work *Moon Lily* (Figure Three).

Moon Lily stands 33 inches wide by 15 inches tall, closer in size to Truitt's *Parva* hand- or table-sized sculptures, than her larger, human-scaled works. Like many of Truitt's works, the main structure is a vertical, rectangular column of wood, but unlike many of Truitt's works, the wooden column is placed on a round, flat piece of wood that acts as a base. There are three main colors used in the work, all of a similar value: a pale yellow, a pale purple, and a pale blue. The base of the work uses the same three colors as the column, splitting the round base kind of like a pie chart. The way the colors are used in the base, I suggest, relates to but does not mirror the way the same colors are used in the column part of the work. Truitt uses *Moon Lily* to describe variable positions around a fixed point, extending standpoints implied by color divisions into the base itself.

On the frontal face of the narrow column, which is slightly wider than the sides, a pale yellow and a pale purple meet at a ridged line. The line that divides them is slightly asymmetrical to show more of the left yellow shade, suggesting a three-dimensional column cast partly in shadow on top of a surface that is actually flat, somewhat like *Insurrection*. Unlike *Insurrection* though, the actual column is only slightly deeper than it is wide, so the face of the work suggests a shape close to its own actual shape, but as though you were looking at it from a corner.

The actual left corner of the front side of the work acts as an approximate midpoint to the yellow section of the base, while the dividing line at the face of the work that looks and acts like

a corner stands at the midpoint of the purple section of the base. Painted on top of the actual left corner of the work, taking up a few centimeters of the left side of the column, is a warmer, more orange line extending from the top to the bottom of the corner. The line is close in tone to the yellow field it stands on top of but reads saliently as painted. Where the meeting of lines at the front of the work suggests a corner view, the literal corner of the work allows itself to be seen as a pictorial line, much like the way corresponding formal elements function in *Summer*

Remembered.

On the back of the work, the surface is not partitioned into two colors like the front's surface. Instead it is painted in one uniform color that somewhat matches the pale blue shade on the base, but it's hard to tell if they match exactly. The right rear corner of the work reads as though there is a graphite line drawn down it and lines up with the midpoint of the bluer section of the base.

Turning to the right side of the work, blue and purple meet at a physical ridge, as the colors do on the front of the work. Both colors stand on the blue side of the base. The physical ridge and difference in colors allow the side to read as a corner in the same way the front does, implying a difference in shadow, although neither the front nor the side is actually a corner. So seen in total the work charts a changing relationship to a single point through different lines. Each of the three standpoints provided by the base lines up with a view of the work Truitt wants the viewer to see, which are all oblique. None of the three standpoints provided incorporates an entirely frontal view of the work. Truitt continues a comparison of literal and pictorial line and shape by using literal corners as line elements and using drawn lines to suggest actual corners. The change in colors, from warmer to cooler, coupled with Truitt's creation of a physical ridge on the front and left sides of the work suggest a change in shape where there is none—the middle

of the work's front is not actually a corner. The right front and left back corners of the column, where the shape literally changes (because they are actual corners) are used as drawn lines, their status as literal corners is downplayed in service of their pictorial status as drawn lines.

The base in this work acts a set of relations a viewer can take up in relation to a single point—the column. These viewpoints further suggest beholders take an oblique view of the object in the counterpointing of the base and column. The pale purple viewpoint shows the pale yellow and pale purple meeting in the middle of the work's front, suggesting a corner pictorially. The pale-yellow viewpoint centers the warm, orangish line on the left front corner, turning the literal corner into a painted line. The pale blue viewpoint of the base, which is about the size of the purple and yellow sections combined, centers a view of the back right corner, a literal corner, that appears to be drawn on in graphite as what appears to be the same shade of blue wraps around from back side to the left side of the work where it meets purple. The three viewpoints set by the base clearly guide a comparison of lines and corners in the work, complicating the correspondence of formal features Truitt had been working towards since at least '62.

The work thematizes separation from the floor by doubling it with the addition of a base, lifted slightly from the ground, separating the column from the floor, while the column itself lifts slightly from its base. Truitt takes up the framing function of the work's bottom with an even stronger emphasis on the relationship between the standpoints provided by the work and its meaning. The vertical line clearly establishes the fixity, while the standpoints of different light qualities suggested by the base act as points of variance, both around the central vertical in space, but also in the passing of intervals of time. The points of variance mark distinctions in implied time of walking around the sculpture, and more broadly in the intervals of the sun's passage through the sky.

