

Practices of Abstract Art:

*Between Anarchism
and Appropriation*

Edited by

Isabel Wünsche and Wiebke Gronemeyer

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CHAPTER SIX

CONGDON'S ABSTRACT ART
AND THE METAPHYSICS OF IMMEDIACY

NIEVES ACEDO

The historical arc of abstract art from Wassily Kandinsky's earliest abstract watercolors to Robert Ryman's monochromes and other more contemporary guises has been studied from a host of viewpoints. It is a subject that has unleashed rivers of ink possibly due to the difficulty of interpreting abstract art or because it comes so close to conceptual art and to philosophical speculation or because it represents a break with the tradition of Western art. Over time, though, the different lines of interpretation, be they formalist or expressionist, have reached a certain consensus over the fact that, in most cases, the abandonment of figurative painting does not reflect an attempt to escape from reality, but rather a desire to represent it *better*.¹ Thus, the relationship with nature is a crucial aspect in the development of the avant-garde in general and of abstraction in particular. The access to reality or, in other words, the possibility of a metaphysics, which modern philosophy placed at the center of its interrogations, appears paradoxically to be a fundamental key to understanding modern art.

The importance of this aspect, however, has not always been made clear in the historiography. Instead, discussion has focused on the two extremes of formalist and of biographical and evolutionary studies, intent on generating what Danto has called "legitimizing narratives." These narratives have, in turn, led to the formation of a canon that excludes everything that does not conform to a given logic.

William Congdon (b. 1912 in Providence, Rhode Island, d. 1998 in Buccinasco, Milan) is one of the first artists who falls outside the

¹ Valeriano Bozal, *Los primeros diez años, 1900–1910, los orígenes del arte contemporáneo* (Madrid: Visor, 1991), 25.

boundaries set by the official canon. This makes his profoundly modern work helpful to achieve a more rounded picture of the period to which he belonged—postwar US painting—and to contrast his output with the official theories that have interpreted or “legitimated” the triumph of the New York School. The following pages set out to link Congdon’s abstract painting with a concern for metaphysics of an Aristotelian stripe. The point, though, is not that Congdon studied Aristotle and that his painting illustrates this fact, but that his painting appears naturally to dovetail with Aristotelian metaphysics.

William Congdon always saw himself as an “action painter,” to use the term originally coined by Harold Rosenberg in 1952 to describe the New York School.² Unlike the other members of his generation, however, he consciously steered clear of abstraction for over forty years. As a result, we can distinguish between a lengthy figurative period followed by an abstract period in the 1980s and 1990s.

Congdon first achieved success when he was working with the Betty Parsons Gallery between 1948 and 1967, thanks to *vedute* of Mediterranean landmarks and landscapes that he produced as a modernist heir to the tradition of the Grand Tour.³ Though this period covers a significant chunk of his career, it is not easy to find abstract paintings in his catalog, with the exception of *New York Subway* and *Bowery (Dark)* (Fig. 6.1), which he did as experiments in 1948, at the outset of his career. Though the views and landscapes that he produced once he had developed his language are deeply expressionistic, we cannot speak properly of abstraction, with the exception of a few paintings inspired by the Sahara Desert.

² Harold Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters,” *Art News*, LI, n° 7 (December 1952), in *The Tradition of the New* (New York; Horizon Press, 1959), 33–34.

³ Peggy Guggenheim, who had close ties to Congdon in Venice, wrote of the man: “William Congdon non appartiene a nessun gruppo di pittori. Congdon sta a parte. Non appartiene a nessuna scuola. Nessuno ha mai cercato di dipingere alla sua maniera prima di lui. Egli è originale quanto Turner, ma la sua concezione è diametralmente opposta a quella del pittore inglese. La conversazione di Congdon è originale quanto il suo lavoro. Egli è pieno di fantasia. La sua pittura può considerarsi strana, ma questa è la sua attrattiva.” Peggy Guggenheim, “Un pittore di Venezia: William Congdon,” *La Biennale di Venezia*, exh. cat., 1953, 28–29.

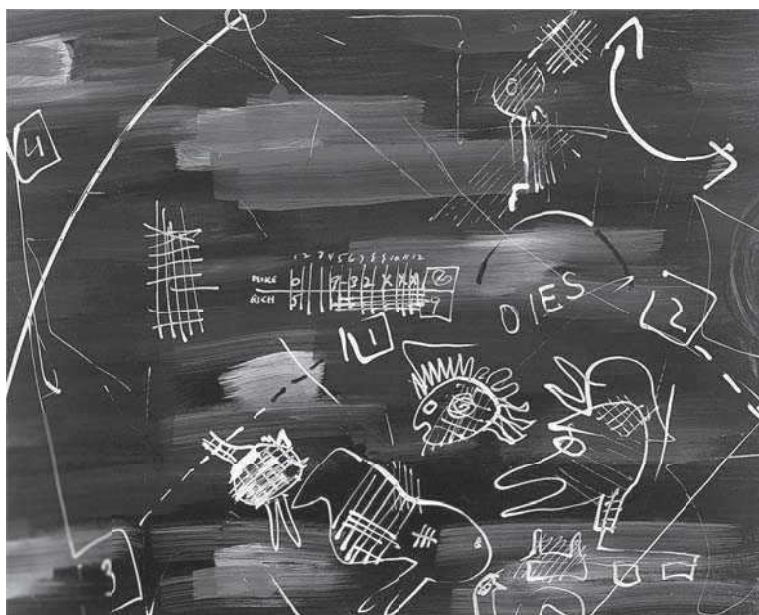


Figure 6.1. William Congdon, *Bowery (Dark)*, 1948. 20 x 25 cm. Courtesy of The William G. Congdon Foundation, Milano.

