

Susan Howe's *That This*: Art at the Limits of the Canvas and the Page

SIBYL GALLUS-PRICE

Abstract: Susan Howe's difficulty has often led critics to address her poetry in relation to language poets and abstract expressionists causing many to read her poems as painterly hybrids dependent on reader-beholder experience rather than meaning. Putting Howe's poetry in conversation with Modernist painting, I establish that Howe's painterly aspects, like her 1960s counterparts on the verge of an ontological crisis, cease to be painterly. Although Howe's poems engage with the problems at the end of Modernist painting—the possibility of white space and pictorial composition—they do so with a canvas that has come to function like a page.

Keywords: painting, poetry, canvas, page

While most poems raise the question: what does this mean? Few poems prompt the question: what is that? What constitutes Susan Howe's oft-cited radicalism, I argue, is that unlike most poets, her poems do both. Indeed, what we'll see in *That This*—already announcing a commitment to this conflictual duality in the deictic circularity of its title—is that in uniting these two questions Howe produces an aesthetically unyielding if aporetic form. While Howe's works arguably dwell in the interstices of image and text, painting and poetry, the canvas and the page, the hermeneutic and ontological bond she calls forth points not to the artwork's unknowability or its transgression of medium, I hold, but precisely the opposite, the assertion of meaning suspended by its limits. While often labeled a language poet for the interpretive difficulty her poetry poses, Howe's *That This*, I contend, returns here as a critical interlocutor of a movement whose inaugural publication was not uncoincidentally entitled, *This*. In the first issue of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* David Melnick, an early contributor, points to the relationship shared by words and images, readers and meaning:

The poems are made of what look like words and phrases but are not. I think these poems look like they should¹ mean something more than other wordless poems do. At the same time, you know that you can't begin to understand what they mean. What can such poems do for you? You are a spider strangling in your own web, suffocated by meaning. You ask to be freed by these poems from the intolerable burden of trying to understand.

Howe's *That This*, I argue, presents a challenge to Melnick's early statement, not only in producing forms "made of what look like words and phrases but are not," but in devising an artwork that comes to "mean something more than other wordless poems" or even visual arts do. Generating an artwork suspended between image and text, whose ontological and hermeneutic demands are (by design) always mutually entailed, Susan Howe's *That This* makes good on Melnick's provocation to "wordless poems." What Howe's aesthetic forms guarantee is that in advancing questions about what the work means, one is already posing questions about what it is, and in advancing questions about what the work is one is already posing questions about what it means.

Susan's Howe's "Frolic Architecture," therefore, produces a structure in which any attempt to understand it, as in fact we will see, brings out a particular set of problems. While Howe's forms are

“made of what look like words and phrases but are not,” her aim is not to free the reader “from the intolerable burden of trying to understand,” but, ontologically speaking, to ensure such a “burden.” Indeed, in their commitment to preserving this epistemological “burden” by any means, Howe’s poems, produces a readerly encounter tantamount not to freedom but to ensnarement, “the way a cobweb catches a fly” (Howe 13). To put it more precisely, the whole point of Howe’s *That This*, as I will show, is to produce a work in which ontological questions are always crucially inseparable from hermeneutic ones.

In looking at the first two examples from Howe’s “Frolic Architecture” such a distinction is apparent right away. In fact, Howe’s iterations explicitly enact such a distinction.

