ART
Monthly

Production Protocols
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By Mark Prince

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We'll evolve
From one germ
Molecule of freedom
Into millions more
We'll pollute your white air
With Black fury
Till its filled
To the brim
Then
White South Africa
We'll come down
Upon you
As an epidemic
of Black
freedom hunters

steven smith

The Colouring Book
Gavin Jantjes interviewed by Virginia Whiles

Production Protocols
Mark Prince

Sacred and Profane
Andrew Key

Rory Pilgrim
Profile by Maria Walsh

Production Protocols

Mark Prince suggests that fears concerning the potential for manipulation in digital imagery may be misplaced, arguing instead that digitalisation merely adds another dimension to debates about the gap between intention and processes involved in the production of all art.

In a 1986 interview with Benjamin HD Buchloh, Gerhard Richter rejected the assumption that technique and craft – in a word, process – have value in themselves: 'the artist's productive act cannot be negated. It's just that it has nothing to do with the talent of "making by hand" only with the capacity to see and to decide *what* is to be made visible. *How* that then gets fabricated has nothing to do with art or with artistic abilities.'

In the word 'fabricated' one hears a faint echo of the discourse around Minimalism two decades earlier, for which the absence of art in art's production went from being a pragmatic contingency to an artistic parameter, one could even say an aesthetic fetish. This is the problem with laying down rules as to which parts of art-making have 'nothing to do with art'. The attempts of conceptual artists to qualify their work as impartial fell at a similar hurdle, when the non-style to which they aspired evolved into a style itself, cultivated as a badge of an objective mindset.

Investing more than teleological value in how art gets made may not only resurrect the possibility of judging artists on their technical prowess (which may be reassuring when all other criteria are confusingly up for grabs), but it can also strategically polarise with the depersonalised production characterising post-minimalist art. Marie Angeletti's recent exhibition in Berlin was divided across two spaces. In one were fibreglass boat parts, resembling formalist sculpture; in the other, leaning against the walls, were casts – also fibreglass – of what appeared to be the same spineboard medical stretcher, although variations in their structures suggested modifications to a given form, blurring the indexicality of the process and allowing figurative analogies to resonate. The objects evoked reliquaries, coffin lids, reptile skeletons; they were suggestive of how 3D-printing muddles the distinction between a causal representation and a computer-generated sketch that assumes the look of the former through habitual associations between casting and mass-production processes. The boat parts were found objects, divorced from the familiar contours of the functional apparatuses to which they had belonged, unmoored into abstraction. The stretcher forms resembled found objects, but were sculptures, their allusive potential released by a manual input that would be anathema to a 'proper' minimalist.

'Witness' – the show's title – suggested that the boat parts, although remnants of industrial manufacture, could still be unica: 'witness' in French is '*témoin*', which can also mean prototype, and this word was handwritten on one of the parts by someone involved in its manufacture, suggesting that it was a fragment of a model for what could have led to a more extensive production. The stretcher forms had something of the formal, hieratically observant air of Egyptian burial sculptures. They were 'witnesses' in a figurative sense, reverse-prototypes in a causal one: hand-finished objects, retrospectively referencing an earlier, reproduced condition. An exploratory dialogue was initiated between the given and the made, but interchangeably, without either value becoming conclusively attached to objects made individually or *en masse*.

It is with respect to minimalist aesthetics – for which art and its production were materially synonymous but conceptually polarised – that Richter's distinction does not hold up, unarguable as it may otherwise seem in a post-conceptual context. Marcel Duchamp's readymades, although the crucial precursor here, severed the art/production link, converting its significance into a negative value. Asking 'the artist's productive act' to carry aesthetic weight may not only be a nostalgically artisanal alternative to the generic mechanics of photography, or the labour delegated to workers commissioned by Donald Judd and co, but also a means of outmanoeuvring those models with a mimetic analogy of the processes that produced them. The illusion of photographic blur, cultivated by Richter in his 'photo-paintings', is a case in point. The accretion of paint, invested at every step with subjectivity, is subordinated to a technique that imitates the all-over technological levelling of photography. Richter gains the plausibility of a causal link between a painting and what it depicts, but figuratively, without indexical grounds for the effect. Conversely, Angeletti renounces her sculptures' indexicality to liberate them from the reproductive potential of the cast, and assume for them a critical remove from the association of that process with the utilitarian determinism of mass production.