By contrast, in his final years—particularly from 1983 onwards—his explorations led him to produce paintings of a purely abstract kind. These works bring us to an aged Congdon, who was tutored in the economy of means by the technique of pastels and hampered in his gestural power by arthritis, ultimately to paint series in the nineties that teeter on the verge of monochrome.⁴ (Plate 6.1)

Focusing on this later period, we find two chief aspects marking the distinctiveness of Congdon's abstract painting. First is its untimeliness. Contemporaries of Congdon had produced their abstract work much earlier than he did, while younger artists working in abstract painting in the late eighties and nineties were always part of a highly conceptual context, remote from the modernist approaches of the former group.

⁴ Giuseppe Barbieri highlighted the year 1983 as the stylistic turning point in Congdon's painting, in "Orizzonte 1983," *Cielo é Terra* (Rimini: FIUA, 1997), 8–11. In my book on the painter, I developed the same idea in the chapter entitled "1983. El año del cambio," *Un pintor americano en Italia: William Congdon (1912–1998)* (Barañain: Eunsa, 2006), 177–189.

The second feature, which is bound up with the first, is the isolation of these pictures from the artistic milieu. In his final twenty years, Congdon led the life of a monk, though he did not actually become one. His particular desert lay in the heart of Europe, on the outskirts of Milan. His estrangement was, above all, an inner one. He no longer enjoyed the consolation of exoticism and travel, which he had pursued throughout his life. The silence and monotony of the surrounding landscape are not irrelevant to the almost monochrome abstraction mentioned earlier.

The challenge is somehow to situate this abstract work of Congdon, an artist born in 1912 who nonetheless did not produce his abstract pieces until late in the twentieth century.

One attempt to interpret the abstract painting of the twentieth century can be seen in the exhibition curated by Barbara Rose in 2004 at Madrid's Museo Reina Sofía, titled *Monochromes: From Malevich to the Present*. In the catalog for the exhibition, Vincenzo Trione proposed grouping the artists in the show according to their disparate poetics: avant-garde (constructivism, abstraction, or Dadaism), informalists, expressionists, minimalists, and analytical artists. He was unable, however, to avoid the need for a further group to cover the remaining artists, whom he lumped together under the heading "eccentric experiences." Had Congdon been part of the exhibition, he would have probably been put in this last group.

In her essay "The Meanings of Monochrome" written for the show's catalog, the American curator Barbara Rose asserted that "monochrome art has two origins: the mystical and the concrete. Its evolution in the twentieth century illustrates the divide between the spiritual quest for transcendental experience and the desire to emphasize the material presence of the object as concrete reality and not as illusion."⁵ Indeed, these two aspects come together, with presence and transcendence as personal quests rising above the imperatives of style and school. They also correspond well with the circumstances in which an artist like Congdon found himself: isolated, a master of his materials, financially independent, and dedicated to achieving a synthesis of culturally contradictory elements. As Rose says elsewhere in her essay, "the adherence to the unity and indivisibility of the monochromatic is not a characteristic of style, but a personal stance, a *Weltanschauung*, a view of the world and of the function of the work of art, often at odds with the criteria of accessibility and mass spectacle."⁶ The artist-monk resembles an alchemist, the master

⁵ Barbara Rose, "Los significados del monocromo," in *Monocromos: de Malevich al presente* (Madrid: Documenta Ciencias y Artes Visuales, 2004), 21.

⁶ Barbara Rose, "Los significados del monocromo," 22.

of an esoteric science that seeks out the ideal synthesis in order to turn matter into spirit.

My aim is to show the *Weltanschauung* or world view that accompanied Congdon on his quest. On earlier occasions, I have undertaken a detailed examination of Congdon's abstract painting⁷ and of the existential circumstances in which it was produced⁸. Here, I will advance an aesthetic definition or theory. Before designing a bespoke suit for Congdon, however, it will be a good idea to test out suits on him that were made for other artists, enquiring in each case how well they fit him.

An action painter fleeing abstraction

In 1952, Harold Rosenberg launched into his influential article on action painters with this remark:

What makes any definition of a movement in art dubious is that it never fits the deepest artists in the movement. . . . Yet without the definition something essential in those best is bound to be missed. The attempt to define is like a game in which you cannot possibly reach the goal from the starting point but can only close in on it by picking up each time from where the last play landed.⁹

As we know, before Rosenberg's introduction of the New York School, the leading critic on the scene was Clement Greenberg and his definition was fundamentally a formalist one. The chief tenet of Greenberg's way of looking at things, which is so close to the theory of the avant-garde and to the legacy of Immanuel Kant (in short, so modern), is to understand the canvas as a surface. From Kandinsky's discovery in 1910 when he first looked at one of his watercolors as an abstract picture through to the color-field painters of New York, abstract painting had worked hard, according to this interpretation, to free itself of the many symbolist or illusionist aspects that had accreted over the course of history. Two-dimensionality and purity of content became the limits drawn around the experiments in language undertaken by several generations of artists. The prerequisite was to see the picture not as a

⁷ Nieves Acedo, "William Congdon en Milán: la presencia escondida," in *William Congdon y La Revisión del Expresionismo Abstracto*, eds. Paula Lizarraga y Nieves Acedo (Barañain: Eunsa, 2010), 109–132; Acedo, *William Congdon*.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," 33–34.

window into the cosmos, but as a cosmos itself, and then as an object in a world of objects.