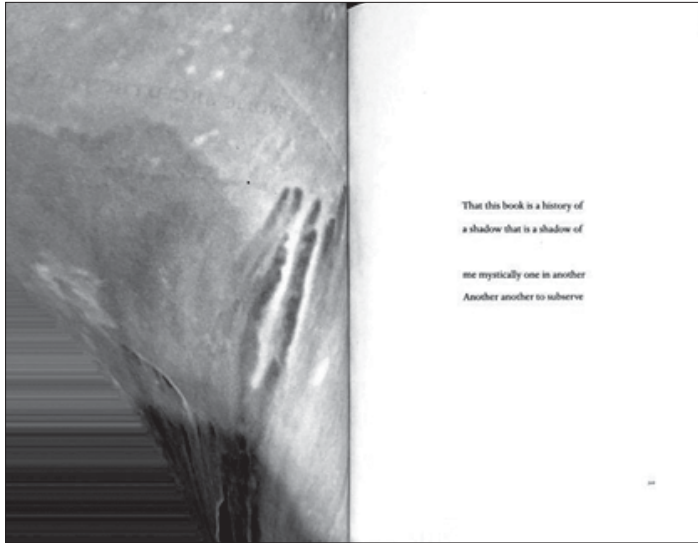


Figure 1. From Susan Howe, ‘Frolic Architecture’ (2010: 38–39).

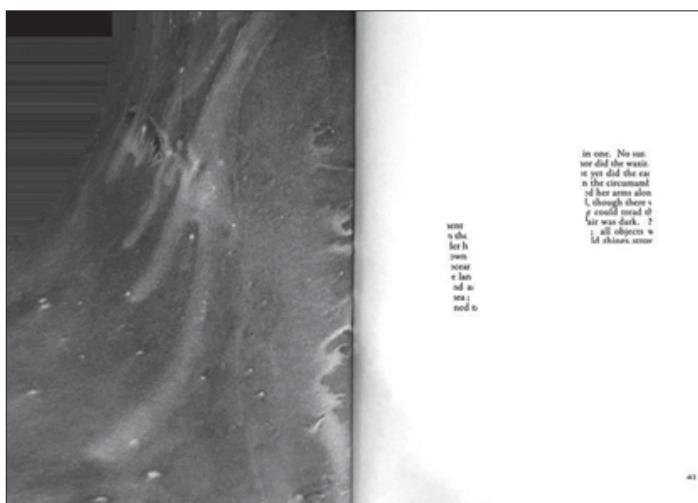


Figure 2. From Susan Howe, ‘Frolic Architecture’ (2010: 40–41).

The first line of figure 1, “That this book is a history of,” immediately illustrates the poem’s hermeneutically embedded difficulties (39). “That” and “of,” the words bookending the phrase “this book is a history,” signal straightaway the interpretive obstacles imposed by the poem’s formal boundaries. Beginning with an incomplete relative clause that functions as an unknown antecedent and ending mid prepositional phrase makes the line especially difficult to understand. It’s not so much that getting beyond these grammatical stumbling blocks is impossible, but rather that their constitutive incompleteness in itself marks them with a complexity whose implications can’t yet be understood in the context of the line. Hence beginning with the subordinate conjunction “That” and ending with the preposition “of” emphasizes the line’s suspended quality such that its grammatical demands surrender to its hermeneutical ones. “That” and “of,” therefore, provoke a series of perplexing interpretive questions. Firstly, on which antecedent does the “That” of “That this book is a history of” depend? Secondly, whose history is it? In other words, what is the history “a history of”?

By contrast, the fundamental concern raised by figure 2 pertains not to a question of what the first line means, nor even to knowing which line is the first, but the difficulty of knowing what would constitute a line at all. While figure 1 contains a line immediately understood as poetry, figure 2 consists of two irregularly shaped blocks of text organized around a white space at the center of the page. What was initially and unproblematically understood as a line of poetry—a phrase, a letter, a poem, or a text—in figure 1 is challenged by the presence of figure 2. Whereas figure 1 invites an inquiry about what the line means, what the phrases mean, or what the words mean in the context of the poem, figure 2 conversely consigns such an inquiry to determining what a line is, what a phrase is, what a word is, or, to put it more precisely, what a poem is. So, if figure 1 activates a series of hermeneutic questions, figure 2 guarantees that proceeding with any hermeneutic process first requires an engagement with questions of an ontological order.