The changes in the actual color of the small column resemble changes in color of an object under variable lighting conditions depending on the time of day. This takes on an iconographical significance. The moon lily is a real flower, which grows two to three feet tall. Significantly, moon lily blooming correlates closely with specific intervals of time: flowers open at dusk and close around noon the next day each day from spring to fall.⁷⁴ Importantly, *Moon Lily* represents a set of bounded conditions: Truitt makes the precise window in time that the flower is open and the change in lighting within those conditions permanently and conceptually available for contemplation. The work, sealed off from the ephemeral conditions it seeks to represent, projects a division of space that doesn't rely on a present viewer for its operation. In drawing such an explicit distinction between the bounded conditions to see a moon lily and the conditions of Truitt's objectified *Moon Lily*, I point to a quality of painting, and art broadly, that distances it from life. With the real flower, if you do not see it under the right conditions (the right season, the right time of day) you will not see the flower. A viewer doesn't have to see *Moon Lily* the right way to see it at all.

Moon Lily references temporary, ephemeral conditions, specifically conditions linked to the passage of time, and seals them off to be permanently visible. *Moon Lily* asserts that the positions from which to understand a work of art differ from the infinite positions from which to perceive the same work of art, and that the positions to understand it from are a product of intent. The work, keeping with my account of other works like *Remembered Sea* thematizes division: of time, of the work from the beholder, of space, and like *Insurrection*, proposes resolution of

⁷⁴ Sasha Degnan, "What Are Moon Lilies?," Garden Guides (Garden Guides, September 3, 2020), <https://www.gardenguides.com/12514025-what-are-moon-lilies.html>.

discrepancy via movement between standpoints, which amounts to acknowledging the conditions of the medium.

In distinguishing between the “pictorial” and “literal” nature of the work’s components, I hope to show that the difference between the two is the difference between conditions projected by Truitt through the work and conditions of an object which can be seen from any angle. When I use the term “pictorial” I seek to describe the intended aspects of the work, many of which make themselves visible in relation to medium conventions, and a type of quasi-naturalism bound up in pictorial conventions, like that a shade of blue in *Remembered Sea* is at least partially recognizable as evoking water. Because Truitt’s standpoints are conceptual and pictorial, they are not contingent on a viewer’s active experience with a work for comprehension. Since the ’62 *Insurrection* though, the standpoints become increasingly complex. *Moon Lily* affirms the oblique effect of *Summer Remembered*, while providing more specific perspectives to grasp it from.

