



“The Term ‘Colour Field’: A Reframing.” In David Moos, ed. *The Shape of Colour: Excursions in Colour Field Art 1950-2005*, pp. 18-23. Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2005.

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The term *colour field*¹ began to be employed in 1965 for large-scale stain paintings by Helen Frankenthaler, Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski and Larry Poons, among others. Over time it has been misaligned with *post painterly abstraction*, which many erroneously regard as a more oblique appellation for it. Stain painting referred primarily to the technique of thinning oil paints and recently developed acrylics to the consistency of watercolour before applying them to unsized and unprimed canvas so that they could be absorbed into its weave. Less descriptive and far more strategic in its approach, post painterly abstraction was the self-conscious creation of the then pre-eminent American critic Clement Greenberg, who had become associated with stain painting in the early 1950s when he began working closely with Frankenthaler, Louis and Noland. Although the designation *colour field* has so often been associated with both stain painting and Greenberg that unsuspecting critics and historians have often ascribed it to him and associated it with his post painterly abstraction, he in fact was inimical to its use and only employed it on rare occasions in the late 1960s.²

In the early 1960s Greenberg was invited by the recently established Los Angeles County Museum and its affiliate from its earlier incarnation, the Contemporary Art Council, to create a major exhibition that would provide an overview of recent developments in painting. His impressive 1964 exhibition, which he titled *Post Painterly Abstraction*, included ninety-three paintings by thirty-one artists, many large in scale. Greenberg chose the rubric *post painterly abstraction* for work that included stain painting but also assessed a number of other trends that "definitely do not constitute a school, much less a fashion."³ Although the group of artists in his exhibition was joined in rebelling against the excesses of second- and third-generation Abstract Expressionism, then known as the Tenth Street School because artists' studios as well as the galleries showing this work tended to be congregated in this part of Greenwich Village, Greenberg united them by listing common stylistic preferences. These included "favouring openness or

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clarity" in their work, preferring high-keyed and lucid colours that "stress contrasts of pure hue rather than contrasts of light and dark," avoiding the use of "thick paint and tactile effects," seeking ways to realize "relatively anonymous [forms of] execution," and preferring "trued and faired edges simply because they call less attention to themselves as drawing...[and] get out of the way of colour."⁴ Although these qualities could all be attributed to the art that was later called *colour field painting*, Greenberg at this critical juncture of his career, wished to look at recent developments in such broad terms that he linked stain painters and a motley group of artists such as Paul Feeley, Al Held, Alfred Jensen, Nicholas Krushenick, Ludwig Sander and Frank Stella under the post painterly abstraction rubric.⁵

Greenberg evidently believed that these various approaches represented historically as important a post-mortem on the excesses of the Tenth Street School as Post-Impressionism had with its namesake precursor, Impressionism. The fact that *Post-Impressionism* is a term coined by Greenberg's acknowledged model, the British critic and Bloomsbury associate Roger Fry, who in 1910 assembled in London the first exhibition of Post-Impressionist painting, strongly suggests this term's role as an antecedent for Greenberg's new designation.⁶ No doubt Greenberg was knowingly creating a counterpoint to Fry's Post-Impressionism in the form of post painterly abstraction – albeit without a hyphen – and thereby was implying a comparison between the two schools and between the two men, thus imbuing his own approach with a genealogy and pedigree. Similar to Fry's term, which configured a diverse group of artists into a major developmental trend, Greenberg's post painterly abstraction subsumes under its purview artists who might otherwise be regarded as stain painters, expressionists, abstract pop artists, and proto-minimalists. Unlike Fry's stylistic category, which was immediately accepted because his exhibition made an indelible impact on the general public, Greenberg's loose affiliation of artists has remained the subject of specialized art historical investigations.