The question of the line or the lack thereof emphasizes the extent to which poetry, as it’s commonly understood, depends upon the line. In its absence, elements that formally constitute a line suddenly no longer seem to matter. Hence, the inability to identify the first line, or any line, undercuts any attempt to reproduce the kinds of questions relevant to figure 1. Answering questions about what a line means, even an interpretively demanding one, requires first knowing what that line is; therefore, the conspicuous lack of a line in figure 2 constitutes not just a hermeneutic difficulty but an ontological obstruction. The discrepancy holding figure 1 and figure 2 in tension doesn’t arise along an axis in which hermeneutic concerns inch toward unintelligibility, rather the contrast between the two establishes something more like an ontological *volte-face*. To put it in slightly different terms, the line in figure 2 has dematerialized. In fact, this abrupt ontological shift comprises, in part, the meaning that such a contrast intends. The readability of the line’s disappearance in figure 2 depends upon a juxtaposition with its predecessor. In other words, disappearance only happens with figures 1 and 2 side by side. That’s not to say that figure 1 causes the line to disappear, but that the presence of the line in figure 1 makes the line’s erasure in figure 2 legible. The point is not that the textual fragments of figure 2 mark it as an impossible text, but that alongside figure 1 they raise the problem of the limits of a text.

No longer structured by the line but by the shape of the textual fragments themselves, the organization of the strategically fashioned shapes on the page disallow any discernible organization of words into lines. So, while figure 1 insists upon a meaning that depends on what comes before and what comes after, the fragments of figure 2 provoke questions about what might constitute a beginning or an ending at all. Whereas in Figure 1 the addition of “That” and “of,” produces a line that embodies its own formal poetic suspension, the fragments in figure 2, hovering affixed rather than inscribed, present themselves to view suspended quite literally on the white space of the page. The slight angle of the left-hand column-like textual scrap calls attention to the position of the left and right-hand structures juxtaposed near the page’s center. Placed as much as written, the slight slant of the text points toward the center of the page calling attention to the white space between the two

floating, column-like structures, and the fact that neither the structures nor the remainder of the page offer points of entry or exit. The left-hand column offers no more a plausible starting point than the right-hand one, and, in fact, the same could be said about the white space at the center of the page.

In approaching figure 2, therefore, it's not readily apparent where or how to begin, or what would even constitute a beginning. Certainly, in the case of figure 2 distinguishing a beginning from an ending would seem like an arbitrary task. What's available instead are two blocks of image of varying size, angle, and position—things literally suspended in some uncharted middle. In fact, we might imagine figure 2 as a kind of *in medias res* in which the beginning of one form is consequently the end of another. What we cannot do, however, is immediately understand where the text begins and the image ends. No longer structured by the line but by the shape of the textual fragments themselves, the organization of the figures, no longer depends upon the line but the architecture of the page. Indeed, comparing figure 1 to figure 2 makes this *in medias res* all the more clear.

Figure 1's phrase, "That this book is a history of," as we have seen, begins as a line suspended. Held in suspension by a clause whose interpretation depends on an antecedent that isn't there and a preposition whose relationship is left pending, the *in medias res* characterizing the first line in figure 1, is a line suspended in the middle of its meaning. While enjambment would be the formal term typically deployed for a line ending mid-sentence, mid-thought, or mid-meaning, in this instance, the *in medias res* quality arises from the line's incompleteness on both fronts, a suspended end and beginning. The line has a clear ending and beginning, but it's difficult to know what these beginning and endings mean. Since the line, unlike the sentence, is, in some sense, dependent on the literalness of its form, the doubly incomplete grammatical structure of "that" and "of" puts the line and the sentence in tension. The terminal "of" doesn't simply dangle phenomenologically against the emptiness of the page but acts in tandem with the incompleteness of "That." Hence suspended *in medias res* "That this book is a history of" goes beyond the usual visual anticipation of an enjambed line or the readerly suspense of an incomplete sentence, pointing instead to a relationship of parts to whole and their meanings. Indeed, the parts "That" and "of," as I have demonstrated, advance a series of hermeneutic questions directed not merely to the lines to come but toward the words internal to the line.