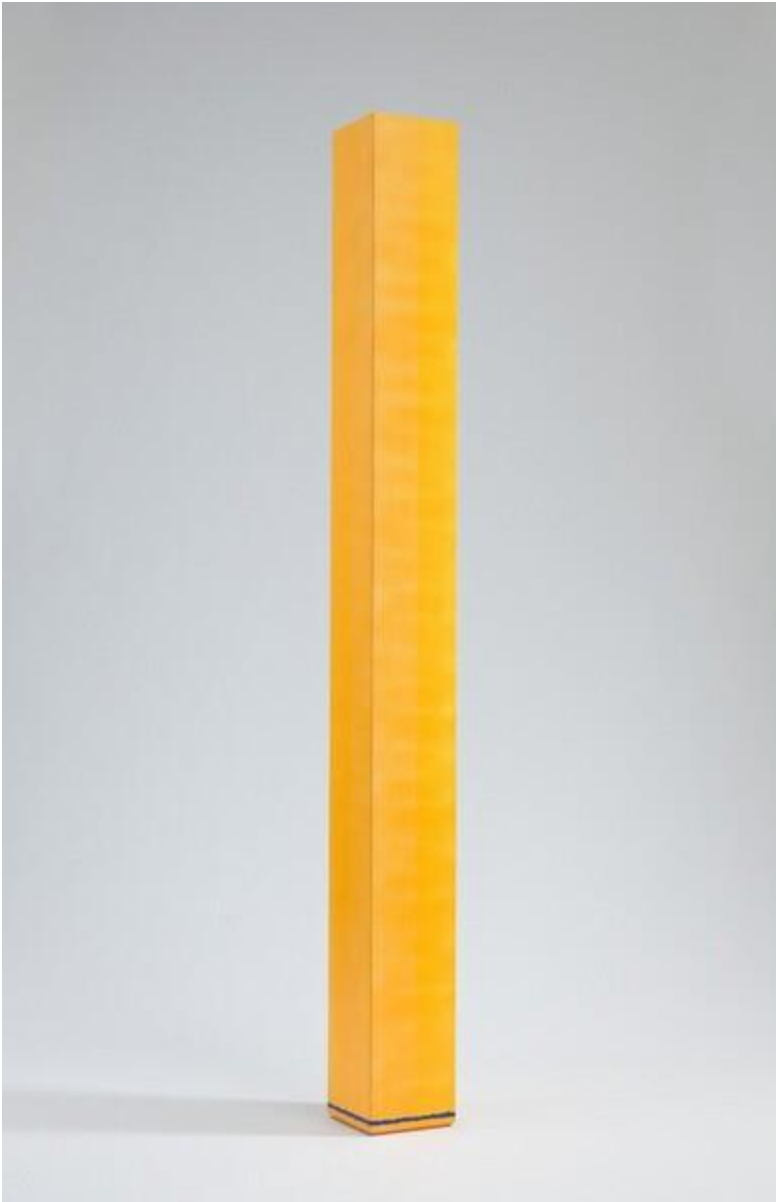


Figure One

Anne Truitt, *Summer Remembered*, 1981

Acrylic on Wood

overall: 208.28 × 20.32 × 20.32 cm (82 × 8 × 8 in.)



Figure One (rear view)



Figure Two

Frank Stella, *The Marriage of Reason and Squalor*, 1959.

Enamel on canvas, 7' 6 3/4" x 11' 3/4" (230.5 x 337.2 cm)

Museum of Modern Art



Figure Three
Anne Truitt, *Moon Lily*, 1988 (purple standpoint)
Acrylic on Wood
Academy Art Museum, Easton



Figure Three (yellow standpoint)

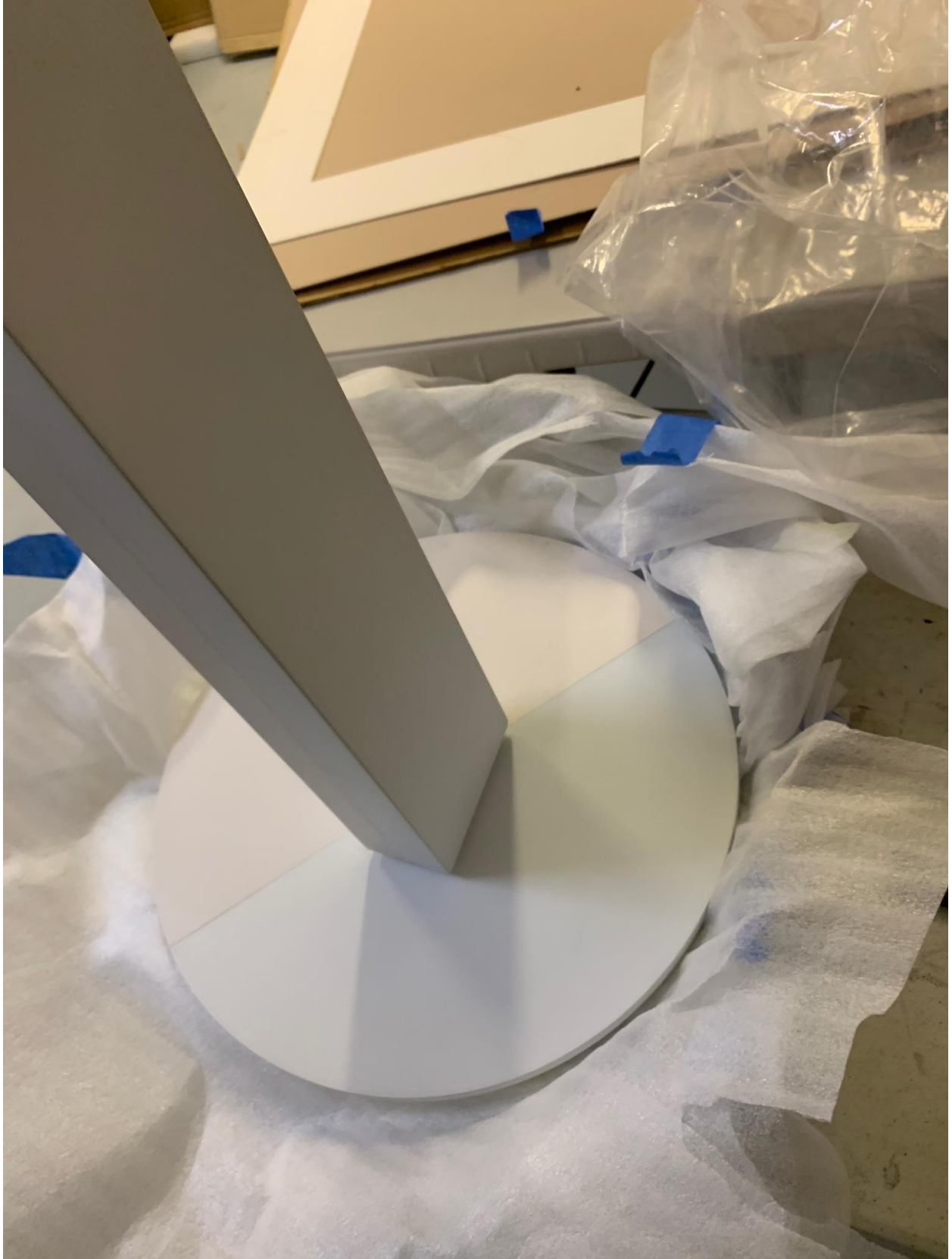


Figure Three (blue standpoint)