The touchstone of this definition, as it was applied to the abstract expressionists, is its rejection of the surrealist quest. This exclusion pushes a good number of artists out of its canon, perhaps even Jackson Pollock himself. Naturally, Congdon did not fit into this view either. As mentioned earlier, his work was that of a *vedutista*—a painter of views and landscapes—and his tradition harked back to the Grand Tourists of the romantic period. His images were those of a visionary. Nothing in Congdon's work allows us to align him with this formalist tradition. Nonetheless, he belongs to it. How could it be otherwise for an artist trained in the 1930s and avidly drawing nourishment from the cultural life of New York, deeply immersed in its reception of the European tradition? Where Congdon does not fit is in its later rationalized version, which seeks to clear away any trace of intertextuality and releases painting from its Romantic legacy, turning pure visuality into an absolute and treating Surrealism as anathema. Nor does Congdon's abstract painting, produced thirty years after he left New York, conform to this conceptual framework, because it entails no break with his poetics of the fifties, but rather is an evolution. In his Milan period, he did not start from scratch, he was not reborn, he did not shed his visionary nature.

On the same grounds, Congdon's abstract pictures do not accord with the definitions applied to understand minimalism. The narrative that leads from abstract expressionism to conceptual art has been recounted many times, following the same formalist tenets. First, it *minimizes* as far as possible the artistic content of the work of art, then it forces the work of art to make a leap to its context. The concept that fits this case is "theatricality," developed by Michael Fried in *Art and Objecthood*.¹⁰ But Congdon's painting always retains a quality of microcosm, of a window, that isolates the picture from its context by means of a frame. His pictures are never objects among other objects. It is certainly no coincidence that some of his most abstract pictures bear the title *Finestra* (or *Window*, in English).

Circling back to Rosenberg's statement above, though, the fact that Congdon always called himself an action painter does indicate some sense of kinship as regards the definition that Rosenberg put forward. As Dore Ashton says, "Rosenberg gradually took on himself the role of spokesperson for the artists who did not come under Greenberg's aegis." Against the rationalist and somewhat nationalist purism of Greenberg,

¹⁰ Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Artforum* (June 1967): 12–13.

Rosenberg put forward a definition closer to existentialism. The figurative, expressionistic, romantic, and process-based art of an artist like de Kooning is, in this sense, not far from Congdon's own art, and certainly closer than Congdon's work is to other painters much more strongly linked to him, like Clyfford Still or Mark Rothko.

As Dore Ashton herself has pointed out, literary references to Sigmund Freud and Martin Heidegger are constant after 1947; a certain kind of existential language became increasingly widespread. The following passage poses an example:

I have watched through a window a World that is fallen,
 The mating and malice of men and beasts,
 The corporate greed of quiet vegetation,
 And the homesick little obstinate sobs
 Of things thrown into being.¹¹

The distress of the decade after the war, which Auden expresses in these lines of poetry, is the same distress that appears in Congdon's views of New York at the time. According to Ashton, it was Sartre's influence that enabled the modern painter to "pursue his individuality while he worked on his canvases and still maintain a thread of hope that what he was doing would be of some value to the human race."¹² This way of thinking opened the door to an idea of "salvation through art" that was prevalent in the pages of journals like *Possibilities* and *Tiger's Eye*, which enjoyed wide circulation among the artistic community of the period.

The third issue of *Tiger's Eye*, published in March 1948, contained a short extract from Friedrich Nietzsche, distinguishing his concepts of the Dionysian and the Apollonian. In the same issue, Barnett Newman drew a parallel, relating the Apollonian tradition to Europe and the Dionysian tradition to America and arriving at the conclusion that "the artist in America is, by comparison, like a barbarian. He does not have the superfine sensibility toward the object that dominates European feeling."¹³

That Congdon shared this view of American painting and broadly of existentialist propositions is demonstrated by the following extracts, taken from his correspondence with the English collector J.H. Ede:

¹¹ W.H. Auden, *The Age of Anxiety: A Baroque Eclogue (1947)* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011) 64.

¹² Cited in Dore Ashton, *La Escuela de Nueva York, 1971* (Madrid: Cátedra, 1988), 251.

¹³ *Ibid.*

I have written an article for a new Italian magazine which maybe I mentioned to you—It is short and it may be violent, but I say that American civilization is causing such a revolution in human life that only by so completely returning to the image (with no external conscious references) as do Pollock, Pousette-Dart, Rothko etc., will we redeem the conflict in art and create out of it a new great tradition in painting. This is an over-simplification I know, but the article is short and I am stressing a direction—and I want it to be strong. . . . Oh yes, I talk a little about myself and put in one WC illustration . . . but all I said was “Congdon does not go as far as do they in abstraction because he paints the more articulated environment of Italy, but he bears all the conflict in him and weaves it in and out of the crumbling arches of the Colosseum.”¹⁴

Four years later, his writing is still in this vein:

And all this abysmal *abstraction or “life”* in America! Its plethora of things and “know-how,” and money and machines—All is commercial—original thinking and great feeling thrown out long ago in the ash bins. Such power and self-righteousness in their ignorance and their wealth. I am nearly literally sickened—.¹⁵

As these extracts show, Congdon relates abstraction to life in the United States. Indeed, he typically used the adjective “abstract” to refer to this way of life, as has been done here and elsewhere. In visual terms, his escape to Italy and the Mediterranean is precisely a flight from abstraction, which he saw as analogous to the existential crisis that hounded him. (Fig. 6.2)

Ultimately, this estrangement justifies Congdon’s membership in the group of action painters, though not because of his similarity but because of his difference. Congdon’s style is consistent with Rosenberg’s definition in which he says:

A painting that is an act is inseparable from the biography of the artist. The painting itself is a “moment” in the unadulterated mixture of his life. . . . The act-painting is of the same metaphysical substance as the artist’s existence. The new painting has broken down every distinction between art and life.¹⁶

¹⁴ Letter from William Congdon to Jim Ede, July 11, 1953.