Conversely in figure 2, scraps cut and pasted realize a literalized *in medias res*, materially speaking, both of and in the middle of things. Whereas the *in medias res* of epics characteristically starts in the middle of an ongoing plot, figure 2 enacts the literal version of Horace's *Ars Poetica* by beginning in the middle of things. Extracted from the middle of a text, the scraps, shapes affixed around a center, compose the space on the (formerly) blank page. Figure 2 repeats the *in medias res* of figure 1, beginning not as a line suspended but as the white space actualized between the two staggered scraps flanked left and right. The shapes and the white space arise conjointly. White space transforms words into shapes and those shapes, in turn, give the white space a shape of its own. Annexed by the white space, these blocks of interrupted text, things literally suspended in a middle, become part of the page's composition.² In the absence of such white space, the partially effaced words and letters amount to scraps of incomplete text, but as part of it, the contours of the scraps become shapes, *things* not only suspended but integral to Howe's compositional whole. Hence if the structural conditions of beginning the epic *in medias res* produce two points of interest for the reader, what happened before and what will happen after, here those literalized conditions produce a composition amidst the before and after the moment the scraps mark the page. To put it another way: they embody action, Howe's action, in the way that a blank page or the source page of the text cannot. Rather than introduce a tension that appeals to the suspense of a listener or a viewer, as the *in medias res* of epics typically does, Howe's literal version gives rise to an ontological tension suspending both the limits of image and text. Unlike figure 1, a sentence suspended between something that has come before and something yet to come, figure 2, its literal counterpart plucked from its source, transforms before and after into the before and after of lines. Whereas in figure 1 the addition of "That" and "of," produces a line that embodies its own formal poetic suspension, the fragments affixed in figure 2

present themselves to be viewed suspended amidst the white space. In figure 2 there are no lines as such and consequently no occasion for endings and beginnings, but rather a compositional space arrested *in medias res*.

As suggested, figure 2 is concerned with shapes rather than lines. In figure 2 the shape of words and letters—what were perhaps formerly parts of lines or phrases—supplies not only the architecture of the columns, the two scraps of text positioned near the center of the page, but an architecture for the page's entirety. As soon as we understand text as an architectural element, as shape with the possibility of arrangement, the space of the page can no longer be considered incidental. It should be evident then that while the space between the lines in figure 1 is carefully specified, as spaces at the end or between lines of poetry usually are, their progression from left to right and from top to bottom raises no questions of their arrangement as shape. Certainly, applying the considerations of figure 2 to figure 1 would only further illustrate this discrepancy. Since it's true that the line, at least in part, is a primary defining feature of poetry, addressing the structural constellation of the lines in figure 1, would only call further attention to formal concerns. Like the lines of most poems, the four lines composing figure 1 gesture toward questions of their formal feasibility, let's say, as a quatrain or four-line stanza. To rehearse the same discrepancy another way, citing a line from figure 1, "That this book is a history of," would pose no problem. One would find no grounds for hesitation in calling the four lines a text. So, although the particularity of spaces in figure 1 might contribute to the poem's overall meaning, the way formal elements of a line often do, their shape, spatial arrangement, or relationship to the white space of the page do not. They don't matter in the same way that they would in figure 2 or as would be commonly understood in a painting or a drawing.

Indeed, critics like Elisabeth Joyce and John Harkey, quite rightly, observe that with such a use of internal space in Howe, painting immediately comes to mind. In her chapter "When Text Becomes Images" Joyce summarizes Howe's artistic process as a painterly one:

It is as if Howe is using letters as her medium for painting and throwing them on the page in much the same way that Jackson Pollock applied paint to the canvas. The white of the page becomes an active part of the composition that interacts with the black lines, so that it becomes a medium of equal weight with the black of the letters. The overlaying and the indecipherability create a field of visual depth, the type of depth created by Pollock in his drip paintings like his *Number 1, 1948* (127).

