

PAINTING THE PAGE

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Abstract

As a way of creating a heuristic opening onto my practice, I will make a rather naïve observation about the paintings of Mark Rothko. I want to suggest that because of the proportions of some of his canvases, the fuzzy rectangles of colour evoke erasures, censorings, concealments or veilings of paragraphs of writing. Running with this fantasy for a while, I go on to ask what kind of 'writing' this might be, and what it can tell us about the relative value of words and images in our culture. I throw the door wide open, giving a brief summary of the cultural symbolism of the book in the West. After that, I look at three paradigmatic critical readings of Rothko's paintings, asking what they might make of the presence of a phantom text, and how this can be related to the symbolism of the book. Finally, I suggest a supplementary reading of Rothko that draws on the East Asian concept of void, and ask what this can tell us about Rothko and how this complicates the earlier analyses of the relationship between the visual and the verbal. The concept of void has also increasingly come to inform my own practice as an artist, and so too has the notion of veiling or censoring signs. In other words, in the end, this long detour will be a way of talking about my own work without actually mentioning it.

INTRODUCTION

I paint found texts – often book covers or title pages – within coloured-fields, and these texts are only minimally distinguished from the field through differentiation in tone and texture. I also conceal paragraphs of text on book pages by painting over them with flat areas of colour. From an art historical perspective my painting practice can be understood as an attempt to stage a convergence between the monochrome and conceptual art. On an epistemological level it deals with the visual and the verbal, the formal and the semiotic. Experientially, it seeks to decentre the viewers' subjectivity through inviting them to inhabit a constitutive emptiness. But rather than discussing my work in relation to axioms, I will instead provide a heuristic opening by taking a detour through the work of Mark Rothko. I want to read Rothko through the distorting lens of my own work, and to suggest that some of his paintings imply erased or veiled paragraphs or blocks of text that are inscribed on tablets or pages, or some such writing space. And so, with this in mind I will begin by exploring the cultural symbol of the book.

The book as symbolic form

The codex book emerged in the early Christian era, in order to permit the communication of the sacred message through clearly defined and portable units of perception and cognition. The very word 'Bible' comes from the Greek for book, *biblos*, through the Latin *biblia*, and the image of this sacred book came to symbolize the legitimacy of the Church's authority. For Christianity the Bible, and its commentaries, represented a logical and divinely transcendent universe in which everything had its rightful place.

The theological world-view of Judeo-Christian monotheism teaches that a transcendent and invisible God communicates to mortals through the spoken word, and in order that this divine Word carried lasting meaning it had to take on a concrete physical form. 'This form is writing, and thereby sacred speech, was transcribed and concretized into two-dimensional graphic signs within the covers of the codex in order that they could be interpreted for the masses by the literate few, who had social status.

Not surprisingly, the image of the Holy Book pervades Christian art. But the corollary to the sanctification of a transcendent and invisible deity was the condemnation of the reality that was revealed to the senses. The Church construed the natural world as a complex web of linguistic symbols referring to the invisible heavenly order – called God's 'Second Book' – and images were deemed mere physical appearances appealing only to the senses, and above all to the sense of sight, rather than serving to reveal absolute and invisible truths. Indeed, image making was considered profoundly dangerous, for it broke one of God's Commandments. Within regions where Protestantism dominated, religious imagery was often prohibited. Texts replaced pictures in churches. But written words also appeal to the eye – they are markings in space and so are also visual representations or images. However, this aspect of writing was suppressed by limiting the visual allure of texts, and the devout learnt to avoid letting the eye dwell on external form and to direct their minds towards the contemplation of the transcendent meaning held within. In semiotic terms, we can say that they looked towards the signified (the linguistic meaning), rather than at the signifier (the material vessel within which this meaning is carried).

During the centuries of progressive secularisation, the potent cultural symbol of the Book went through a metamorphosis. The control and dissemination of the information that was carried by the verbal graphic sign remained central to any successful articulation of power, but now these words were collected in what might be called the Humanist Book, housed in the universal library. In

the process, the Book's symbolism changed. It became a transformed, hallowed space within which was inscribed God's spoken word into a cherished depository for mankind's wisdom. The great books were henceforth the record of the labours of human genius like Dante or Shakespeare, and while what these books contained might still be considered *inspired* by God, they were now essentially understood to be the work of the human mind.