The year after *Post Painterly Abstraction* opened, Michael Fried, then an art history graduate student and a well-known critic who had first come into contact with Greenberg in the late 1950s, curated the exhibition *Three American Painters: Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Frank Stella* for the Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University. In his catalogue essay Fried provided a rationale for the type of art that he referred to as *coloured fields*.⁷ He sought to establish a critical and historical framework for understanding the fields of coloured canvas, which in his estimation were first created by Jackson Pollock and Barnett Newman and later refined by Noland, Olitski and Stella. Fried's essay, which was then being closely followed by members of the contemporary art world, served as a touchstone for a number of critics, who soon thereafter completed the process of naming this new art by condensing its rubric *coloured field* to *colour field*.

In his ambitious essay Fried establishes the basic parameters for looking at the work of Noland, Olitski and Stella. He undertakes a radical rereading of Abstract Expressionism so that its gestural aspects are suppressed in favour of a new understanding of this art in terms of both Pollock's and Newman's fields that subsequently become the foundation for the paintings in the exhibition. Fried's interpretation of the situation is an assertion of partial independence from Greenberg, who had reversed his position on Pollock in 1955 in his essay "'American-Type' Painting" to the minor strategic position of late Cubist. In this same essay, Greenberg intended to score a major triumph by singling out the new leadership of Newman for his creation of fields and then connect him with similar concerns evidenced by the paintings of Clyfford Still and Mark Rothko. Because of the ability of Newman's art to move beyond the scale of easel productions and attain a special type of new and open composition, Greenberg concludes:

What is destroyed [by Newman's art] is the cubist, and immemorial, notion and feeling of the picture edge as a confine; with Newman, the picture edge is repeated inside, and *makes* the picture, instead of merely being *echoed*. The limiting edges of Newman's larger canvases, we now

discover, act just like the lines inside them: to divide but not to separate or enclose or bound; to delimit, but not limit. The paintings do not merge with surrounding space; they preserve – when they succeed – their integrity and separate unity.... Newman's paintings have to be called, finally, "fields."⁸

Reluctant to accept Greenberg's placing of Pollock in a conservative and subsidiary position, Fried enlarged on the artist's contribution by re-conceiving the classic drip paintings of the late 1940s as field paintings on a par with Newman's.

A source for Fried's innovative thinking may have been the 1961 introduction by British art critic Lawrence Alloway for a Pollock exhibition at the Marlborough Gallery, London. In his essay Alloway provides a rereading of Pollock's drip paintings as holistic fields. "By covering the surface with branching, flowing, crossing, exploding marks," Alloway notes, "Pollock made a painting into a highly responsive field."⁹ Two years later when he was working as a curator at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, Alloway wrote an essay for a Morris Louis memorial exhibition and advanced this position when he retooled Greenberg's descriptive term *field* into the category field painters, and then added Louis to the group. Alloway makes the following connections:

The whole area of the completed painting [by Louis] is not reducible to smaller components that can be equated either with signs for known objects or with personal handwriting. As in Still, Newman, and Rothko, the painting must be seen as a single field, a field not devoid of incident but, equally, not reducible to a scale of different sized forms and marks.¹⁰

Pollock's "personal handwriting" in his drip paintings is the leitmotif that connects Fried's thinking with Alloway's. Indeed, Fried, too, wishes to rethink this Abstract Expressionist's use of line so that it will no longer be considered descriptive, delimiting and hierarchical. Instead he conceives of it as "a kind of space-filling curve of immense

complexity, responsive to the slightest impulse of the painter and responsive as well, one almost feels, to one's own act of looking."¹¹

Looking, which takes the form of radical opticality in Fried's writing, is considered the real goal of this painting. In order to theorize the type of opticality needed for this art, Fried literalizes the concept of French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty regarding the see-er who affects what is seen. In addition to reducing Merleau-Ponty's embodied perception to a set of eyes, Fried also employs this philosopher's approach to reinforce the primacy of *Pollock's* vision, which viewers are in turn induced to use as a pair of particularly inviting spectacles by looking at the drip painter's works as if they represented *his* specific way of looking. "Pollock's field," according to Fried, "is optical because it addresses itself to eyesight alone. The materiality of his pigment is rendered sheerly visual, and the result is a new kind of space – if it still makes sense to call it space – in which conditions of seeing prevail rather than one in which objects exist, flat shapes are juxtaposed, or physical events transpire."¹² Not only does Fried consider this vision to be disembodied, but he also regards it as a dynamic field that gains authority through allusion to quantum mechanics and theories of energy. Describing Pollock's drips in this manner, Fried writes: "Line, in these paintings, is entirely transparent both to the nonillusionistic space it inhabits but does not structure and to the pulses of something like pure, disembodied energy that seems to move without resistance through them."¹³