Though Pollock surfaces here as Howe's painterly counterpart, Joyce, like many, situates the poet's writerly developments across a sampling of visual artists. Alongside Pollock, Joyce draws parallels with "that of collage, or a kind of word cubism" (116) tracing the visual and textual spaces in Howe's block poetry and collage poems back to her well-known affinity with minimalist artists like Agnes Martin (112). Harkey reiterates Joyce's claims drawing similar parallels between Howe's work and the "grid-like paintings" of Agnes Martin and Ad Reinhardt (161). To Harkey and Joyce's list, one might add any number of abstract expressionists (161). Indeed, Howe herself regularly furnishes her own lengthy list of artistic influences in her interviews.³

Although her beginnings as a visual artist and her relationship to the art of the 1960s are in no way irrelevant, analogies—driven by an impulse to ground her work in a constellation of personal experiences and affiliations—often fail to address the kinds of problems her work advances. In furnishing her own equivalent, Howe reveals that pursuing equivalence in sameness, with paintings that look like her poems, misses the force of her interventions. Pressed to provide a definitive visual counterpart for her work, Howe declares: "It would be blank. It would be a white canvas. White" (Keller). Understanding the relationship between the textual and the visual demands an equivalence beyond the visually analogous. On the contrary, we must, as Howe does, address the thing which holds text and image in tension—white space.

What we can see in figure 2 is that, unlike figure 1, space does indeed matter. Unlike figure 1, in figure 2 there's no means of distinguishing to what extent space might matter simply by reading the text on the page or by evaluating its typographic positioning. Instead, what is distinguishable is a

positive space—a scrap of text—and a negative space—the remainder of the page. Reconsidering the way Howe imagines her painterly equivalent—“It would be blank. It would be a white canvas. White”—allows us to see not only the relationships between the white space and the figures but the way in which Howe calls white space into being. Empty space only registers as white space because it's marked by the textual scraps arranged on the page. Just as the line's disappearance in figure 2 is made legible by its appearance in figure 1, the white space in figure 2 appears because it's marked by objects. If immediately following figure 1, Howe were to produce figure 2 as a blank page—a page free of writing, marks, or textual scraps—such a page would fail to signify as anything other than blank, empty, or unused. In the context of the book, the space of the page, its size, its rectangular shape, and its white color would all fail to matter in and of themselves. There are many things that a blank page could represent: absence, emptiness, omission, or even some failure on the part of the publisher, but what it could not do is signify as white space. While a blank, empty, or unused page has the potential to invite hermeneutic questions about what it means to leave a page blank, no questions would be raised about whether or not a blank page is, in fact, a page. Indeed, its emptiness would only further emphasize its “pageliness.”⁴ Conversely, a page marked by textual scraps would, first and foremost, raise the question of what the page is, in short, what the whiteness is. In other words, it could no longer be considered merely a page. The point is not that the ontological concerns raised by the entirety of the page in figure 2 would render it uninterpretable, but that to consider what the sum of the page and its parts mean, the page, the interior of its shape, the white space, and the arrangement of the image and text within it would all need to matter.

What does it mean for everything to matter? Here once again, a return to the distinction between figure 1 and figure 2 proves useful. Consider the earlier discussion of figure 1 that led me to quote the first of four lines, “That this book is a history of.” In examining the line's hermeneutic difficulties I began, as we typically do in essays like this one, by citing the line. Nothing could be more straightforward. Of course, even more obvious but perhaps less self-evident, in quoting the line, I haven't made everything matter. My line doesn't look exactly like Howe's original since neither the particular shape of the letters, nor the exactness of their spatial arrangement enters into consideration. Naturally, though the kinds of white space between letters and words follow necessary conventions, with generally less space between letters than words, that standard convention is only ever one we seek to approximate. In the context of writing an essay such as this one, when citing the line on the page, we wouldn't task ourselves to uphold the original margins or the many typographic conventions. Certainly, what authorizes us to talk about a line outside its original context is citation. The organizing features of a text permit us to readily cite it, precisely because some things matter more than others.

But obviously, this isn't true of figure 2. Noting, first, the difficulty of identifying individual lines and, second, the role played by a compositional rather than textual white space, it's obvious that in the case of figure 2 citation is at the very least inadequate. How do we cite the compositional? How do we cite white space or shapes? Thus, another way to think about the tension between figure 2 and figure 1 is to consider what it means that we have to reproduce words rather than cite them. The architecture of figure 2 not only motivates ontological questions about what it is but any discussion of it, inevitably requires that we reproduce rather than quote it. Where, in figure 1 we can cite a portion of a line, trying to do the equivalent for figure 2 demands something more like description or reproducing a detail. Indeed, it is precisely that difference that has pushed me into identifying and even exhibiting the two texts I have been writing about as figure 1 and figure 2 as opposed to the first poem and the second poem.