From Roy Lichtenstein to Andy Warhol to Richter, art's metaphors for the dynamics of reproduction have always been equivocal, connoting its economic clout and its potential for distribution, while exposing its

Niele Teroni's work installed at
Liège University Hospital, mid 1980s

limitations. The inevitability of subjective intention in an artwork – even if the decision that makes it art occurs after the fact of its production – is contrasted with the technological nature of photography, which does not have to be aesthetic because the information it generates need not have been intended.

If the photographic separation of intention and process can be liberating, shielding images from the imposition of ideas and ideology, it can also leave them open to being manipulated to those ends. Faced with this dichotomy, we are more likely to feel unease at disinformation abetted by image-manipulation software, while the positive aspects of the resistance of photography's causal essence to interference, or even intention, go under the radar. Although our contemporary photographic/filmic ecosystem – whether digital or analogue in source, trafficked online, or flashing up on screens in a provisional, as yet unmaterialised state – is driven by an exponentially developing capacity to transform its content according to personal or corporate purposes (or simply the internal dynamics of the software in operation), photography still seems defined by a relation between a given input, the intentions behind the use of the mechanisms that capture it, and the processes applied to it. While contemporary theorists insist that digitally generated imagery tends towards insularity – gravitating towards the black holes of systems that reconfigure data through algorithmic analogies and affinities – the multifarious image worlds into which we tap every time we check our phones, or activate a video stream, seem no less about what is 'out there' and no more about themselves.

The reasons for this may, as ever, be structural. Retouching a photograph, or creating an image that resembles one using pre-set algorithms, does not reshape the past – or pasts – on which its representation is predicated; it only weakens the image's connection to it, so it ceases to that extent to be a photograph of that past and instead becomes a proto-painting – or indeed a 'photo-painting' – of it. Nor does the amenability of digital images to modification appear to have fundamentally weakened our belief in their veracity, at least not yet; it has only made us seem more credulous of what was always an illusion, and is now only more likely to be one. The crucial difference remains not that between the differing likelihood of the veracity of the record provided by analogue and digital media, but between what we bring to photographic images – in creating and viewing them – and the extent of their independence from that input. Perhaps it should not be surprising that Jon Rafman – a contemporary artist whose work has been based on the use of computers to modify digital imagery with virtuoso flair – has suggested the unavailability of photography to our contrivances, describing one of his slideshows of Google Street Views as consisting of 'photographs that no one took and memories no one has'. One hears yearning as much as disillusionment in the comment – possibly even a wistful consciousness of the redundancy of his own facility – as if he were disconsolately intuiting that, when it comes to photographs, the greatest artistic potential may lie in leaving them to themselves.

Michael Snow, *La Région Centrale*, 1970, production photo

A desire to produce 'photographs that no one took' has had proponents since the 1960s, when structuralist filmmakers imagined such imagery corresponding to the superfluity – vigorously mooted at the time – of the author. In 1970, Michael Snow had what he called a 'Camera Activating Machine' specially built by a film engineer to stand in a deserted, mountainous tract of Eastern Canada, and rotate the lens of an Arriflex camera on a long metal arm around a 360° circumference, from slow pans to high-speed, somersaulting sweeps. The movements of the camera were remote-controlled by Snow in real time from a control box, transmitting sound tones which the CAM was designed to translate into directions and speeds of rotation, in semi-automatic pilot mode. This authorial remove divests the resulting three-hour film, *La Région Centrale*, of subjectivity (Snow: 'I only looked in the camera once ... the film was made by the planning and by the machinery itself.'), apart from that conferred onto it by its subsequent viewers, as the landscape, as it appears in the film, is voided of signs of human presence ('we had to be there, but hidden, behind the rocks'). The camera's roving eye was blind only to the spherical core around which it moved, as if its 'self' was the only space invisible to it. The film has been compared with the first footage of the gravityless Moon's surface, shot by Apollo 11's astronauts a couple of years before. The Quebec wilderness appears as an alien or prelapsarian world, beyond culture's reach, not only symbolically untouched, but humanly unseen, a metaphor for the independence of photography from what we invest in it.