¹⁵ Letter from William Congdon to Jim Ede, December 6, 1957. Emphasis mine.

¹⁶ Harold Rosenberg, *La Tradición de lo Nuevo, 1959* (Caracas: Monte Ávila Ed., 1969), 31.

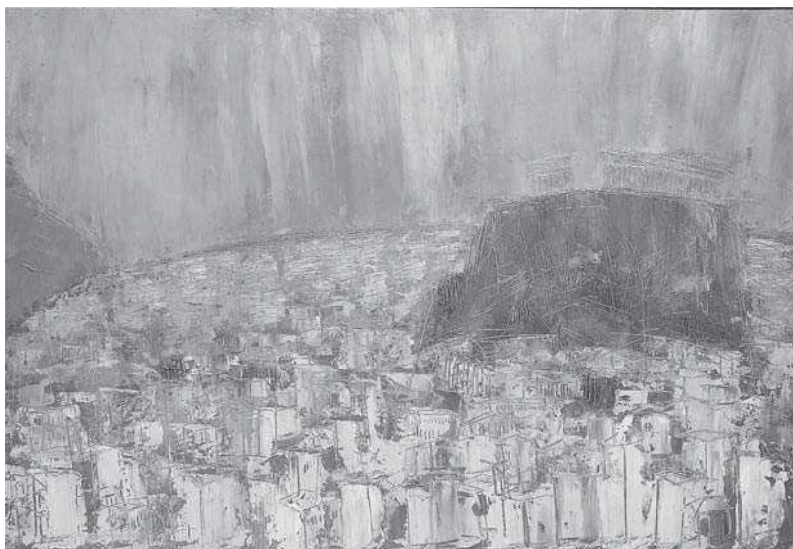


Figure 6.2. William Congdon, *Athens No. 1 (Acropolis)*, 1953. 100 x 145 cm. Courtesy of The William G. Congdon Foundation, Milano.

Elsewhere Rosenberg writes:

The innovation of Action Painting was to dispense with the representation of the state in favor of enacting it in physical movement. . . . In the painting, the primary agency of physical motion. . . . is the line, conceived . . . as stroke or figure (in the sense of "figure skating"). In its passage on the canvas each such line can establish the actual movement of the artist's body as an aesthetic statement.¹⁷

The painting as trace, the importance of movement, the stress on process: these are the aspects that, together with other historical coincidences of time and place, underline Congdon's membership in this school. (Fig. 6.3) Perhaps they are also what the art critic Emily Genauer had in mind when, in the rather belated year of 1960, she wrote an enthusiastic piece about the artist in what was practically the tone of an obituary: "Congdon, I should make clear at once, while admitting the

¹⁷ Harold Rosenberg: "Hans Hofmann: Nature into Action," *Art News* (May 1957): 30, in *ibid.*, p. 30, note 1.

looseness of labels, is an abstract-expressionist artist,”¹⁸ a surprising remark to make in reference to a clearly figurative artist.



Figure 6.3. *William Congdon nel suo studio*, 1981. Photograph Elio and Stefano Ciol, Casarsa. Courtesy of The William G. Congdon Foundation, Milano.

Abstraction and metaphysical utopia

From this brief overview of Congdon’s fraught inclusion within the theoretical definition of his contemporaries’ painting, we turn to an account of the unusual path that led him to abstraction. Special attention is given to how this path was consistent with a metaphysical conception that seeks, precisely through painting, to achieve immediacy.

In 1979, Congdon settled in the Milanese countryside and his painting entered into its final period. As always, his work was tied to vision, but now this was not a vision of luminous Mediterranean culture. Rather, it looked out onto the monotony of the fields and fog of the Po Valley. Though the steps that brought him there have been recounted elsewhere, it is useful to recall his conversion to Catholicism in 1959 and his arduous, but profound inner struggle to integrate his artistic self-awareness, his homosexuality, his origins in the upper bourgeoisie and the psychological

¹⁸ Emily Genauer, “Congdon Converted Uses Abstraction to Serve Religion,” *New York Herald Tribune*, Book Review (August 21, 1960).

wounds left by his wartime experiences into a coherent, and to some extent, harmonious whole. Painting at the very highest quality is both cause and effect of a gradual integration of these contradictory aspects.

The series *Autunno*, of 1981; *Nebbia, Verso Primavera, Ottobre* and *Novembre* of 1983; *Cielo-Terra*, of 1984; *Neve*, of 1985, and others, contain moments of profound abstraction that begin in color fields and progress emphatically toward monochromatic reduction. The action painter vanishes in this period, making way for a painter deeply focused on the potential in expanses of color. (Plate 6.2)

At the same time, Congdon's notebooks and letters show how his thinking was evolving, as viewer and as critic, in relation to the process of his own painting. Some of the quotes taken from Congdon's personal journal entries are particularly complex. Written for personal use, they appear to gush forth from his pen and he made no effort to tidy them up later with a view toward communication. In this respect, they are also an expression of the elusive nature of the intuitions that he wanted to grab hold of and that are doubtless conveyed much better in his pictorial work.