Chapter 4: Piths

Truitt's late artworks, exemplified in the *Pith* series, and specifically *Pith 57* (Figure One) become tactile, monochromatic surfaces, which use various fictionally impersonal modes of making to reflect on the idea of the middle. Like other works in her oeuvre, the *Piths* continue to explore the possibilities of line while standing in the middle of a dichotomy, alluding to the potential of unity. Unlike other works, the *Pith* series attempts to fix this unity in both art and death.

In *Morris Louis*, Fried mentions that he doesn't like when Louis's *Floral* paintings read in tactile terms. Fried wrote that because the *Florals* were more nearly opaque, more intense, plastic, and tactile, the qualities of individual shapes and colors seemed arbitrary.⁷⁵ To Fried, when Louis's painting read as tactile, it lost its power to to compel conviction as a shape, which to Fried made the color seem added or applied. It was as though the precise shapes didn't matter.⁷⁶ Fried's concern is that if Louis's goal was an impersonal mode of address, the image should look as if it put itself there, not as if a person decided to put this or that here or there. For this to happen, to Fried, the materiality of the materials and the evidence of making need to be, at least for an instant, overcome by the form and color as such. I think this comment is relevant to my discussion of Truitt because Truitt's late work includes instances of highly tangible, tactile compositions, which like Louis's *Florals*, have been treated as outliers. In light of Fried's wariness of tangible texture rendering other aspects of the picture arbitrary, I want to provide an

⁷⁵ Michael Fried, *Morris Louis* (Abrams, 1971), 31.

⁷⁶ Michael Fried, *Morris Louis* (Abrams, 1971), 31.

account of Truitt's intention in a work from her *Pith* series (2002-2004), which are monochromatic and can be read almost exclusively, if not only in tactile terms.

Truitt maintained a close relationship with Morris Louis prior to his death in 1962. In an unsent letter to Clement Greenberg from 1965, Truitt praises Louis, writing "Morris's work was, it seems to me...even more important than Ken's in the '50s: he was watched and emulated by his students and by Ken's because Ken told them to."⁷⁷ At the same time, Truitt writes her praise of Louis's influence with awareness of a problem it created, which is that artists adhering too closely to Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland's paradigm were overshadowed by their teachers' success. I plan to respond to Michael Fried's worries about tactility in Morris Louis's paintings to address a similar problem in Truitt's work, but I want to be careful not to align Truitt's goals too closely with Louis's, which would overshadow Truitt's unique achievement with the *Piths*.

In a work like Truitt's *Pith 57*, internal articulation is almost strictly tangible. For this work, Truitt cut and frayed the edges of the canvas to different lengths and painted over it in successive layers of thick, black acrylic paint. Only a handful of interpretations have been advanced about any of the items in the *Pith* series, and the existing account by Kristen Hileman proves quite useful as a starting point. In the catalogue essay "Perception and Reflection," Hileman writes the *Piths* "obscure cardinal axes with their irregular outlines."⁷⁸ Speaking of the process, Hileman writes that the canvases are cut into rectangular, circular, triangular, and ovoid shapes and painted with black acrylic so thickly applied that multidirectional ridges form on their surface. Hileman also notes many of the *Piths* are folded to produce tactilely and optically

⁷⁷ Anne Truitt, unsent letter to Clement Greenberg, 23 November 1965, Anne Truitt Papers, Special Collections Department, Bryn Mawr College Library, Bryn Mawr, box 1, folder 20.

⁷⁸ Kristen Hileman and James Meyer, *Anne Truitt Perception and Reflection* (Washington, D.C: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, 2009), 42.

perceptible ridges of gridded and radial lines.⁷⁹ Concluding her remarks on the *Piths*, Hileman writes the *Piths*, which “bridge painting and sculpture as two dimensional objects on the cusp of three dimensions are an intriguing late addition to a career that might be characterized as reconciling physical structure with things immaterial or unseen.”⁸⁰ I think thinking of the *Piths* as reconciling opposites is a good lens to see the works with, particularly considering the definition of “pith” as a middle or center. So, what was Truitt going for in *Pith 57*, specifically?