A scene from Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-Up*, 1967, is a no less telling parable, half a century later, of the fear of a deficit of intention that haunts photography, of its showing what was before the lens even if it is not what it was meant to show; or, as Diane

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Günter Forg, '1987–2011', installation view, Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin, 2012

Arbus put it, of its insertion of a 'gap between intention and effect'. A photographer observes a man and woman in a deserted park. Has he stumbled upon a tryst, a break-up, a performance, a drug deal? His curiosity prompts him to raise his camera. If he is uncertain whether they are acting, we know that they are – at least for Antonioni's camera. As if to mock the irrelevance of that knowledge to the narrative, the woman remonstrates with him for having taken her picture without her consent, demanding the negatives so vehemently that his curiosity is piqued. He refuses to hand them over, and, on developing the reel, spots what he suspects is a corpse in the bushes, of which he was oblivious at the time. Cameras, however, are never oblivious or aware, innocent or guilty; they scan what appears before the lens without selection or judgement. If they offer an even-handed inventory, it is the person with a purpose who took the picture, the viewer of the pictures they produce, or even the software processing it, that generalise from that data, focusing on this or that detail or aspect, according to design, bias, pre-programmed predilections. It may be only after the fact that intention – or the intention that matters – enters the picture.

Here lies the difference – all the more vital with the emergence of AI technology – between how cameras and minds register information: one mechanically, as photons landing on a negative or sensor, the other as sense data from which our brains mysteriously transform the same input. Cameras evenly scan; paintings show what artists have seen or imagined, as well as tracing their process. The comparison also suggests that photography hasn't changed art as much as is generally assumed, as if it had always existed, even before cameras were invented, if it is considered not as a technology but a means of collating information by a mind incapable of generalisation or emphasis, or at least *aesthetic* emphasis, by, for example, the practical but indifferent fabricators of minimalist legend, or high-end contemporary art production, or the mass-producers of Duchamp's urinal and bicycle wheel, whose example lies behind theirs.

'I'd always wanted to know the difference between a mark that was art and one that wasn't.' This remark by Lichtenstein, while apparently inquiring into the nature of painting, comprehends the photographic schism between intention and process, and nods to photography's impact on painting. Unlike photographic detail, which may be unintentionally captured, a painter's brush is deliberately raised. Whether the painter assents to claiming the mark it makes as art is another matter. It is in the grey areas between non-aesthetic artistic intention, and non-artistic process that is subsequently approved as aesthetic, that art made 'by hand' post-Duchamp does some of its most consequential work.

Thierry de Duve's distinction between the 'aesthetic' and 'documentary' functions of Robert Ryman's painting recalls Lichtenstein's query. Ryman rendered his procedures explicit: what support he used (metal, canvas, plastic etc), how it was attached to the wall, what sort of paint (oil, acrylic, casein, enamel etc) was applied to it, in what order and with what implement. These factors are amenable to being reduced to diachronic units of information, even forming narratives of one thing after another – or beside another – like a camera's scan of the scene it pictures or the rolling of products off a conveyor belt. In 1965, Frank Stella described his method according to this logic: 'I usually work on a series together, but usually in sequence. I start on one and work sort of down the line like a kind of production line.' Yves-Alain Bois succinctly summarised this minimalist propensity to privilege labour over what art has traditionally asked it to do when he said of Ryman: 'Ask him *why*, he'll always answer *how*'. But Ryman's materialism only takes you so far in heuristically parsing the works themselves. The results leave an aesthetic excess unassimilable to the inventory and resistant to reproduction. Look at the highest-resolution reproductions of his work and all you see are similar white squares on the bigger white squares of gallery walls. We are drawn in by the promise of actuarial legibility only to be confronted by an experience that exceeds the piecemeal procedural that the process narrative promises. Photography proves unable to render legible art that takes the legibility of the photograph as its production standard.