First, though, an analysis of his journal entries leads us on a brief detour, showing us Congdon's possible glimpses into Eastern philosophy. In an entry dated February 20, 1992, the painter writes: "Better late than never, I'm reading *Sentimento del colore* and I'm getting there forty years after my colleagues, who studied Zen in New York."¹⁹ Although no book in his library is known to have had this title, Congdon includes in a letter to Paolo Mangini, written on March 3, 1992, a few extracts from the volume with quotes from Toshihiko Izutsu and other Buddhist thinkers. Based on these references, we can conclude that the book was an Italian edition of the lectures of the Eranos group.²⁰ The volume on color corresponds to the 1972 *Eranos Yearbook*, published in English in 1977

¹⁹ "Meglio tardi che mai, sto leggendo 'Sentimento del colore', e arrivo dopo 40 anni dietro i miei colleghi che studiavano lo Zen a New York," Journal entry made by William Congdon on February 20, 1992, Archives of the William G. Congdon Foundation, Buccinasco, Milan.

²⁰ The meetings of the Eranos group, which were first held in 1933, took place every summer in the Swiss town of Ascona, bringing together leading figures in the sciences and other academic disciplines for a kind of cultural gathering. In an extracurricular and intercultural setting, they engaged in discussions on a range of topics from the soul and nature to yoga and meditation in the East and West, and more.

under the title *Color Symbolism*.²¹ Given the strong Jungian orientation of the Eranos group,²² it is logical that reading the volume would put Congdon in mind of the concerns of the New York artists he called his “colleagues,” who were so heavily influenced by Jung’s theory of archetypes and, by and large, had such a deep interest in Eastern mysticism.

However, while these allusions in his journal entries coincide with his visual experiments at the time, they are rare in comparison to constant references to various aspects of Catholic spirituality that he had striven to assimilate since his conversion.

Reaching the end of this brief detour, it appears rather that Congdon’s openness to Eastern thought and his interest in monasticism and meditation should be taken as similar, for instance, to the stance adopted by Thomas Merton, whom Congdon had met to ask for a foreword to his 1961 book *In My Disc of Gold*.²³ Another intellectual who was particularly close to him was Jacques Maritain, a philosopher who had converted to Catholicism and dedicated himself to recovering and spreading the thought of Thomas Aquinas.

These references and Congdon’s own work and writings give rise to the suspicion that the path toward abstraction, which he undertook so belatedly, is related to a gradual assimilation of certain principles of Catholic thought.

By way of explanation, I will make reference to texts on art and philosophy by Fernando Inciarte (1929–2000), a Spaniard living in Germany, who taught philosophy in Cologne and Freiburg before going on to become a professor at the University of Münster. Deeply conversant with the philosophy of Heidegger, Inciarte saw the resurgence of

²¹ This was probably the 1990 edition: S. Sambursky, G. Scholem, H. Corbin in D. Zahn, T. Izutsu, *Il sentimento del colore. L’esperienza cromatica come simbolo, cultura e scienza*, trans. into Italian (Como: Quaderni di Eranos, RED, 1990).

²² As Luis Garagalza puts it: “No matter how much Jung resisted being seen as the founder of Eranos, it is highly likely that without his language the group, in its ambitions to build a dialogue between East and West, would have become not a hermeneutic circle, but a vicious circle, mired in navel-gazing and turning into just one more of the many sects of esoteric Orientalists.” Luis Garagalza, *Introducción a la hermenéutica contemporánea: Cultura, simbolismo y sociedad* (Rubi: Anthropos, 2002), 112.

²³ Thomas Merton is celebrated for his insights, from a standpoint of Roman Catholic orthodoxy, into Eastern monasticism, lamas, Zen Buddhism and other such forms. His conclusions are collected in texts such as “The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton,” which was published in Spanish by Trotta (Madrid), in 2000.

metaphysics amid the cultural contradictions of the late twentieth century. In the words of his editor Lourdes Flamarique, Inciarte “was able to recognize the profundity of the superficial, that is, the echoes of metaphysics in culture, in its woven fabric of reality and fiction, of presences and representations. He blazed a trail for metaphysics after the end of metaphysics.”²⁴ Inciarte is especially useful for the analysis that I am pursuing here because he addressed this issue not head-on but more stealthily or, as Flamarique puts it, “from the flanks.” And one of these flanks is art.

Thus, when we speak of metaphysics, it is necessary to define which metaphysics. Being clear that it is Aristotelian metaphysics does not go far enough. We need to add that it is Aristotelian metaphysics as recovered by Inciarte: stripped back and rid of the many accretions of Late Scholastic thought and of modernity. This is a metaphysics that Inciarte himself defines as minimal, poor, a product of dispossession. That is, a metaphysics that reduces its expository presentation as far as possible, but not completely because “bare metaphysics lacking any expository presentation would not be metaphysics, but mysticism.” Only through exposition, however minimal, can metaphysics escape its utopian character.