In a series of interviews with Anne Bayly, conducted between April and August of 2002, Truitt speaks about her works’ relationship to gravity. Truitt says, “The line of gravity in the center of my sculptures is really the essence. It’s the essence of them. Around the line of gravity, I can magnetize—or is magnetized by the color, the meaning of the sculpture, just in the same way that along the line of gravity in our bodies our lives are organized. Without that line of gravity, you haven’t got anything.” Truitt continues, saying the law of gravity implies a strong, intractable order, which “in the end of one’s life one has to submit to.”⁸¹ This discussion of gravity as an intractable order and a source of meaning aligns verticality with order and structure in Truitt’s work, and specifically of the same, vertical order humans must submit to. That gravity is magnetized around a line, which is present in a variety of ways in nearly all of Truitt’s sculptures, seems significant as well.

A few moments later, in the same interview, Truitt speaks of an opposite or counter to the seemingly unavoidable nature of an order like gravity: “When you see something, its opposite is

⁷⁹Kristen Hileman and James Meyer, *Anne Truitt Perception and Reflection* (Washington, D.C: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, 2009), 43.

⁸⁰ Hileman and Meyer, *Perception and Reflection*, 43.

⁸¹ Anne Bayly, “Oral History Interview with Anne Truitt, 2002 April-August,” Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (Archives of American Art, August 12, 2005), <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-anne-truitt-11857#transcript>.

implied; if you see light, dark is implied; good, evil. It seems to be set up on a line of dichotomy. And as I said before, I think the line of dichotomy runs in Heraclitus' convex/concave curve. And I try to stay in the center of it, in the pith of it, in the middle, neither one side nor the other, just as the line of gravity is neither one side nor the other."⁸² What I want to draw out here is a described interest in standing at the center of dichotomy, which is related to Truitt's lifelong interest in antique philosophy, particularly Heraclitus's idea of the unity of opposites. The unity of opposites describes Heraclitus's idea that things are both the same and not the same over time.⁸³ The unity of opposites also describes a relation between part and whole: "Collections: wholes and not wholes; brought together, pulled apart; sung in unison, sung in conflict; from all things one and from one all things."⁸⁴ Heraclitus's point about the convex/concave curve is that all opposites are two sides of the same process, as inseparable as convexity and concavity. The effort to stay in the middle of dichotomous positions figures prominently in Truitt's artwork. I think the literal/pictorial dichotomy of *Remembered Sea* and the middle standpoint that synthesizes multiple points of view, taken together, serve as an easy example of this. Staying in the middle of things could also refer to the dichotomous relationship between "feeling and hand," intellect and intuition. Finally, I want to point to Truitt's use of the word pith, which she describes as a center, something on neither one side nor the other.

The word pith, which can also describe the essence of something, takes on another association with the idea of the center slightly later in the Bayly interview, where Truitt locates the drawing impulse that aligns feeling and hand in the human body's physical center. She says

⁸² Bayly, "Oral History with Anne Truitt."

⁸³ Daniel W. Graham, "Heraclitus," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Stanford University, September 3, 2019), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/heraclitus/>. Another example Heraclitus used to explain that contrary qualities within us are the same by virtue of change is that seawater is both pure and polluted, because it is pure to fish who cannot survive without it, but humans cannot drink it.

⁸⁴ Graham, "Heraclitus"

“Art is in your midriff. It’s in a magnetic center...”⁸⁵ and later, providing a more detailed description, explains, “You have to stand so that you gather your energies about five inches below your belly button, you have to tip your pelvis slightly...Then you put your arms out like that and you turn your palms in and give them a little bit more strength, then you bring them in very slowly.”⁸⁶ In the last several quotes I seek to locate a common attitude towards the center, which is where I believe Truitt orients her later artistic practice, conceptually and physically. Intuitive action comes from the center of the body, and Truitt by again trying to stay in the “pith” of the dichotomies she sets up, is still trying to resolve proposed oppositions. Truitt uses the word intuition to talk about her own work frequently, most poignantly in her last journal entry, where she describes the process of how things are made as “intellect met with intuition.”⁸⁷

The way she describes intuition throughout her writing aligns it with an intangible mental image or an inchoate impulse. In Kantian terms, “intellect” might line up his use of “understanding” in the Transcendental Aesthetic of the first *Critique of Pure Reason*, defined as the ability to have and employ concepts.⁸⁸ Truitt’s use of “intuition” on the other hand, seems pretty close to Kant’s “intuition” defined by Douglas Burnham as “an immediate singular representation in space and time,” which doesn’t necessarily have to come from external stimulus (sensation) but can also come from the imagination, (sensibility) like a mental image of a mathematical shape for example.⁸⁹ In Kant’s view, objects are given to us as intuitions through sensibility, then they are thought through understanding using concepts, and our experience of objects comes from judgements, which involves the synthesis of intuitions and concepts in the

⁸⁵ Bayly, “Oral History with Anne Truitt”

⁸⁶ Bayly, “Oral History with Anne Truitt”

⁸⁷ de Baca, Memory work, 111

⁸⁸ Douglas Burnham, Sean Greenberg, and Andrew N Carpenter, “What Does Kant Mean by ‘Intuition?’,” Questions | AskPhilosophers.org, October 19, 2005, <http://www.askphilosophers.org/question/204>.