The year after Fried's essay, Alloway comprehended the ramifications of this rereading that transformed Pollock's drips into holistic fields of activity when he wrote:

His large drip paintings of 1950 have been, as it were, de-gesturized by a few years passing: what once looked like impulsive directional tracks have condensed into unitary fields of colour. This all-over distribution of emphasis and the consequent pulverizing of hierarchic form relates Pollock to Still, Newman, and Rothko.¹⁴

Even though Fried makes this connection, he does so with an important proviso that ultimately has an effect on the initial critical view of colour field art. After looking at Pollock's all-over, yet pulsating ensembles as fields, Fried believes that it is impossible to view Newman's work as simply large expanses of colour, that such reframing has consequences for how Newman's work is understood. He regards Newman's work and that of the other Abstract Expressionist field painters as needing to be reassessed in terms of the traces of painting activity that remain in their completed works. Citing passages from his mentor's 1962 essay, "After Abstract Expressionism," he notes:

Clement Greenberg has written, "the ultimate effect sought is one of an almost literal openness that embraces and absorbs colour in the act of being created by it." Moreover, the coloured field "has...to be uniform in hue, with only the subtlest variations of value if any at all, and spread over an absolutely, not merely relatively, large area. Size guarantees the purity as well as the intensity needed to suggest indeterminate space: more blue simply being bluer than less blue."¹⁵

Once he advances the term *coloured field*, Fried invokes it again several times to reinforce the opticality and energy of Newman's subtle painted inflections of modulated colour so that viewers might see them as dynamic fields rather than mere decorative surfaces. In order to drive home the relevancy of these energized fields for Noland's, Olitski's, and Stella's work, Fried concludes his introduction with the observation that "Newman stands alongside Pollock as one of the two most seminal figures of Abstract Expressionism, without whom much of the finest modernist painting of the past ten or twelve years would have been inconceivable."¹⁶

Only two months after the publication of Fried's catalogue, Alloway wrote a piece on Newman for *Artforum* in which he solidified the physics metaphor that Fried had intuited in his description of Pollock and implied in his discussion of Newman:

His [Newman's] field is holistic, but phased, like, say, the phases of the moon, parts of one movement. The exhilarating or ominous all-over colour of Newman's paintings is not simply sensational. On the contrary, the colour embodies an act of order. Such a continuous plane like a magnetic or electric field in physics, contains all potential force within it and it is important to bear in mind that an order of this nature is implicit in Newman's art. He presents the field and its phased modification, both as a finite visual image and as a statement of continuous potential order.¹⁷

Alloway's reference to "a magnetic or electric field in physics" conjures associations of forces at work in Newman's painting that may be known more by their effects than their appearance. Operating in this somewhat covert manner, they transform field painting into a highly subtle, yet ongoing dynamic of forces. This understanding of the role that the physics correlation plays in the critical program giving rise to the term *colour field* has unfortunately been overlooked in retrospective views of this work that emphasize its decorative appeal and emphasis on opticality.

The physics analogy was more fully explicated in John Coplans' essay on Larry Poons, which was published in the same *Artforum* issue as Alloway's piece. As *Artforum's* editor-at-large Coplans might have had a slight advantage over Alloway, since he would have had an opportunity to read his article on Newman before it was published, and therefore could have used it to elaborate the physics comparison in his Poons essay. Poons, who begins each of his dot paintings as a stain painter, manages, according to Coplans, "to manipulate and balance two mutually exclusive approaches – the precisely ordered and the haphazard" – also ascribed to Newman and Pollock by Fried. Apropos the physics/energy connection, Coplans points out that "the mode in which these phenomena simultaneously contradict one another inaugurates a complex field of wave assaults – of disruptions and reformulations in the eye of the observer.... This double-opposed organization allows for an extraordinary variety of cyclical rhythms as well as

spatial activities which add, in no small degree, to the tension of this work."¹⁸ Although Coplans cites Pollock, he finds Newman's work crucial for Poons's dot paintings. "The solid colour field," he explains, using the term that will thereafter be ratified through widespread usage, "which is the theatre of action in painting, genealogically derives from Newman."¹⁹