Unlike the readily citable figure 1, figure 2 reveals only textual scraps inseparable from their spatial arrangement. Any attempt to cite phrases, words, partial words, or letters from within the scraps means addressing the contour and arrangement of the shapes themselves along with the corresponding shape of the white space. Just as the space on the page is no longer arbitrary, the irregular shape of the textual scrap too embodies a presence as integral (as any word) to the compo-

sition. In fact, the idiosyncratic shape of these scraps only reinforces the way in which their most minute curvatures, map and shape the subtleties of the white space. When everything matters, in other words, as soon as the entirety of the space of the page matters, the page in question, like a painting, can only be reproduced.

This is what it means to think of Howe's aesthetic as being like a painter's, and it's presumably what Howe meant when, in response to the question about a visual counterpart to her work, she responded: "It would be blank. It would be a white canvas. White." But while Howe's use of the page like the space of a canvas, on the surface, seems to place her in the purview of the painter, the obvious contradiction is that her own compositional spaces are anything but blank. Howe's counterpart is not just any painting but something that addresses the very limits of painting, limits that themselves would come to be commensurate with the limits of the page.

In hailing the blank white canvas, Howe exposes not only her limited commitment to an aesthetic generalizable to painting but gestures toward the ways in which the painting of the 1960s had already faced a limit and ontological crisis of its own. After all, the whole point of the blank canvas introduced by critic Clement Greenberg in "Modernist Painting," was that it illustrated the limits of painting, a limit he saw as flatness (5). Indeed, it was Greenberg's advocacy of the purity of painting as flatness that led him to make the claim in "After Abstract Expressionism" that "a stretched or tacked up canvas already exists as a picture—though not necessarily a successful one" (30). What Modernist painting demanded was not a painting you could look into but look at, a (pre)condition that made the illusion of deep space impossible. Hence the blank white canvas was an opportunity for artists, not because it expressed a painterly aesthetic, but just the opposite: it was the moment when a Modernist vision of painting had reached its limit, a moment when painting could cease to be painterly.

For art critic Michael Fried the literalism of the canvas as mere object introduced by Greenberg signaled not the limit case for painting but the endpoint of painting and Modernist art as such. Making flatness painting's limit, Fried argues in his essay "Art and Objecthood" reduced the canvas to a condition that was "wholly literal" and hence something already "beyond painting," what in his 1967 essay he calls "objecthood" (36). So, while Greenberg saw painting's limit as the blank canvas, for Fried that canvas, already consigned to objecthood, could only command painterly limits by restoring an element of the pictorial. Fried found such an example in painter Morris Louis: "it occurred to me that Louis's unfurled may be taken as showing what, in fact, was required in order that a large expanse of canvas compel conviction as painting, that is, be endowed with specifically pictorial not simply literal, significance" (Morris Louis 40). To compel such conviction the limit case for painting couldn't be blank, as Greenberg contended, but required, as Fried saw it, a canvas that could mobilize a blankness in the effort to depict its own illusion of flatness, flatness that would turn painting into the page. Such a requirement aligns the limit of painting not with the blankness of the canvas, but more with marks on the page.⁵ As Fried describes in "Morris Louis":

it is as though drawing's primitive character as mark, as something decisive, irreversible, even cataclysmic that happens on, and to, the blank page or canvas—something that, thereafter, is manifest both in its own right, as a unique entity, and in its ineluctable consequences for the perfect blankness and apparent flatness of the original sheet—is, in these paintings, made perspicuous as never before (119).