⁸⁹ Douglas Burnham, Sean Greenberg, and Andrew N Carpenter, “What Does Kant Mean by ‘Intuition?’,” Questions | AskPhilosophers.org, October 19, 2005, <http://www.askphilosophers.org/question/204>.

unity of apperception.⁹⁰ In this chapter, I will continue to use “intuition” to describe a mode of continuous action based on a mental image, that transforms into an intention based in concepts during the process of completing the work.

One way to see *Pith 57*, would be to see it as a continued exploration of the possibilities of line. Truitt abandons her linear columnar format and traditional line drawing, to contrast types of line made in more indirect ways. The limits of the canvas become a literal frayed line. Truitt’s brush strokes are packed and layered in a way that prevents them from reading as an index of movement, unlike the way the brushstrokes of a Franz Kline painting might read as an index of Kline’s gesture, for example. Instead, Truitt underscores the physical ridges made by the brush bristles. Additionally, Truitt produces physical lines in folding the stiffened, painted canvas, all without really drawing a line. Unlike pictorial drawing, all the lines in *Pith 57* are literally, physically present, whether a ridge or a thread. Truitt takes away all the usual indexes of material work and leaves behind only mute ones.

The dense brushstrokes present the beholder with a range of traces of her interaction with the materials, but at the same time, there’s a way in which the idea of process gets pushed away. This is especially apparent in contrasting the thickly brushed paint with how marking works traditionally. In drawing, when you make a mark on a piece of paper with a pencil, that mark both delineates or creates imaginary pictorial space and traces a real action that you made. In *Pith 57*, the marks continue to build multidirectionally until the whole space is covered, which causes the mark’s roles in structuring imagined space and indexing the artist’s hand movement to disappear when the page is full. Similarly, Truitt’s unraveling of the canvas’s woven edges into

⁹⁰ Douglas Burnham, Sean Greenberg, and Andrew N Carpenter, “What Does Kant Mean by ‘Intuition?’,” Questions | AskPhilosophers.org, October 19, 2005, <http://www.askphilosophers.org/question/204>.

lines replaces a fact about how the object became what it is, (that its limits were decided by its creator) with a fiction about its unmaking. *Pith 57* narrates a fictional story about painting absence, and in the same way renders the artist's personal touch absent, allowing for something like Stéphane Mallarmé's "elocutionary disappearance of the poet,"⁹¹ despite the most tactile, seemingly indexical approach. In *Pith 57* Truitt replaces her role in the work's making with a fiction of its autonomy, in turn securing autonomy for the viewer and the artist at the same time. In Truitt's *Piths*, she paints her own disappearance, by presenting a fiction that the work came into being of its own accord. This creates a nonliteral illusion of sovereign impersonality. The *Piths* comment on separateness by elevating it to the level of theme.

It is relevant to mention that *Pith 57* was completed in 2004, the year of Truitt's death. The work thematizes Truitt's ongoing investigation of the center and imagines a yearning toward a union with totality only possible in death. The ovoid, irregular shape, which literally radiates lines from a center, visualizes Truitt's process proceeding from her physical center, but also towards a conceptual center. *Pith 57* preserves indeterminacy, especially with regards to the work's edges. The lines become frayed weaving, something made mechanically out of the undifferentiated warp and weft of the canvas, which allows for an impersonal extension of the work of art. It is as though the work of art is extending itself, making a line out of the work's own fabric, rather than the artist's brush. *Pith 57*'s frays allow for the imaginative extension of the work of art away from its author, but at the same time it pictures an artwork that is internally expansive, a center grasping outward in the process of its own making, while remaining

⁹¹ In *Crisis in Verse*, Mallarmé describes a pure work of art, independent of the world outside it "The pure work implies the elocutionary disappearance of the poet, who leaves the initiative to words" Nelson, Brian. "Mallarmé: the Magic of Words." Chapter. In *The Cambridge Introduction to French Literature*, 147–50. Cambridge Introductions to Literature. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. doi:10.1017/CBO9781139047210.022.

nevertheless firmly externally closed. The frayed canvas lines are stuck in place with thick black acrylic, permanently preserving a temporary state of expansion.