The utopia of metaphysics consists of achieving the utmost immediacy. However, pure unmediatedness is not something that human beings can attain in this world, because mediation always intervenes. Nonetheless, coming to the realization that mediation is not the whole story, that there is in addition to mediation—and on the basis of mediation—unmediatedness: this is the crucial task of contemporary metaphysics. Unmediatedness is the poverty of thought. The other, the exposition, is its riches.²⁵

What is fundamental to the definition of metaphysics and the possibility of access to reality, or of unmediatedness, is abstraction. In the case of Congdon's painting, as noted earlier, the relation to abstraction undergoes a shift. This shift appears to follow a clear path. No longer fleeing abstraction as he did in the fifties, Congdon returns to abstraction in the nineties: starting from a conception of abstraction that we could call post-Scholastic, stripping it back to its Aristotelian origins. This is a journey that calls to mind Inciarte's reflections on metaphysics, though in Congdon's case it is clearly not explicit, but implicit in his painting. To

²⁴ Lourdes Flamarique, “El arte o el refugio de la metafísica,” in *Nueva Revista*, n° 93 (May–June 2004): 152.

²⁵ Fernando Inciarte and Alejandro Llano, *Metafísica tras el final de la Metafísica* (Madrid: Ediciones Cristiandad, 2007), 21.

understand this journey better, Inciarte's texts can help to restate or paraphrase Congdon's painting and writings and his complex, but fruitful relationship with abstraction.

The first thing that draws our attention in Congdon's reflections on his abstract pictures is his resistance to accepting the epithet "abstract" for paintings that are clearly abstract. For example, in 1989, he wrote: "To anyone who tells me that it's abstract, I respond, 'it's the opposite of abstract, it's the total object'."²⁶ (Plate 6.3)

Congdon's refusal to apply the term "abstract" to his painting is consistent with the notion of abstraction that he applied to the work of his New York colleagues, as seen earlier, and to the life he had fled many years earlier, when he wrote, for example: "I was so caught up in the aggressiveness of American self-merchandizing that I too began to howl at the World about me, to recognize me—like a crying child."²⁷

What is behind this notion of abstraction that he rejects? And in what sense can we call his later painting abstract? What is the conceptual distinction underlying this ambiguity?

From the text above, we can surmise that the "abstraction of American life" of which Congdon was speaking made it hard for him to distinguish between reality and fiction. The plethora of "merchandizing" representation and mediation becomes an impediment to "recognizing" oneself. The flight from abstraction and from America became a way to avoid fiction and seek contact with reality.

Indeed, the ambiguity of the concept of "abstraction" has to do with the problem of distinguishing reality from fiction. The difficulty of drawing the line that separates the two is a distant inheritance of the West, which reaches fever pitch by the end of the twentieth century in the neo-Sophist proposal of nondifferentiation, abolishing opposites so as to thwart any such discriminations.

Inciarte traces the origins of this nondifferentiation between reality and fiction to the thought of a group of philosophers that included Duns Scotus. At the dawn of modernity, they "drew a distinction between a mode of intuitive cognition, directed at proximity and immediacy, and a mode of abstract cognition, mediated by signs, and they declared that the former (the *cognitio intuitiva*) was unattainable and that therefore so was

²⁶ "A chi mi dice "è astratto," io: "è l'opposto d'astratto, è l'oggetto totale," Journal entry made by William Congdon on January 25, 1989, Archives of the William G. Congdon Foundation, Buccinasco, Milan.

²⁷ Letter to Jim Ede, December 1956.

unmediated reality."²⁸ Thereafter, the sign or representation takes the place of the concept, where the sign is mediation and the concept is immediacy: "the concept is the only sign that does not stand between us and reality, the only one that does not supplant reality as its representative or substitute, as its representation. The sign—word and image—stands for the thing, while the concept is the thing itself, though, to be sure, in another mode of existence."²⁹

Sign or concept: this is the key to understanding what kind of abstraction we are referring to, because Congdon conceived broadly of painting and specifically of abstraction—which he did not want to name as such—as a gateway to knowledge or, if one prefers, to communion.

On one side, there is Duns Scotus' abstract mode of knowledge mediated by signs, which conforms to the idea of abstraction that Congdon is defending himself against: it is marked by mediation, absence, or estrangement from reality. It is hard to distinguish from fiction. The sign (image or word) stands for the thing. Or worse yet, in the aggressive environment that was smothering Congdon, the sign stood for the sign. That is, it was the sign of another sign. Access to reality remained sequestered behind countless layers of meaning and overlaid levels of language. There is no truth, only opinions in competition with one another "in the marketplace" and denuded of any argument that might prevail, other than the use of force, seduction, or deception.

Unsurprisingly, Congdon is not on the side of the sign and Duns Scotus, but rather on the side of the concept and Aristotle. In Aristotle, there is abstraction as well, but it is different in kind. Significantly, Congdon's refuge in his art, his dependence on it, shows that he does not conceive of his pictures merely as signs among other signs. To the contrary, he sees painting not as an impediment, but as an interface with the world and tradition that enables him to recognize himself.

In effect, the notion of abstraction introduced by Duns Scotus had come to supplant the positive sense that the term had had in Aristotle's theory of knowledge. While Duns Scotus understood abstraction to be the moment at which image or word takes form, Aristotle viewed "abstraction" as something akin to seeing the structures of reality spiritually.

