

# object approaching short blue waves

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# Notes on the Digital Grapheme

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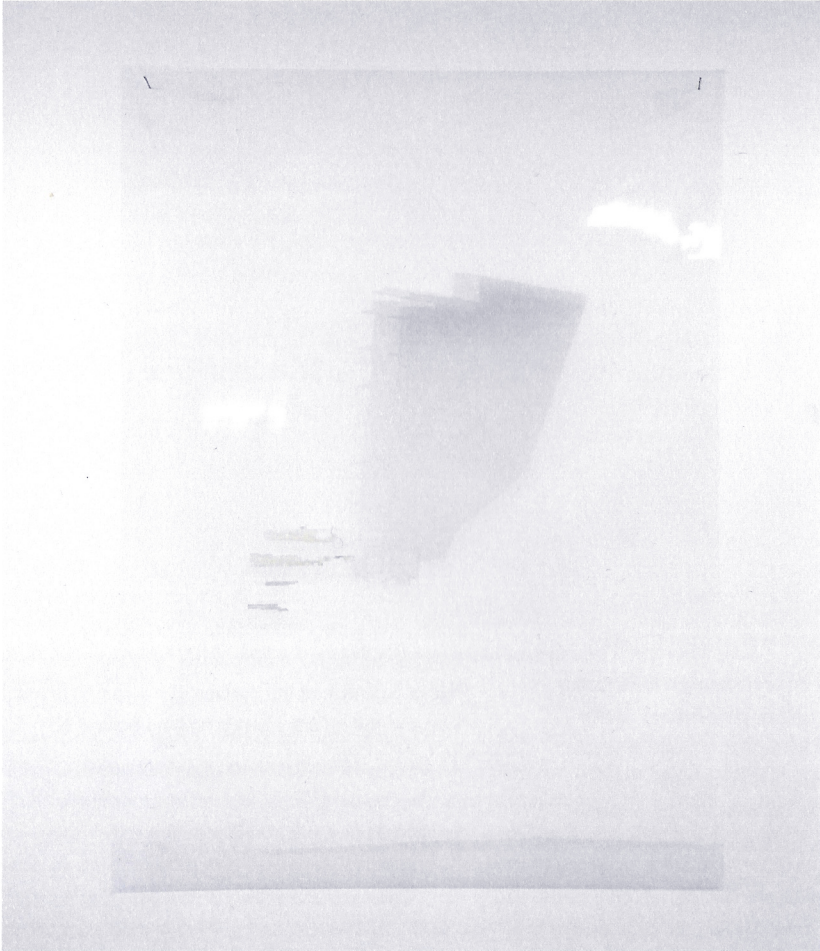
A transparent plane, Epson TM "crystal clear" film, made of polyester, which is a synthetic polymer, contains a mark. Or acts as a support for a mark. Or captures a mark. We would have to import language from an extinct practice, painting, to qualify this visual relationship. But the imported language would be artificial, itself a readymade, at best: it's intuitively evident that this mark and its optical ground are woven of the same material, that we are confronted with a new narrative or phenomenology of mark-making. That stroke, or rather icon of a mark made by a brush carrying pigment, is at once fluid and frozen, caught between movement and stasis. The mark made of paint and the mark that comes out of a printer, printing a mark made within the apparatus of a computer app, ultimately comprised of a code (ASCII), itself resulting from a sequence of zeros and ones, these two "marks" aren't the same species. The metaphors double and thus split the problem.

About this mark: it has a history.

If we were to trace the grapheme, understood as the unit of paint deposited on a surface—from its politicized assertion of autonomy from the academy, and by association the State—in French painting of the 1870s and 1880s (painting that was important for its engagement with modernity, not because it was French or European per se) to its equally political withdrawal into aesthetic autonomy of the first decade of the 20th century

to recent reconfigurations of aesthetics and politics drawn through a history of contradiction, we might arrive at problems that feel both erstwhile, if not obsolete, and, in an era of new rounds of accumulation and enclosure, newly politicized. Intelligence is trademarked, seeds and biological data are trademarked, and copyright restricts the transition of things and thoughts that modernity was to have liberated, deterritorialized. How might the mark be an exploration of agency, of what that word might even mean, at a moment when the aesthetic mark seems long ago to have given way to the logic of the cursor within a predetermined matrix, a program, or an application?

Against this quality of generalization with its dialectical counterpart in the way the inscription seems to fade as inscription, to be part of the ground, we encounter the voices of critics and theoreticians eager to restrict the grapheme as such, to a site of depth. This might be either optical depth or existential depth. Greenberg, in a caveat all too often overlooked in the association of his name with modernist flatness, insisted that painting preserves optical depth against the empirically verifiable, literal, flatness of the picture plane. Pierre Restany found the subject's will (to be differentiated from class consciousness, its opposite) embedded in the gesture. The mark has a complicated relationship to consciousness, at least within the brief history of modernity sketched out via the painterly grapheme in the previous paragraph.



Anyse Ducharme, *que l'espace s'effondre*, 2014, pigment ink on polyester transparency, 190.5 x 111.8 cm  
Courtesy of the artist

Jasper Johns said, "I painted the American flag because I dreamt the American flag," to call out the myth of conscious intention. Johns seemed to be suggesting that that which intention is to stand for is, denoted otherwise as the author-function, driven by unconscious drives. Moreover, these unconscious drives might themselves be far from autonomous from mass determination, might be moulded by ideology. Warhol, in turn, said that he painted Campbell's soup cans because he ate Campbell's soup, pressing the conditions of control into the somatic register, consciousness-as-digestion, controlled by the compulsory consumption dialectically made necessary by disciplinary labour in late capitalist re/cycles of production and consumption, the reification of people and things expressed in the relationship between worker and work. This relationship is inscribed in Warhol's *Marilyns*, into the texture of silkscreen print.

Silkscreen print, a fancier term for offscreen printing, had come by the sixties to rely on a synthetic polyester surface that in hindsight augurs the plastic sheets to feed a printer.

Were we to momentarily suspend the primacy of social history, and to trace history *within* the grapheme, from Monet through Matisse to contemporaneity, we would note the drift toward anonymity. The mark that seemed to carry the singular correlation between vision and

execution, individuality and authorship, tended most toward entropy: "Ideologically, we see the same contradiction in the fact that the bourgeoisie endowed the individual with an unprecedented importance, but at the same time that same individuality was annihilated by the economic conditions to which it was subjected, by the reification created by commodity production." The dialectic expressed by Georg Lukács in the oft-cited essay on class consciousness is operative over the 20th century's exploration of cause and language at a molecular level, from Mallarmé to Barthes's death of the author yields this contradiction: the more the grain of singularity fades into the very matrix of the conditions of inscription (poetic, painterly, vocal, across any register) the more the author-functions purchase on the conditions of meaning at that historical moment. No other artist's work of the second half of the 20th century is as iconic as Warhol's iterations of icons in multiple. And yet Warhol recognized the vacuity of his own position among the icons he collected, pulled through the fictitious socially necessary labour time of his factory on 34th Street. "If you want to know all about Andy Warhol, just look at the surface of my paintings and films and there I am. There's nothing behind it!"

Anyse Ducharme's mark suggests otherwise, that this "nothing" is replete with historicity resisting its own programmed erasure.

1 Gretchen Berg, "Andy: My True Story," *Los Angeles Free Press*, March 17, 1967.