I would like to connect another instance of Truitt's writing to the thoughts of Georges Bataille. I believe that they come together by way of an interest in Heraclitan dichotomy and an interest in death as a type of union. In her book *Turn*, Truitt writes "I have fairly thoroughly explored the union of my feeling with what my hand can make. Not entirely. I will not, as far as I can tell, give up that pursuit. But I begin to envision a union beyond it, and this one *does* seem to offer infinite potentiality: a yearning toward the divine which I intuitively experience as immanent in all that I have known and know. I will in time come to this interesting union by way of death."⁹² Truitt imagines death as a union like the union she describes of feeling and hand in art but more final and with infinite potentiality. I would like to connect Truitt's imagining of death as a type of union and her relation of death as a union to art as a union to Bataille's ideas about poetry and death.

In the introduction to Georges Bataille's *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality*, he writes that eroticism is more than sexual reproductive activity. He proposes an initial definition: "eroticism is assenting to life even in death."⁹³ Throughout *Eroticism*, Bataille describes a gulf or verge that marks the discontinuity of consciousness. There is both a gulf between minds ("Between one being and another, there is a gulf, a discontinuity.")⁹⁴ and later in the conclusion a gulf within language itself.⁹⁵ Bataille writes, "So language scatters the totality of all that touches us most

⁹² Anne Truitt, *Turn: the Journal of an Artist* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1987), 184

⁹³ Georges Bataille, Mary Dalwood, and Colin McCabe, *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality* (London, England: Penguin Classics, 2012), 11

⁹⁴ Georges Bataille, Mary Dalwood, and Colin McCabe, *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality* (London, England: Penguin Classics, 2012), 12.

⁹⁵ Georges Bataille, Mary Dalwood, and Colin McCabe, *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality* (London, England: Penguin Classics, 2012), 274.

closely even while it arranges it in order.”⁹⁶ The speaker and the listener are separated by a gulf, as are language and the concepts it tries to identify. We need language to organize the concept of totality, but when we use language to make totality legible to us as concept, it makes it impossible to see the whole all at once.

At the end of his introduction, Bataille connects poetry to eroticism, and eroticism to death. He writes, “Poetry leads to the same place as all forms of eroticism—to the blending and fusion of separate objects. It leads us to eternity, it leads us to death, and through death to continuity.”⁹⁷ Poetry (and painting) leads to the possible convergence of separate beings, and as far as art bridges the discontinuity that isolates human beings from each other, it can be figured by death. In art and death, continuity and consciousness draw closer together.

Bataille compares the verge between minds central to his eroticism and to the act of communication to the cusp of death, as a place where continuity and consciousness come closest together.⁹⁸ In addition to being limited by the separateness of consciousnesses, humans are limited by internal divisions. One way to see humans as internally divided would be to look at the self that acts continuously with the world out of habit or intuition and the reflective self that stands apart from the world, including one’s own actions or utterances, to reflect on them/it (“What exactly did I mean when I did that?”). In addition to bringing consciousness and continuity between separate minds closer together, art heals a gulf of separateness within the self. Art requires its maker to pull consciousness and continuity, or in Truitt’s terms “intellect,” and “intuition” close enough together to make the artwork. Under this view of art’s function, *Pith* 57

⁹⁶ Georges Bataille, Mary Dalwood, and Colin McCabe, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality* (London, England: Penguin Classics, 2012), 274.

⁹⁷ Georges Bataille, Mary Dalwood, and Colin McCabe, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality* (London, England: Penguin Classics, 2012) 25

⁹⁸ Bataille, *Erotism*, 276.

is about proceeding through the uncertainty of making, which in turn reflects the uncertainty of selfhood. For Truitt and Bataille, art and death potentiate union between separate minds. Many of Truitt's artworks, like *Insurrection* or *Summer Remembered* have internal divisions while securing a mode of unity. The shimmering yellows that divide *Summer Remembered* as the opaque blue band marks their unity. And to tie both back to Heraclitus, Truitt understood continuity and consciousness as two sides of the same dichotomy, as a unity of opposites.

The *Piths* then allegorize Truitt's process of making art, imagining the process as being constantly in the middle of something. The *Pith*, the object in the middle of the maker (the intuitive actor) and the beholder (the reflective observer) is the middle between separate minds and the middle between the self and death. It is the moment of simultaneous continuity of existence and discontinuity with the artist. In separating herself from the work through features like the impersonal extension of the canvas and the denial of indexical marks, Truitt suggests that the work, which will persist in her absence will do so precisely because of its separation from herself. The *Piths* are about the literal middle of the body, the gut of intuition which Truitt drew from, structuring life from the point of view of the indeterminate center, a delicate web of marks.