The sceptical spirit of the Enlightenment further complicated this symbolism, diminishing yet further the transcendent status of the word. But it did not depose it. While in the earlier period the book had been understood to consist of celestially-ordained *facts*, it would now be judged merely the repository of humanly-contested *opinion*. The legitimacy of the words was thus thrown into question, as was the power of those who claimed to administer the will of the God who spoke through the words. The information housed within the Book would now be seen as arbitrary, and so open to endless critique. What once was thought to have the legitimacy of uncontested 'reality' was now merely a human projection or construction, and in this context, the symbol of the Book could represent both *emancipation* from authority and its legitimation. Each act of writing was a challenge to the canon; it was potentially an act of erring and of swerving away from the authority of tradition. And each act of reading could also empower the reader rather than simply setting them on a course of obedience. Indeed, in the modern world books can often be seen as posing such a threat to the ruling order that not only will they be severely censored, but the books themselves will actually be destroyed.

In order to more fully understand the significance of this change in symbolism, it is important to understand that the idea of the book – and its authority – is derived from deep within the structures of western thinking. Epistemologically-speaking, western culture's valuing of the invisible absolute over the evidence of the material world traces an essential dualism resting on a polar or dyadic foundation. Western thinking is based on a binary system of seemingly

exclusive opposites in which one term is always privileged over another. This posits that reality must be conceived according to exclusive opposites, with a first term always prioritized over a second: Spirit/Body, Mind/Matter, Good/Evil, God/World, Being/Becoming, Presence/Absence, Full/Empty, Purity/Stain, Word/Image. It is a tradition that cannot allow the possibility that such opposites might be equivalent. They do not co-exist peacefully, and one term is always privileged over the other. This, in turn, becomes the basis for an asymmetrical hierarchy that has determined the theological, logical, axiological and political domains throughout the course of western history. The western idea of the subject is thus founded on an ability to lay claim to a sense of sovereignty or authority through a process of expulsion of the negative and opposing aspect of the dyad. In this context, the cultural symbol of the Book stands on the 'positive' side of a dualistic system, a system wherein the values associated with the intellectual and mental faculties are praised over the sensual and physical, and the self is understood to be constituted through the process of separation and boundary-making – establishing identity through demarcation of limits.

Reading Rothko

The evolution of the arts in the modern period was a many-sided rebellion against the hierarchy of values inscribed within this western dualism. One way of putting this is to say that there was an all-pervasive 'crisis of the sign'.

As Mark Rothko himself would write in the early 1940s: 'Today, instead of one voice, we have dozens issuing demands. There is no longer one truth, no single authority – instead there is a score of would-be masters who would usurp their place' (Rothko. 2004. 4). And the result of this 'crisis', at least as far as Rothko was concerned, was the characteristic style of painting he had evolved by the late 1940s. Broadly speaking, three interpretative paradigms are usually deployed in relation to these signature works, and I will now

discuss each briefly, before asking what they might make of my suggestion that some of these paintings allude to the writing space.

Firstly, there is the formalist approach to Rothko, promoted during the artist's own lifetime by the critic Clement Greenberg (Greenberg 1961). Here, Rothko's dramatically reductive style is seen as founded on the rigorous analysis of the medium, and in this light, Rothko's eschewal of figurative subject-matter and narrative content is motivated by an awareness that such things belong to the world of literature not the plastic arts, and so weaken the visual impact of the works. Rothko sought the essence of painting by stripping away all that hides what it alone is, and thereby secures objective grounds for its aesthetic and cultural value.

The formalist interpretation obliges us to attend to the physical facts of a painting – to shape, colour, texture – so grounding interpretation in sensory experience, but it certainly wasn't the way Rothko himself wished his work to be understood, nor how many viewers responded to the paintings. For Rothko talked of his eschewal of conventional imagery not in materialistic terms, but rather as constituting a new kind of more exalted subject-matter which he called fundamentally 'tragic'. So attempts to more effectively acknowledge professed intention and to account for the kinds of responses the works elicit, led to what might be called the existential-psychological approach during the artist's own life, which was promoted, for example, by the critic Harold Rosenberg (Rosenberg 1972). Rothko's characteristic style is described in this context as arising from a desire to express, in stark terms, the reality of modern man, of the self stripped bare of all forms of consolation². According to this interpretation, Rothko's art is truly 'tragic' because it is about the essentially nihilistic reality of the modern condition. It plumbs the depths of despair, and is essentially an art of deliberate negation that aims to blunt our sight, to strip art of its authority over the real, to be at its extreme point, an exercise in what Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit call 'blocked vision' (1993).