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Behind the documentary mode of production lurks the readymade: the documentary art object to rival the photograph, and the outcome of Duchamp abandoning his ambition to become a modernist painter. This was painting's submission to photography, a contingent surrogate for its reproducibility according to the model of mass-produced commodities. If aesthetic value could be reduced to the transferable sign that photography makes of the artwork it reproduces, then the work could be any object we decide to see through the lens. Hence the simultaneous defeat and promise of Duchamp's revolutionary gesture. De Duve's documentary mode corresponds to a commodity's use value (value according to use), the aesthetic mode to its exchange value (relatively arbitrary, acquired on the market), a distinction that renders painting – unequivocally aesthetic – as the default art commodity, the market's patsy. Among the first generation of abstract expressionist artists (all of whom were high-mindedly predisposed to ignore the onset of mass image culture, and the Pop Art that responded to it), Philip Guston cynically corroborated these assumptions: 'Every time I see an abstract painting now I smell mink coats'; and at a time – 1969, just prior to transitioning into his later figurative period, with its rag-bag of disposable, interchangeable imagery – when he would still have been seen as an abstract painter.

Consider how often postmodern painters, who, like Ryman, have sought to objectify their processes – Günther Förg or Ian McKeever, for example – have also used photography to challenge painting to define itself, not in the Greenbergian sense of prioritising what is essential to it, but to negatively isolate properties of the medium that resist being reduced to the virtual form of the production inventory. The emphasis is empirical, exposing the blindness of phenomenological materialism to what lies outside its scope.

In his 'Hartgrove Paintings', 1992–94, McKeever discarded the photographic elements he had integrated into work of the 1980s and began to deconstruct the application of paint, which works that preceded them had mystified by mixing oil- and water-based materials that react unpredictably to one another, defying analysis. Veils of semi-translucent acrylic, of fluctuating width, were drawn across canvas. One can track the superimposition of layers – each path consolidating a previous one's opacity – without being able to trace the order or direction in which they were applied. The compositional structure forms a metaphor for the act that produced it, threading in and out of an illusion of expanding depth and extending time. Analogy outstrips trace: the paths were painted using makeshift newspaper stencils to frustrate the literalness of a link between their figurative directionality and the artist's application. Vittoria Colaizzi's comment on Ryman – 'each stroke is a record of its application' – might also seem to apply here, but it doesn't quite, nor does it fully comprehend Ryman's painting, which is as much a representation of his mark-making as a trace of it. Process separates out from intention in a medium in which that distinction requires guile to realise, and then can only be figurative. The artist suppresses the trace of his intention just as, in turn, the forms it produces relinquish their ability to claim him as their producer. Paradoxically, a structuralistic emphasis creates an essence of figurative painting's ability to generate spatial illusionism, but without the representation to hang it on. Fittingly, in 2010, these works were exhibited alongside a set of black-
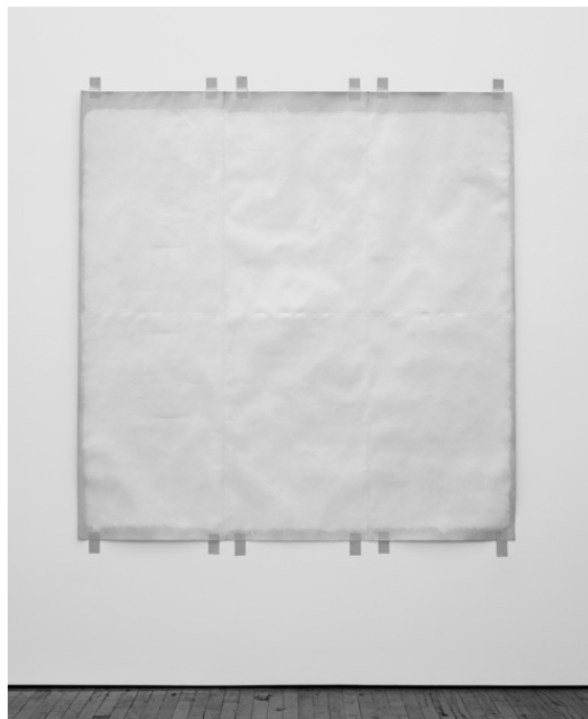
Robert Ryman, *Medway*, c1968

and-white analogue photographs, the first sign of a return of photography to McKeever's practice two decades after it was set aside.

Niele Toroni inverts this relation between intention and process. Since the 1950s he has been making the same mark with the same sized brush, leaving the same distance between strokes arranged in the same quincunx formation on a range of supports (newspaper, gallery walls, sometimes straying out into the street to polka-dot bricks and adverts). If the idiom would seem to correspond to Daniel Buren's rendering of painting as a transplantable, reproducible decor feature, open to being hired out, Toroni's marks are his, from which the limitations of his process, had it been as transferable as it seems, may be inferred. Whereas McKeever depersonalises the application of a subjectively improvised compositional structure, Toroni conforms to a strictly determined mass-production template, but charges the marks forming it with the direct trace of his gestures. The contingent features of the supports – a daily broadsheet, how a gallery wall was painted, or the cut of the interior of which that wall was a part – contrast with the relative uniformity of the strokes applied to them, only for that dichotomy to be reversed on scrutiny: the supports are generic, the marks individual.