All of this allows for the actualization of what Truitt calls one of the most valuable of all human potentialities, which is "some form of shared subjectivity by way of which individuality is at once most fully actualized, and transcended."⁹⁹ Truitt's late works propose the actualization but most importantly the transcendence of individuality.

⁹⁹ Anne Truitt, *Turn: the Journal of an Artist* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1987), 183.

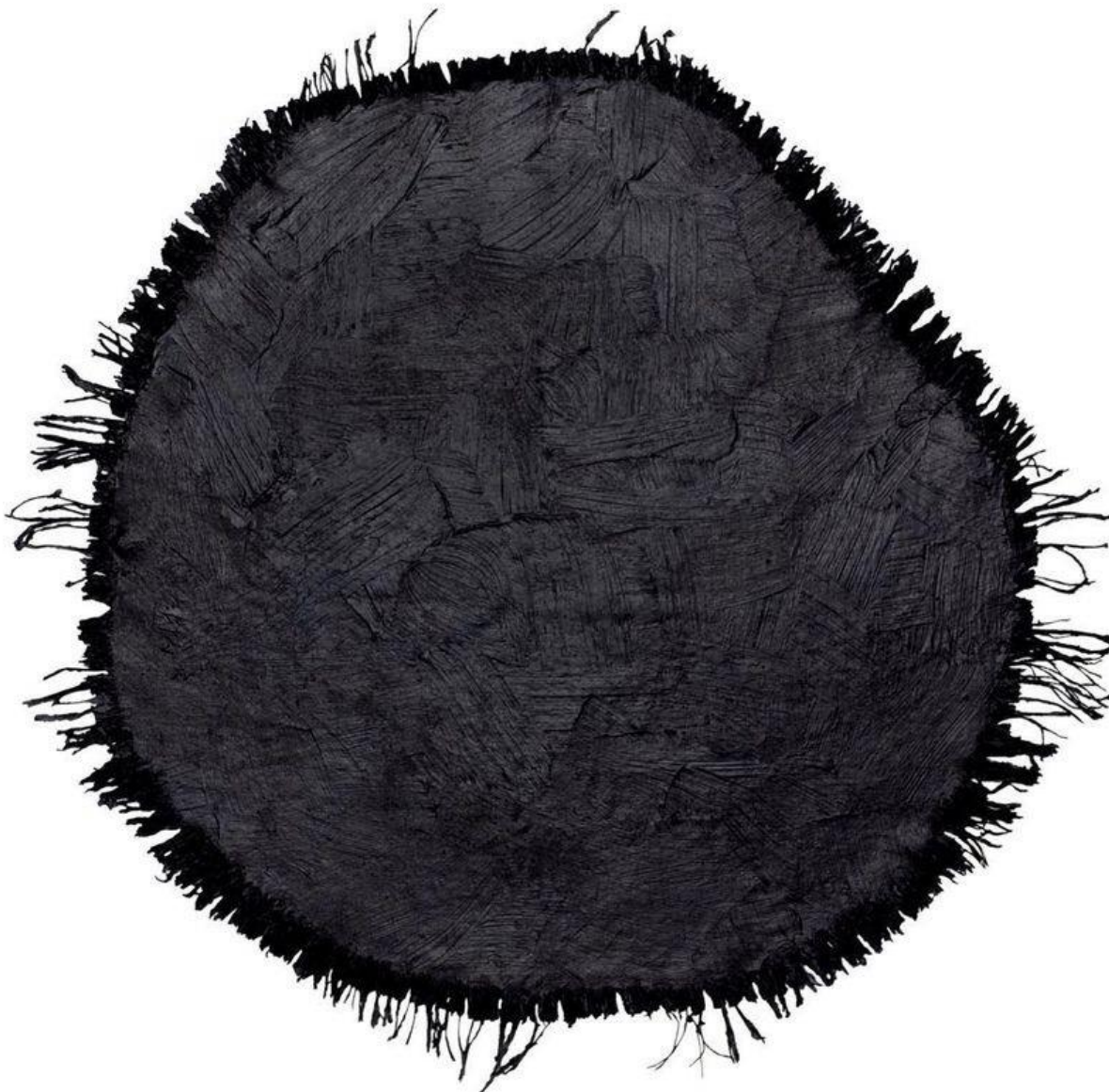


Figure One

Anne Truitt, *Pith 57*, 2004.
Acrylic on Canvas.
25 x 26 in.

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