Put differently: in painting, abstraction can be reached by starting with the repudiation of an order and rationality as Informalism does, or by following a constructivist or analytic propensity. Congdon's abstraction is

²⁸ Fernando Inciarte, *Imágenes, palabras, signos: Sobre arte y filosofía* (Barañáin: Eunsa, 2004), 31.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 33.

not an abstraction built ideally out of a deconstruction of figuration, but neither is it “nonfigurative,” as constructivist abstraction in the style of Malevich is. That is, it is neither expressionist nor self-referential. The abstraction at which he arrives seeks reality; it does not flee from reality. It is consistent, therefore, with the idea of Aristotelian abstraction: to see reality spiritually.

In his writing, Congdon uses images of the Bedouin and the monk to express how he understands the type of vision that appears in his abstract paintings. It is a way of looking that, when it does not see “something,” is capable of seeing the “all” in the apparent nothingness. Here, the “void” or “nothingness” is the opposite of “something,” and “something” in turn is the opposite of the “all.” In this sense, apparent “nothingness” is closer to the “all” than to “something.” Ultimately, the “something” is genuine “nothingness” because everything that “is something” focuses on this “something” while forgetting the “is” that comes before it.

Abstract painting does not help us to identify the “something.” For this reason, it is suitable for capturing being. Let us see how this can be so. In a journal entry from 1986, Congdon refers to a discussion with his friend Paolo Mangini and wonders:

Why does Paolo, when looking at a picture of mine that has only two masses of color, say that “we are on the brink of nothingness”? There is an apparent nothingness, yes. But dwelling in this nothingness are all the beasts of the earth and sea.

And if an object had been added, perhaps a tree, would the nothingness be less? No, there would be more nothingness than ever. The insistence that there must be an object to enliven the mass of color calls to mind those people who think that the presence or representation of a sacred figure is what renders art sacred.

An Arab living in the desert would have no difficulty accepting the two empty masses as inhabited. He is accustomed to seeing, to reading his entire life in the apparent nothingness of the naked sky and the naked earth. But he who sees a void or nothingness in a mass that contains no objects either sees the void because it is empty or does not know how to see the color that contains life, that is teeming with life. Otherwise the painting is not alive.³⁰

³⁰ “Perché Paolo dice guardando un quadro di due sole masse “siamo all’orlo del nulla?”

Dell’apparente nulla, sì. Ma in questo nulla vi abitano tutte le bestie della terra e del mare.

E se avessi introdotto un oggetto? Un albero? Sarebbe meno nulla? No, potrebbe essere più che mai nulla. L’insistenza su di un oggetto per far vivere la massa è

A Bedoin's and a monk's ways of looking coincide in their poverty, in their propensity for reduction:

In order to value things rightly, the artist's love is the opposite of the love felt by monks, who shut their eyes in order to think. Whether you are one or the other, you are divided: only the blessed artist is a total human being. . . . It seems inescapable that a gradual synthesis (simplification) of things will reduce the patchwork mosaic of fields to huge voids populated with rare stalks.³¹

The gradual disappearance of objects in Congdon's series is linked, therefore, to the poverty of vision. The countryside of the Milanese lowlands is neither picturesque nor sublime. There is nothing there to be painted. It is the very landscape that drives the artist to strip back. If Mont Saint-Victoire asserts its iconic presence in Cezanne's painting, the Milanese countryside disappears beneath the fog and the passing of the seasons. Congdon seems to ask himself, as leading metaphysicians have done throughout history, why is there something and not nothing? The countryside shows Congdon his own precariousness, which he paints and makes disappear through the gateway of abstraction. (Plate 6.2)

In the winter of 1982, Congdon writes in his journal:

Silence not derived from things, but rather silence as the creator of things! . . . This silence as the painting's starting point is the power or comes from the power (grace) of the fog. I got rid of everything so that

come coloro che pensano che la presenza o la raffigurazione di un personaggio sacro renda sacra l'arte. . . .

Un arabo che vive nel deserto non avrebbe nessuna difficoltà ad accettare queste due masse vuote, come abitate.

Lui è abituato a vedere, leggere tutta la sua vita nell'apparente nulla del nudo cielo e della nuda terra. Ma chi vede "vuoto" o "nulla" una massa che non reca oggetto, o vede quel vuoto, perché è vuoto, o non sa leggere il colore che reca la vita, che è popolato dalla vita. Oppure il quadro non vive." Journal entry made by William Congdon on January 29, 1986. Archives of the William G. Congdon Foundation, Buccinasco, Milan.

³¹ "l'artista ama per valorizzare le cose in esatto opposto ai monaci che chiudono gli occhi alle cose— sia uno che l'altro è uomo frazionato. . . .

Mi sembra inevitabile che un progressivo sintetizzare (semplificare) le cose— riduca il mosaico dei campi a dei vasti vuoti popolati da rare steli," Journal entry made by William Congdon on December 2, 1982. Archives of the William G. Congdon Foundation, Buccinasco, Milan.

what I can't see would be born—the thing no longer there, but revealed by means of the filter (spirit) of the fog.³²

The stripping away that leads to the void, to the nothingness that is everything because it is not something, shows the precariousness and contingency of all existence. “Everything nameable, everything describable rests on itself,” says Inciarte picking up on Thomas Aquinas. “This is how it seems to us, this is what our vision tells us. But this is not how it is.” He goes on: “to the extent that nonfigurative painting shows us nothing . . . it robs us of our security . . . ; it pulls the safe ground out from under our feet, as it were, and we feel suddenly in the abyss of a nothingness that, as Thomas Aquinas said, is the only thing that is *naturaliter*, that is essential to the creature, to the universe in its entirety.”³³ This is why abstract painting is metaphysical: because, as noted earlier, through its absence of subject matter, it speaks to us of nothingness, of the absence of a particular something, but above all because it reveals our precariousness, that suspendedness between being and nothingness.