Coplans's essay may well represent the first time the actual term *colour field* is tied to a rationale for seeing it, involving physics and energy – an approach that no doubt was premised on Fried's *Three American Painters*. Coplans may have been inspired to come up with this term and a rationale for it based on an analogy with physics because of his prior knowledge of Charles Mattox's *Rotating Colour Fields*, a kinetic work that he had discussed two-and-a-half years earlier in *Artforum*.²⁰ His condensation of *coloured fields* into *colour field* constitutes a small, yet crucial step in the development of this stylistic designation. At the time of its coinage, colour field was beginning to be employed to describe large paintings notable for their expansive areas of paint, saturated and often stained hues of relatively the same value, insistence on opticality, and energetic fields that analogize physics rather than landscape elements.

The association of the word *field* with the idea of abstract landscape painting soon gained currency because of Frankenthaler's acknowledged connections with the countryside that became more pronounced in her works of the 1960s. By the end of 1965 in an *Artforum* essay by Sidney Tillim and continuing in the next two years in this same magazine, such critics as Max Kozloff, Darby Bannard, E. C. Goossen, Irving Sandler, Barbara Rose and Kermit Champa all employed *colour field*.²¹ An investigation of other periodicals of the time reveals a number of instances when critics ratified this stylistic name through repeated references to it.

Despite its wide acceptance, Alloway faulted the term in 1981 in his essay, "Adolph Gottlieb and Abstract Painting." Although he continued to regard *field* as an appropriate stylistic designation and even cited one of the unabridged *Random House Dictionary's* definitions for it, Alloway firmly rejected the term *colour field*. He assumes that the term had become tainted by its association with a new critical approach to painting on a par with Greenberg's modernism in which all possible meaning must inhere in a given work's articulation of its forms, shapes and colours. Linked with an intrinsic rather than an extrinsic approach to art, colour field painting, according to Alloway, "over-emphasizes the esthetic and undervalues the semantic potential of the style."²² Referring to statements made by Gottlieb, Rothko and Newman in the early 1940s, he reminds his readers of these artists' long-standing preoccupations with meaning and their unwillingness to relinquish it in the interest of achieving mere decorative effects. By this time colour field's association with physics, which Alloway himself had played a supporting role in underscoring, was forgotten. The term itself was in danger of being written off as a merely formal preoccupation, with an over emphasis on decorative effects. Alloway's harsh condemnation and its timing denotes the nadir to which this stylistic category had sunk after being extolled to such great heights in the mid-1960s, when it was credited with culminating aspects of the modernist tradition in the work of Frankenthaler, Louis, Noland, Olitski and Stella, among others. Although Alloway's censure testifies to the vagaries of history, it also indicates how relative and misplaced critical evaluations can become when later connotations move beyond the historical denotation for a given artistic expression and the original critical nexus in which an artistic term such as *colour field* achieved its most cogent meaning.