A third interpretative paradigm also seeks to take into account the presence of some kind of 'subject' or expressive core in Rothko's apparently abstract paintings, but it takes a quasi-religious route. This can be called the 'theo-aesthetic' approach. As Robert Rosenblum pointed out in an essay that sought to place Rothko and other artists of his generation in a broader historical context, abstract art has often been driven by Romanticism's quest for a spiritual art appropriate for the modern age. This involved the negation or suppression of all particularity and individuality in order to be essential or 'primal' (Rosenblum [1961] 1999), to evoke the sublime and the infinite. In this light, Rothko himself can be seen as committed to cultural imperatives arising from his Jewish cultural background (he especially felt the potency of the commandment against idolatry central to Judaism) and in this reading the absence of the kind of imagery we might expect to see in a painting can be understood as motivated by the artist's belief in the negative implications of the seductive power of the image. It also reflects his belief in the superior reality of an invisible and transcendent absolute.

Having sketched in these three approaches to Rothko's painting, I want now to ask how they might each understand Rothko's potential exploitation of the symbolism of the Book.

A strictly formalist interpretation would not interest itself in any ostensibly symbolic dimension. Indeed, a partisan critic would no doubt argue that the attribution of representational content – however abstract – fundamentally misreads the artist's work, and far from showing how the artist has stripped back his painterly language to its essence, such reference to an erased or concealed book page – indeed like any symbolic references – suggests that Rothko was engaged in some very impure kinds of 'literary' allusion that completely misunderstand the cultural significance of his work.

The existential-psychology-inclined critic would be more sympathetic to my observation, and find the possibility that something might be buried much

more interesting. A concealed book page or inscribed surface could help us conceive of the possibility that what we see in a Rothko painting is not in fact merely a stage that has been stripped bare of familiar images – something one may feel rather strongly on comparing the mature works with those made by Rothko (I refer to those surrealism-inspired works of insect-like figures floating above horizontal grounds of colour, grounds that are very like what will soon become the ‘figure’ – or subject – of the mature works). Instead, we would be obliged to re-read Rothko’s shimmering chromatic fields as not necessarily empty spaces, but rather as somehow full, or at least as somehow concealing something that is there but not on view. What he was doing, perhaps, was burying a highly complex history just under the surface. And if so, then some kind of ‘archaeological’ process would be necessary in order to unearth these traces of a past. Furthermore, in this context, the idea of the effaced writing space might be understood as revealing an artist motivated by the desire to extend the attack on painting’s claims to ‘mastery’ beyond representational imagery and towards all sign-systems. It would thus be part of modernism’s war against the very tools that the arts are always obliged to employ, and the meanings they once embodied.

This line of enquiry might also be expanded from within the theo-aesthetic paradigm. For here what we see is to be construed as an act of iconoclasm of a far-reaching kind, one that aims at the obliteration of all sacrilegious idols – including written words. Rothko, then, belongs within a long western tradition that has always taken the war against idolatry far into the domain of the written word. In short, Rothko was inspired by, or intuitively followed, alternative traditions of ‘negative theology’ based in *Cabbala* – the study of the hidden meanings within Jewish sacred texts – or by Christian mystics such as Pseudo-Dionysius and Meister Eckhart, or even, in his own times, by procedures that find echoes in the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. Within these traditions, verbal, visual or aural signs – all the normal carriers of information - are employed in ways that seek to make them allude to what is *beyond presence*. For from a perspective that seeks to evoke the absolute,

any representation – indeed any claim to authority over the real, whether attempted through words or through images – must be deemed false. The absolute can only be referred to by what it is not. In a strictly Judaic context, we might say that Rothko presents us not so much with a book page as with something far more fundamental: a defaced or erased stone tablet – the Mosaic Tables of the Law.

What this interpretation implies is that Rothko is protecting us from some kind of dangerous encounter, perhaps from the seductive power of all visual signs. But he first sets out to invoke the conditions for the appearance or presence of these signs and then, by his act of concealment or erasure, he declares that it can never be the basis for the establishment of any legitimate power over the real.

In this context, it might be useful to look at some arresting paintings by the contemporary American artist Ed Ruscha, for they can be considered as enlightening commentaries on the buried texts I have detected in Rothko's art. I refer to those works by Ruscha in which he presents us with dark coloured rectangles of different lengths laid out on blank backgrounds, which, on a first encounter, might be taken for some kind of Malevich-like Suprematism, but soon, with the aid of the information provided by the titles, turn out to be censored fragments of demotic American speech of the kind encountered in film noir, or Raymond Chandler novels (For example, *Little Snitches Like You End Up In Dumpsters All Across Town* (1997)).

