

“A thing is a hole in a thing it is not.”

- Carl Andre

Carl Andre's terse statement telegraphs how the meaning of his sculpture is as determined by what surrounds it, as by what comprises it. Indeed, one could say that any artwork is always inevitably understood via the lens established by the relationship between the two. Implied is the impossibility of an artwork ever achieving a pure state of autonomy. Andre thus draws our attention to how a work of art is always to some degree perceived in relation to the place where it is displayed, even if the work's site is that of the supposedly neutral white cube gallery. A mutually reciprocal relation, the one determines how we experience the other, and vice versa. For example, that purported neutrality highlights the coarse materiality of Andre's bricks and lead squares, while in turn the brute physicality of Andre's work makes visible the spatial envelope around it, underscoring its role as an institutional structure that bestows art status on what is displayed within it.

Matthew Feyld's work is a comment on, and extension of, this notion within the purview of painting. Treated as a concrete, yet still imaginary space, in Feyld's hands the physically articulated surface of a painting becomes a place to articulate, abstractly, certain material relationships. In its most developed expression in his work, this is explored through the seemingly simple, but ultimately complex, dialogue between the dot and the field that contains it.

Feyld's earlier work included installations of small monochrome canvases. Not unlike Robert Barry in the mid 1960s, he dispersed these to the perimeter of the walls on which they were hung, mapping the outline of the architecture. Confronted by the well populated history of monochrome painting, in his work Feyld was no doubt drawn to differentiate his singular color fields in some way that expanded the possibilities of the mode without contradicting the conviction he shared with many of those artists: that a painting should operate as a special kind of object that activates, both optically and haptically, the space in which it is installed.

Feyld's next step was to internalize this investigation of the relationship between a geometric unit and its surrounding space within a singular painted field. He did this via the dashes that started to appear along the periphery of his paintings, visually activating their perimeter much as his monochrome canvases had that of the rooms in which they were installed. They also push the relationship a step further, by articulating the physical boundary between painted and actual space. This gives the work an open-ended, imaginative dimension that is absent from the more purely conceptual and architectural valences of the preceding work.

With time the dashes evolved into dots. At first they also appeared along the edges of the canvas, but eventually migrated to its center. This format has become the primary, if not the exclusive, component of Feyld's artistic vocabulary. From there Feyld has played with this basic unit: permuting, dividing, and multiplying it. Each canvas is discrete, but also has the potential to be deployed in a modular fashion, and thus expanded serially through the addition of similar canvases. For example, in this exhibition Feyld is debuting new multi-panel works made up of horizontal bar canvases, each punctuated by a single dot. The dimensions of these paintings are based on those of his square ones. For example, a twenty-four-inch square becomes eight three-by-twenty-four-inch panels.

It is important to note that, seen in person, Feyld's work is not flat, meaning thinly painted and consequently graphic in effect. Instead, the paintings are densely layered, and further, the dot(s) and the field are materially distinct from one another. For the dot, which we likely interpret as a subsequent gesture enacted upon a ground prepared before, is in fact the cultivated residue of an earlier stage in the building up of the final color field. Because Feyld layers different hues so as to arrive at a dense, definitive color this is quite literally a remnant of an earlier

moment in the work's life. Further, the two parts of the painting are distinguished materially by consisting of (nearly imperceptibly) different levels of paint accretion. They are thus the same, materially, and yet utterly different, visually. This is the kind of simultaneity of presence and absence that Carl Andre is also speaking about in the epigraph, and which is essential to any art object's underlying ontology as a physical presence in a space, and yet also as something that is underwritten (and thus to some degree always overwritten) by the qualities of the space in which it is exhibited—no matter how “neutral” it purports to be.

This means that our perception of a given painting is determined by the relationship between the dot and the field, but also by the fact that this relationship is further inflected by the varying density between these two essential components of the work. This distinction adds a haptic valence to the optical one presented by Feyld's signature composition. From afar we witness a dot in relationship to a field, while from up close we examine a simultaneous presence and absence within that field. In Andre's terms, this is the “hole in a thing it is not.” I mean this in the sense that we evaluate the dot both as an accretion of paint, and also as a visible element—and arguably the central one of the painting—and in that sense most definitely a presence. At the same time we also perceive the difference between the level of the dot and that of the field around it, making it seem as if the dot is physically bored into the field, and thus the result of a certain removal, something emphasized in many paintings by its colorless whiteness in distinction to the rich pigmentation all around.

As I have already discussed, the paintings are made up of multiple colors, layered on top of one another. In his tondos Feyld essentially blows up the dot and one can see this level of coloristic complexity, which then becomes the subject of the work, determining the experience one has of it. While not initially self-evident, this logic is one born from that of the digital screen and the way we have transposed our tactile impulses for exploring the physicality of objects by handling and inspecting them into the zooming feature of the touchscreen, which promises infinite degrees of blow up not possible to the naked eye. Comparing the diminutive size of the dots in Feyld's canvases to that of these tondos reveals a logic of sizing up only possible in a digital age. Further, they make the wall on which they are hung into the canvas of sorts, reinterpreting and continuing the spatial investigation present in the earlier wall-spanning installations of small monochrome canvases.

A number of artists in the 1960s and 1970s, including Andre, pursued a single road in their work, convinced of the intellectual and formal possibilities of articulating one complex idea over an extended period of time, and via an ongoing, clearly related chain of controlled permutations. These included On Kawara's date paintings, Hanne Darboven's esoteric writings and calculations, and Alan Charlton's shaped grey monochrome paintings. In recent years, amid the continued dominance of pluralism, this notion has not been very popular among younger artists, but Feyld's ongoing exploration of the many possibilities of his seemingly strict dot format demonstrates that the approach retains potency. We can look forward to reaping the philosophical and aesthetic rewards of the continued measured evolution of Feyld's work in the years to come.

- Alex Bacon, New York, January 2019