Liberating the blank canvas from objecthood meant regaining a pictorially meaningful illusion of flatness, but one that would serve as a limit case for painting by turning a blank canvas into a marked page. Louis produced for Fried, "no equivalent in the work of any other painter," not merely for his emphasis on the bare canvas or its "sheer primacy," but in generating a painting that could internally mark its own blankness as such. Hence for Fried, only a painting that — like a page — retained the "firstness of marking" could both suspend objecthood and approach the flatness Greenberg sought in the limit of the blank canvas (119). What generated the closest thing to Greenberg's canvas, the very painterly equivalent Howe invokes, was a painting that by necessity takes on the character of a page. The rivulets of color marking the left and right banks of Louis's unfurled produce a limit case not

only insofar as they possess the capacity to “simultaneously destroy and make [the canvas] pictorially meaningful,” as Fried asserts, but because they depict the illusion of flatness as “(the blankness, one feels, of an enormous page)” (119). For Fried the blank canvas only works as a painting insofar as it’s a pictorially marked flatness, and that flatness only works insofar as that flatness is the flatness of a page.

Further reinforcing the structure of the page in Louis’s unfurleds was the illusion of closeness they produced. As Fried explains:

experiencing the unfurled means seeing but being unable to bear down on the rivulets of color: as though one were physically too close to the unfurled to be able to bring everything they comprise into simultaneous focus—as though one were compelled by that closeness to focus, to look, infinitely beyond them. And yet stepping back changes nothing. The illusory closeness of the unfurled—which is what *makes* the blankness of the canvas seem like that of an enormous page—as well as a vertiginous ‘beyond’ they open onto, belong not to one’s actual situation viewing them, but to the paintings themselves (122).

What this means is that no matter where we stand, we feel too close to see the streams of color on both the left and right banks at the same time. The positioning of the markings of color on the canvas belong not to the beholder’s “actual situation” but to the canvas itself and refusing that deep space in exchange for a pictorial flatness that keeps the beholder out renders the canvas with a flatness that could only be described as a page.

Hence the blank white canvas, with which Howe equates her work, is a painting whose markings, like Howe’s, call forth a white space that even as it seeks to render a kind of purity and meaningfulness to its composition, can only do so through the discovery of the canvas as a page. As it happens, Howe starts with the page not with the canvas. And it’s this starting point that allows her to meet Louis at a flatness of painting already long in tension with the page. Even though figure 1 readily reads from left to right and figure 2 seems to obstruct that, with Louis’s unfurleds in mind, we can see that even when taken to radical extremes Howe’s poems still embrace the logic of the page. What we can see once and for all is that even as Howe’s compositional structures work like a canvas, that canvas has already met its limits. Though figure 2 does indeed possess the compositional structure of a painting, that painting epitomizes, as Fried demonstrates, a page’s flatness. Whether we consider Howe’s scraps of text in figure 2 to be rivulets of text akin to Louis’s rivulets of color arranged on the white space, Howe’s figure 2 like Louis’s unfurleds, produces a totality that’s impossible to capture, an experience that belongs not to the beholder but to the structure of work. And it’s this impossibility inherent to both that produces something that works like Figure 1’s page. Hence while it’s clear that Howe isn’t the first poet to capitalize on the white space in a poem, since the line on the page is already in some sense literal, what is true is that with the primacy she gives it, Howe like Louis, addresses the question of limits.

As we have begun to see, figure 1 belongs as much to Howe’s practice as figure 2. And though figure 2 embodies a compositional logic not unlike a painting, that structure much like figure 1, can only do so by reinforcing the flatness of the page. Moreover, this flatness is only further emphasized by the fact that each of them, in the book, is opposite a work (a Welling photogram) deeply determined by a visual rather than a textual logic, and the fact that each is on a page rather than a canvas, begins to suggest a certain limit to Howe’s appeal to painting. Welling’s photograms, like every photograph, produce literal rather than perspectival illusion, the depth in the things themselves. While the minimalism of Welling’s photograms calls attention to the flatness of their surface, the negative images left by the shadow, the place in which two things touch, reaches the illusion of deep space. The photograms consisting of nothing more than the projection of paint and Welling’s folding of the thin mylar onto photographic paper, produce the illusion of depth, and it’s this projected three-dimensionality that calls attention to the flatness we see in Howe’s figures on the opposite page. Despite their equivalent flatness, Welling’s photograms insist on an illusion of depth so that the things that appear deep in it seem far away and the things that appear near the surface seem

closer. Because we can look into them, they position us somewhere in space. Conversely, we can recall that for Howe's figure 2 and Louis's unfurleds, where the beholder stands doesn't matter. For both Louis and Howe, the compositional logic produces a flatness that ultimately depends on the logic of a page, and what was crucial to the page, Fried insists, was that it made the question of our position in space completely irrelevant, an irrelevance that demanded our submission to the logic internal to the page. Hence, in Fried's terms, whether looking at figure 2 or figure 1, we see it the way we would any page, something we look at rather than look into.