When we weigh up the 'non-art' mark, it is only non-artistic in inverted commas, given that it – or the desire for it – appears in a context in which Duchamp demonstrated that such a mark could be art as much as one intended as such. Like the accidental mark or gesture to which Francis Bacon aspired ('In my case all painting ... is an accident ... I don't in fact know very often what the paint will do, and it does many things which are very much better than I could make it do.') and Duchamp exploited with studied irony in his *Three Standard Stoppages*, 1913–14, the non-art value of a mark that is part of an artwork is figurative. How accidental is a brushstroke subsequently claimed as consistent with the artist's intentions; or how

non-artistic when it was applied to produce an artwork? In seeking to forego intention at the production stage, an artist may be aiming for a state of unselfconsciousness, which evades the filters of habit. Guston proposed an analogy of the difference between listening to 'someone talk when you knew he was only telling you a story and your mind wandered' and 'really' listening 'when they are not hearing themselves tell the story'. Jasper Johns implied that intention confines experience: 'I think a painting should include more experience than simply intended statement.'

Förg stress-tested these distinctions. His allusions to the metaphysical abstraction of Barnett Newman or Piet Mondrian claim a transcendental reach that could only be failed by his reduction of those models to post-industrial materialism. In setting himself up to fall short, he exposed the shortcomings of the documentary mode. In the 1980s and 1990s, he painted geometric sections of lead panels, apparently intending to cover their surfaces as efficiently and expeditiously as possible, as a decorator would roller emulsion onto a wall. That the prerogative appears to be an *economising* of time, energy and materials – the clinching parameters of mass production – pre-empts the conversion of the results into commodities. The hypothetical decorator would probably have tried to pretty-up the job, a desire Förg avoids, although he is unable to prevent that avoidance becoming an aesthetic itself. 'I never correct myself,' he claimed; but how realistic is that purpose – or lack of it – within the tangle of assertion and reservation that characterises even the most un-self-censoring 'making by hand'? One can speculate that Bacon and Förg's drinking problems were linked to their need to subvert their own facility. Bacon

confessed to using drugs and drink while painting to help him 'be a bit freer'.

Förg's matter-of-fact handling, applied to the slab-like presence of the metal support, conforms to the disillusionment of minimalist process, but as if according to a Kantian model for which art would be only negatively implied, as a transcendental potential, by a materialist mode of production to which it is inaccessible. Instead of this potential consisting – as for Immanuel Kant – of entities ultimately unknowable or unprovable to our rational faculties, it would be what remains unrepresentable to all *but* us, and our ability to project beyond materials and the processes which utilise them. A camera reduces Förg's squares and rectangles to colourful decor, puzzle designs exchangeable as pixels.

For a group exhibition in São Paulo last autumn, Iulia Nistor commissioned the production of a 'non-art' surface as a foil for art objects neither produced nor commissioned by her. This was among a series of works she calls 'interventions', which involve the modification of art's settings. Absent from an exhibition's list of works, and without formal titles, they function as ambiguous elements in the hierarchy of artistic value, prompting us to question how we distinguish between the givens of an art occasion and its intended substance. Whereas Duchamp let art's context frame non-art objects as art, Nistor's modifications are anti-readymades, in that they test a spectator's readiness to assume that what looks like decor has no artistic role.