Radical impermanence and void

I conclude my paper by presenting Rothko's buried writing spaces as they might be seen from within a fourth interpretative model. I will focus on what is perhaps East Asia's most important philosophical concept: *radical impermanence*.

Within Daoism the virtues of water are often extolled. Water does not seek to attack impregnable objects, but instead peacefully finds its way around them. Rivers do not fail to reach the sea, though they seek the lowest level and the simplest course. The reason for this emphasis is that, rather than focusing on the eternal, unchanging or the immutable as the highest aim and ideal, as do western philosophical and theological traditions, Daoism gives a central place to the liquidity of *change* – to the role of time in forming our experience of reality.

In the world-view of Taoism, and later especially of Ch'an or Zen Buddhism in particular, every single thing is seen to be coming into existence, developing, decaying, or going out of existence. This radical impermanence means that all things are understood to realize both themselves and their relationship with other things within the unity of *ch'i* – the vital breath composed of the non-dualistic intertwining of *Ying* and *Yang*. Within this perspective the existence of a thing or a person is as much determined by what they are *not*, as by what they are. They are simply a phase within a continual process of transformation that is driven by *ch'i*. Everything is an open to the invisible breath or flow of life. Everything is radically impermanent.

Thus a founding text of Daoism, the *Dao Te Ching* of Lao Tzu, written in the fifth century BC, which in turn influenced Buddhism and Confucianism, begins as follows:

*The Dao that can be expressed
Is not the eternal dao.
The name that can be named
Is not the eternal name.'* (Lao Tzu 1985: 27)

This may at first sound rather similar to Judeo-Christian traditions of 'negative theology', in which it is claimed that the absolute cannot be signified within

any positive sign-system, but in fact, it is very different in emphasis and implication. In order to clarify this, I want to explore the East Asian concept of *void* or *blankness*. Void is inextricably bound up with and prior to 'fullness' through a process of interiorisation and transformation. Not surprisingly, the concept of void has considerable importance within the language of East Asian art. As the Korean curator Lee Joon writes:

East Asian painting traditionally placed more emphasis on the inherent spirit in objects than on representing them.....void was often used to express not only profound spaces of nature, such as clouds, atmosphere, and the ocean, but also worlds that are abridged, suggested, and invisible. From the perspective of Western art, which explicates everything based on forms, the void of Asian painting may appear, to certain extents, to suggest a lack of forms or a space of incompleteness. As a matter of fact, it is difficult to find a term corresponding to the concept in the Western artistic lexicon. 'Empty space', a negative element, implies absence of physical representation or is synonymous with 'blank space'. In the theory of East Asian painting, however, void exists as a complete, legitimate part of a work, and, in a more active sense, is an 'unpainted painting'. In that sense, void does not mean the renunciation of the use of space but rather the encouragement of space and is absence-cum-presence. (Lee 2008: unpaginated)

All this implies a kind of sign-system that fundamentally challenges the implicit bias of western dualistic thinking. The Franco-Chinese theorist and translator François Cheng offers a perspective on void and radical impermanence that helps clarify this. He describes void as participating in both the noumenal (the metaphysical dimension that refers to essence and origin) and the phenomenal worlds. In the noumenal dimension, for instance, accounts of the origins of the universe traditionally describe it as arising out of 'nothing':

"'No-existence'" I call the beginning of Heaven and Earth', writes Lao Tzu (Cheng 1991: 27). Meanwhile, in the phenomenal world, 'empty' is understood to be the prior condition for everything concrete and 'full', and void is represented by a valley or by water. Like the valley it is hollow, but nourishes everything, and like water it is inconsistent and penetrates and animates everything. By seeking to identify with the sense of 'emptiness', writes Cheng, one therefore puts oneself in harmony with the world and

becomes its mirror. The void thus roots a life in time and space and links it to the origins in the eternal (Cheng 1991: 65). Thus Cheng describes void as a central aspect of an expanded sign-system in which it is considered to be a privileged sign. It is precisely through void that the other units within the semiotic system are defined as signs, and, Cheng argues, it is thus quite the contrary to a 'no man's land', or blank spot, or negative space, as it would be in western thinking. In contrast to a binary thinking that proceeds in terms of discrimination between opposites, this Eastern tradition posits a kind of 'middle way' based on integration.