It's not quite right, then, to maintain, as many have, that Howe's page belongs to a logic that could be called painterly. The claim that figure 2 or the many figures of "Frolic Architecture" merely function like paintings proves inadequate. In fact, we can have a poet like Howe and a painter like Louis precisely because the page and the canvas exist in tension rather than as equivalents. The point is not, therefore, as Joyce contends, that "letters themselves become . . . the equivalent of the strokes of a paintbrush" (127) or that Howe's words, "thrown" or "splashed across the page," are reduced to a condition of "instability . . . explosiveness . . . changeability, rapid evaporation, transience, and even loss of retention" (104). Nor can we agree with critics resigned to see Howe's "page as a kind of canvas," as Alan Golding does in "Drawing with Words," a stance meant to support the claim that Howe's "poems deny the possibility both of an authoritative point-of-view within the text or an authoritative movement through it" (161). Positions that align print with stability and painting with instability not only undermine our ability to assess Howe's structural relationships, which depend on her ability to produce the limits of both the textual and the visual, they overwrite any relationship at all.

Engaging a dialectic of the fundamental aesthetic problems facing the visual and literary, Howe produces an artwork sustained by the limits of both. Howe's work suggests something beyond painting with words—a poem-painting equivalent "freed" from meaning—committing instead to the deictic reciprocity of limits—an art "suffocated by meaning." Howe deals in image and text not to undermine medium, but rather to point to its necessary limits. In raising hermeneutic claims alongside ontological ones and holding the limits of painting in tension with the limits of the page Howe, I argue, ensures not only meaning's epistemological burden but the limits of medium.

University of Illinois at Chicago, USA

Notes

¹ Melnick underlines "should" in the original issue of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E.

² Howe's commitment to composition calls poet Charles Olson to mind. Indeed, in interviews Howe regularly cites Olson as an influence (see the interviews "Susan Howe the Art of Poetry, 97" in the Paris review, and "An Open Field: Susan Howe in Conversation" at Poets.org). No doubt her poems take the "act of composition" (50) first outlined in Olson's "Objective Verse" seriously. As Howe herself explains it, "[F]or Olson the syllable and the line make the poem—to that pair I would also add the margin" ("An Open Field"). For Howe, then, addressing Olson's "composition by field" in earnest means making that field literal. Howe not only addresses Olson's project to produce a poem beyond the "old base" of the "inherited line, stanza, all-over form," (52) she composes a work that exceeds the relations of line and the syllable by embracing the space on the page. In doing so she moves beyond Olson's dependence on the voice and the "breath" (53). Howe does this not by disbanding "the conventions which logic has forced on syntax" (56) as Olson advocates, but precisely by raising the stakes of the poem's compositional notion of syntax and aesthetic logic.

³ In addition to the influence of her late husband sculptor David von Schlegell and former housemate Marcia Hafif, Howe adds "Richard Serra, Joan Jonas, Don Judd, Eva Hesse, Ellsworth Kelly, Robert Morris, Carl Andre, John Cage, Agnes Martin . . . the work of these artists influenced what I was doing" (Keller).

⁴ In fact, we can see this staged in the last four pages of the book when Howe omits pages 106, 107, and 108. While we can speculate on what this omission means or represents, a way of pointing to how the three parts as a single whole, we cannot envision them blank as canvases.

⁵ This line of inquiry follows Walter Benn Michaels's "When I Raise My Arm" which first develops Fried's argument about the canvas and the page in relation to intention and Anscombe's theory of action.

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