On this occasion, a decorator was employed to plaster a gallery wall using a standard procedure by which drywall paste is applied with a toothed

Iulia Nistor, *[a wall left in a provisional state, art works placed on it]*, 2023, plaster applied with a notched trowel, executed by Clécio Prado da Silva, artworks by Amadeo Lorenzato, Hana Miletić and Mario García Torres, installation view, Mendes Wood DM, Sao Paulo

Jon Rafman, *378 Texas 343 Loop, Austin, Texas, United States*, 2013

Jon Rafman, *LA-27, Creole, Louisiana, USA*, 2020

trowel, in interlocking sweeps, to create a combed ground onto which tiles are affixed. This surface was left bare, however, and used as a ground on which to hang art: paintings by Amadeo Lorenzato and Mario Garcia Torres, and a sculpture by Hana Miletić. By delegating painting to a decorator, and concealing it under the function of a support for objects that were unequivocally intended as art, the plastering assumed a liminal status: a 'non-art' layer of process between art work (the paintings/sculpture) and art setting (the gallery). Nistor has described the plasterer's work as consisting of 'unintentional gestures', which could only be achieved if applied by 'someone who did not know that the result would be visible, or that it would be an artwork'. But, of course, the plasterer brought an intention to the job – to prepare the wall for the appli-cation of tiles – albeit an intention lacking the aesthetic dimension that distinguishes art-making from con-struction work. If the subject (the plasterer) remained, artistic subjectivity was voided. The gallery context elicited resemblances to gestural painting from the trowel's sweeps – Lichtenstein's comic-style renderings of Ab-Ex brushwork or Jackson Pollock's tangled paint skeins – woven into a pulsating visual field (the wall to which the plaster was applied being of a comparable size, unlike the easel-scale paintings hung on it). However, the superimposed paintings and sculpture appeared, in contrast, as concentrated compounds of aesthetic decision-making, obscuring the decorator's work with their self-proclaiming traces of expressive subjectivity. Förg's method – one coat of colour and done – aims for a similar effect, but because he was making paintings, and making them himself, it was re-tooled as aesthetic, but by the back door as it were. Nistor's intervention recalls Förg's wall paintings. Gallery walls were painted in monochrome colours he would not have applied himself, sometimes serving as grounds on which his own photographs and paint-ings were hung.

Bois sees Ryman's objectification of his process as forsaking the imperatives of modernist painting – in the Greenbergian sense of a progressive refinement of medium-specificity – in favour of structuralist deconstruction. This shift from aesthetics to mechanics is associated with photography: 'Ryman produces a kind of dissolution of the relationship between the trace and its organic referent. The body of the artist moves towards the condition of photography.' Rather than supplanting medium-specificity with deconstruction, Nistor's intervention relativistically combined these modes, revealing how objectified process, situated within an art setting, can be taken for what Bois

saw it as superseding: an emphasis on the honing of painting's essential properties. From this vantage, formalism and Minimalism – inveterate opposites – turn out to be two sides of the same coin. The plas-tered wall appeared as both an example of painting's quintessential dynamics and nothing but the humble stuff that accommodates its display.

Ryman's assimilation of the devices – metal fasten-ers, masking tape – that attach his painting to the walls into their aesthetic order is consistent with the equivocal status of Nistor's intervention. These forms look both ways, qualifying the art they support, or foil as divisible compounds of material and process, while subsuming the gallery wall, and the space to which it belongs, into the aesthetics of areas of artistically applied paint which hang on or within it. The like-nesses between figure and foil set the stage for a meditation on their differences. Apparently tasked with defining art's limits, they imply the impossibility of doing just that.

Ryman claimed that, 'usually paintings, if they're pictures, hang invisibly on a wall, because we're not interested in that. It's the image we're looking at in the confined space [...] My paintings don't really exist unless they're on the wall as part of the wall, as part of the room.' Paintings, here, are by default 'images' – a photographic term – which must separate out from their setting for their illusion to take effect. This condition is distinguished from that of his own works, which are to be seen as part of the spaces and structures they inhabit. Manifested by the fasteners, the liminal threshold – here remaining open to all it excludes – does not hold. The trace of artistic inten-tion is exposed to the porousness of its relation to non-artistic process. The interface suggests that even if every part of an artwork's narrative of its production is exhaustively contingent upon every other, its self-referentiality cannot be self-enclosed. If the work is continuous with the fasteners that attach it to the wall, it may also be continuous with everything beyond and around it, as Toroni intimated by extending the pattern of his marks out into the street. Its discontinuity, as art, with that wider context, cannot be taken as a given. The fasteners conform in order to transform, conferring on the paintings the power to elude not only a setting that their constitution implies is banally identical to it but also the process that produced them, even the subjectivity behind the intentions that process was designed to circumvent, as if paintings were magic carpets, hiding in plain sight.

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