All signs aim to freeze or arrest time. So in order to evoke radical impermanence and void, East Asian artists employed devices that aim to challenge this false impression. They customarily employed the iconography of clouds, smoke, water and mountains, for example – all of which denoted impermanence within nature. Furthermore, they used techniques that were explicitly designed to relinquish conscious control of the process of making and to blur the boundaries between sign and non-sign. They sought an explosion of viewpoints. For example, in the fifteenth century in Japan there emerged, under the influence of Zen, a technique called *Haboko*, or broken or flung-ink painting – a very freely and rapidly executed style in which ink appears to have been flung across the paper surface and is beyond conscious control. The artist was thereby exploring how any frame or construction could be opened up or exposed to what can be described as the force of an expanded and expanding field of transformation. Artists also sought to pull the viewer away from the illusory sensation of a fixed, definite and stable reality, and of an independent and perceiving self. They actively engaged the viewer in the process of interpretation – in the activity of completing the work – by obliging the viewer to supplement the often minimal visual experience by acts of imaginative engagement.

To sum up, when oriental artists aimed to evoke the reality of radical impermanence, they deliberately engaged with aspects of experience and

technique that were not governable by the subject and which stood outside circumscribed boundaries. But this was very far from being seen as a threat to the self or as implying its depletion, as would be the case within a western ontology. Rather, it was understood as signifying the completion of a self that is now established within an expanded field. The self is activated, and imaginative thought is engendered in the very space where the impossibility of language and representation is signalled.

What this might mean from a material perspective is suggested by Norman Bryson in an essay that links western 'scopic regimes' to an alternative Asian conception of vision and visibility grounded in radical impermanence.¹ Bryson brings the theorizing of Sartre and Lacan, who are chosen as representative of western ideas on how the self is constituted, into confrontation with the ideas of the Japanese philosopher Keiji Nishitani who, by re-reading Heidegger through the lens of Buddhism ideas on void and radical impermanence, suggests an entirely different interpretation of what is at stake. Bryson writes:

Nishitani engages with Sartre as precursor, and both regard the centering of the universe around the sovereign subject as illusion. In the field of *sunyata* [*the Japanese word used to describe void or blankness*] the centralised subject falls apart; its boundary dissolves, together with the consoling boundary of the object. Nihilism and blankness undo the subject's centering of the world upon itself; and, radically decentered, the subject comes to know itself in noncentred terms, as inhabiting and inhabited by a constructive emptiness. Such decentering is a central theme in Lacan and in Nishitani; and yet their approaches are quite different. (Bryson 1988: 106)

Bryson then goes on to make an enlightening comparison between Hans Holbein's painting *The Ambassadors* (1533), with its celebrated anamorphic representation of a skull, and Chinese flung ink painting:

The skull appears in and as the *protest* of the Imaginary against its own decentering, as the menace of death; the flung ink figures represent instead the subject's *acceptance* of decentering. The skull represents the subject's fear of dissolution, the flung ink embodies instead the subject's renunciation of

a central subject position, on a field of radical emptiness where the last remains of the cogito are rendered null and void, literally cast out on empty air. (Bryson 1988: 106)

In his psychoanalytic writings, Freud criticized what he saw as the unhealthy yearning man possesses for dissolution of ego into the oceanic release of death, calling it the 'nirvana complex'. And indeed, from the perspective of the western concept of the self, of the cogito and the autonomous subject, the implications of the Asian notion of void and radical impermanence must appear negative. De-centering is understood to imply weakening, for it means loss of control, and cuts across the binary oppositions central to western thought. But it is exactly the *negative* implications of the kind of control and dualism that is implied in western constructions of the self that such ideas expose. They demonstrate the high price paid by the 'subject's fear of dissolution'. For what the East Asian concept of void implies is not so much a breaking away from a sense of the sovereignty of the self into the boundless ocean of the infinite, nor a leap away from the consolation of boundaries into the arms of death, but rather a sort of *transition*, or *negotiation* of the space between the bounded and the unbounded – the presenting of a kind of liminal space.

Rothko and the veil

So what might these Asian traditions make of Rothko? They would perhaps say that Rothko presents us with a space that has been established not for the consolidation of the self, the solicitation and imposition of symbolic codes, or for the assertion of an absolute authority. Rather, they would say that he reveals a space pregnant with the possibilities of unfolding into an expanded field of radical impermanence. From the perspective of the Asiatic tradition of non-dualistic thinking, Rothko is creating the conditions for subjective de-centering, in which the viewer experiences void. He is drawing attention to the non-signifying surplus or envelope that, within Eastern Asian philosophical traditions, is a sign's necessary and meaning-giving complement or pre-

requisite. Rothko is taking us on a complex journey from one state of mind to another. He moves us from the bounded to the unbounded: from one side of the frame to the other.