1. The author gratefully acknowledges the helpful and assiduous support provided by Nicole De Armendi, Thalimer Research Assistant, Virginia Commonwealth University. Of course, *colour field* was spelled with the American spelling *color* rather than the Canadian spelling. To be consistent with the rest of the catalogue, a decision was made to use Canadian spelling.
2. In the section on "Greenberg's Modernism" in the recently published *Art Since 1900*, the following conclusion regarding these terms is reached: "Thus the 'exclusively visual' terms of what he [Greenberg] would now call 'post painterly abstraction' and also 'colour field painting' were both new and American." Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yves-Alain Bois, and Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, *Art Since 1900* vol. 2 (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2004): 443. According to Janice Van Horne, who was married to Greenberg, "Clem never liked the term 'colour field.' And whose work would it fit? Louis? Noland? Frankenthaler?" in telephone conversation with author, 24 February 2005.
 In John O'Brian's edition of Greenberg's collected writings, there is a reference from 1952 to the "one or two (sometimes more) rectilinear and parallel bands of colour against a flat field." *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O'Brian, vol. 3, *Affirmations and Refusals: 1950-1956* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 103. In the 1960s Greenberg lists colour field together with fifteen other stylistic trends to underscore the basic similarity of art underneath its apparent far-flung heterogeneity in a lecture given at the University of Sydney, Australia, on 17 May 1968. *Clement Greenberg*, ed. John O'Brian, vol. 4, *Modernism with a Vengeance: 1957-1969*, 294.
3. Greenberg, *Post Painterly Abstraction*, n. p. This and the following assessments come from Greenberg's brief essay.
4. *Ibid.*
5. The stain painters in the exhibition included, among others, Jack Bush, Thomas Downing, Friedel Dzubas, Helen Frankenthaler, Kenneth Lochhead, Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland and Jules Olitski.
6. Lawrence Alloway arrived at this same conclusion in 1966. Lawrence Alloway, "Systemic Painting" in *Topics in American Art since 1945* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc., 1975).
7. Michael Fried, "Three American Painters: Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Frank Stella" in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 213-65. The exhibition was shown at the Fogg Art Museum in Cambridge, Massachusetts from 21 April to 30 May 1965, and the text was reprinted in a catalogue with the same title and a different group of paintings for an exhibition at the Pasadena Art Museum from 6 July to 3 August 1965.
8. *Ibid.*, 226-27.
9. Lawrence Alloway, *Jackson Pollock* (London: Marlborough Fine Art Ltd., 1961), n. p.
10. Lawrence Alloway, "Notes on Morris Louis," in *Morris Louis 1912-1962: Memorial Exhibition Paintings from 1954 to 1960* (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1963), n. p.
11. Fried, "Three American Painters," 223.
12. *Ibid.*, 224-25.
13. *Ibid.*, 224. This observation probably was the basis for the title of B. H. Friedman's biography *Jackson Pollock: Energy Made Visible* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972). Friedman's book was promoted by the Book of the Month Club, and this endorsement helped to ensure the widespread awareness and acceptance of this analogy.
14. Alloway, "Systemic Painting," 77.
15. Fried, "Three American Painters," 251-52.
16. *Ibid.*, 234.
17. Lawrence Alloway, "Barnett Newman," *Artforum* 3 (June 1965): 20.
18. John Coplans, "Larry Poons," *Artforum* 3 (June 1965): 34.
19. *Ibid.*
20. While one of the earliest references to *colour fields* may be Charles Mattox's kinetic *Rotating Color Fields* - no doubt other candidates in time may surface. Mattox's work appears to be a serendipitous reference that had no effect on critical discourse. His work is reproduced in *Artforum* and described by John Coplans. John Coplans, "Charles Mattox: Three Machines," *Artforum* 1, no. 7 (n. d.): 32.
21. Sidney Tillim, "Further Observations on the Pop Phenomenon," *Artforum* 4 (November 1965): 17; Max Kozloff, "The Inert and the Frenetic," *Artforum* 4 (March 1966): 42; Darby Bannard, "Color, Paint and Present-Day Painting," *Artforum* 4 (April 1966): 35; E. C. Goossen, "Distillation: A Joint Showing," *Artforum* 5 (November 1966): 33; Irving Sandler, "Reinhardt: The Purist Backlash," *Artforum* 5 (December 1966): 41; Barbara Rose, "The Sculpture of Ellsworth Kelly," *Artforum* 5 (June 1967): 51; and Kermit Champa, "Albert Stadler: New Paintings," *Artforum* 6 (September 1967): 30.
22. Lawrence Alloway, "Adolph Gottlieb and Abstract Painting," in Sanford Hirsch and Mary Davis MacNaughton, *Adolph Gottlieb: A Retrospective* (New York: Arts Publisher, Inc., in association with the Adolph and Ester Gottlieb Foundation, Inc., 1981), 62, n. 5.