And how might this shed light on what I have described as the effect of the concealed book-page in Rothko's work? What does Rothko suggest happens to the idea of the book and to the writing-space in general when they are cast into an expanded field of radical impermanence? For to be sure, writing was invented in order to resist the erosions of time. Speech vanishes, but writing persists; it holds and defines, and is a bulwark against impermanence. In this sense, the evolution of the traditional western symbol of the book, mirrors the particular way in which the west defines agency and the sovereignty of the subject at the expense of the reality of indeterminacy and impermanence. Indeed, the word is far more emblematic of this fundamental resistance than is the image, as it seeks to subordinate the mind to the experience of the senses and of the body.

But what of the veiling? How can this be construed within a non-western paradigm? Let us say that Rothko is engaging in what might be an act of censorship. He is like those who in other contexts, at the behest of military or civic authorities, deal with letters, articles, official reports or other kinds of potentially dangerous or incriminating data, and remove them from view by placing some prohibiting mark on top that conceals their meaning. Rothko is an over-zealous censor, to be sure, for he has systematically blanked out entire images or texts. And he is also one who has been permitted considerable aesthetic leeway, because these paintings are far from looking like the censors indecorous cancellation, or even Ruscha's bald erasures. It isn't simply that Rothko blocks from our view some kind of content, but rather that he wishes us to take the method he has used for this action as something seductive and sensuous in its own right. His filigree-like surfaces may appear to be hiding some kind of signs from our eyes, but they are in themselves made in such a way as to provide considerable visual pleasure. It is almost as

if he is offering some kind of compensation, although to be sure, of a rather minimal kind. Indeed, he seems to want us to dwell not simply on what is now absent, but rather to be affected by what is now strangely present. He wants us to be seduced by the very means employed to make the effacements. For, while the action he performs may on one level lead to a kind of impoverishing of the normal visual experience of painting, the form this 'impoverishing' takes is actually of the most delicate and refined kind.

Rothko presents us not so much with the erasure of the sign, as with the sign of an erasure. His art is not one that can be fully accounted for within a semiotics of presence – within the kind of binary code where one (positive) terms is prejudiced over the other (negative) one – as in presence/absence, figure/void, spiritual/material – or at least not a code that follows the western model. What we need is some kind of expanded sign-system that can articulate some kind of absence-in-presence.

Ultimately, perhaps, Rothko's veil implies that *nothing is concealed*. Indeed, we can say that the veil is the supreme fiction of his art, for what it does is draw attention to the void by implying that something could have been there. In the borderline or liminal space that he constructs, the experience of the veil implies not so much that something has been hidden or erased, but rather that what is essential can never be put into language.

This veil emerges through its material trace – through the manner in which pigment has been laid down on canvas. One can say that it constitutes the spatial dynamics of the work of imaginative thought on matter. It could be called the movement of desire – the desire to move outward from the self towards the other, into the expanded field. As Jean Fisher writes in a context that does not specifically discuss Rothko but which seeks to understand the kind of experiences I am addressing:

Unable to map myself as a coherent self within the work's multiple coordinates, I am set adrift in uncertainty. Words fail me. I am struck dumb. I 'lose' my ego-self; time appears to be suspended and I am discharged into the non-time of a free-floating reminiscence. (Fisher 2003: 187)

Rothko stages a situation in which we are witness to the process through which fixed and definite boundaries give way and collapse under the pressures of fusion, and far from being seen as a threat, this new kind of (non-) space of (non-) communication should be welcomed as signalling the entrance of the self into an expanded and more generous ontological field.

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END NOTES

1. See the essay on Rothko in Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essay*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961)
2. See the essay on Rothko in Harold Rosenberg, *The De-definition of Art: Action Art to Pop to Earthworks* (New York: Horizon Press, 1972)
3. Robert Rosenblum, 'The Abstract Sublime' (1961) re-published in *On Modern American Art: Selected Essays* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1999), and also his *Modern Art and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975)
4. For another interesting attempt to link eastern ideas on void and radical impermanence to western thinking and modern art, see Hans Belting, 'Beyond Iconoclasm. Nam June Paik, the Zen Gaze and the Escape from Representation' in Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, eds. *Iconoclasm: The Image Wars in Science*,

Religion, and Art, ex. cat. (Karlsruhe: ZKM Centre for Art and Media with Cambridge, Mass. and London: The MIT Press, 2002) pp. 390-411.

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