As we have seen, abstraction in Congdon is not the opposite of figuration. There exists nonfigurative abstract art and abstraction that originate in concrete objects. Congdon did not reject the object, but rather takes it as a starting point. His titles offer proof of this (*neve, cielo, terra* and so forth). This is not nonfigurative painting; it is anti-illusionist painting. Whatever the case, though, it is painting that does not let us rest in recognition (there is no mountain there). Clearly, if there is no recognition, there is no representation either. Art forfeits its vicarious character, its role as mediation. As Inciarte says, “seeing such forms, we are perpetually uneasy because we do not know what it is or even if it is something or nothing. This suspendedness between being and nothing is precisely the metaphysical.”³⁴

Congdon perceives the precarious equilibrium and expresses it, albeit in a somewhat clumsy manner, when he tries to grasp the meaning of Pollock's painting retrospectively, in light of the man's death, and

³² “Silenzio non derivante dalle cose ma il silenzio che ha creato le cose! . . . Questo Silenzio come partenza del quadro è la virtù o per virtù (o grazia) della nebbia. Mi è stata tolta ogni cosa—finché ciò che non vedo nasca—non c'è più la cosa—ma viene rivelata per il filtro (spirito) della nebbia.” Journal entry made by William Congdon on January 7, 1982. Archives of the William G. Congdon Foundation, Buccinasco, Milan.

³³ Fernando Inciarte, *Imágenes*, 80.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 78.

interprets Pollock's suicide as a realization of the death already present in his painting:

The great task that lies ahead of us: to delve deeper into this clarifying (I don't know how to express myself) this until now hidden commitment (precarious balance) between being and non-being in the artist, which accordingly defines his art. The world is not interested in this distinction, which determines whether art is really art, whether it lives. . . . Pollock took his art to the "limit" (of diabolical non-being), to the "limit" in the sense that his art was non-being and nothing else. I (like other artists) live poised between being and non-being, where it is possible to encourage their merging into one another. . . . That is, Pollock has revealed that there is a being art and a non-being art. Pollock's calamity [his suicide] revealed that there can be no living art unless it comes alive within the artist. . . . Until Pollock, this fact remained hidden in the equilibrium that artists (like any other living human being) maintained in the exact balancing point at which being through art recovered the artist's non-being, in an art that was, therefore, always an act of salvation.³⁵

Concept, unmediatedness, stripping away, nothingness, contingency. There is yet one more aspect in which Congdon's abstract painting is an expression of this metaphysical utopia. It is his attempt to capture a moment of stopped time, registering the eternity of each instant. This aspect is particularly on display in his series. Whether figurative or not, Congdon's series involve the repetition of a subject, of a view that varies

³⁵ "Il grande lavoro da fare: approfondire questo portare a chiaro termine (non so esprimermi) questo fin ad oggi nascosta compromessa (equilibrio precario) tral'essere nell'artista e il non-essere, e in conseguenza così determinando la sua arte. Il mondo non s'interessa in questa distinzione, la quale, determina se l'arte è veramente arte, cioè, se VIVE— . . . Pollock ha portato a "termine" (del diavolo del non essere) la sua arte—a "termine" nel senso che sua arte era quel non-essere e null'altro. Io (come altri artisti) vivo un equilibrio tral'essere e non essere in cui uno può favorire fondersi nell'altro. . . .

Cioè, Pollock ha rivelato c'è un arte-essere e un arte non-essere.

Il disastro di Pollock ha rivelato che senza l'essere vissuto nell'artista, l'arte come la vita non può esserci. . . . Fino a Pollock, questo fatto è stato nascosto nell'equilibrio vissuto da gli artisti (come lo vive ogni uomo) e in quell'esatto equilibrio in cui l'essere per via dell'arte recuperava il non-essere nell'artista in un arte sempre, perciò, redentiva.

La furia di Pollock è quella furia con la quale egli ha rigetta tol'essere, —che vuol dire, rigettare ogni oggetto vita(?)—cioè l'arte stessa." Journal entry made by William Congdon on February 27, 1982. Archives of the William G. Congdon Foundation, Buccinasco, Milan.

gradually from picture to picture. In this respect, the image that he paints has an ecstatic quality, of time being halted. The repetition of the same moment in several paintings is the materialization of a concept, a spiritualized view of the thing, which stops time by introducing the perspective of death. To elucidate this, Inciarte employs a metaphor that I would like to re-use here to convey Congdon's vision: the Red Sea viewed slantwise. That is, if the river (in its narrowness, the Red Sea is seen here as a river) is a metaphor for life, for the flowing of time, then stopping its flow so that the Hebrew people may cross introduces a new perspective, the perspective of death. Death is not only at the mouth of the river, where it empties into the sea, but at any spot along its course. Time in art is an ecstatic time, a simultaneous time. Working in series also privileges the notion of art as process over art as product, reflecting the indeterminate, limited, yet unfinished nature of the world. That is why art makes it possible to pull back the curtain, in a sense, and to transcend mediation. But not as a sign that claims in its reality to repudiate the falsehood of everything else; this is not the artistic sign that Marcel Proust considered "the most real of all things."³⁶ To the contrary, art is a manifestation of the real in that "art may well do nothing more . . . than reflect and maximize the ecstatic character inherent in the concentrated extract that is both real time and all of life in its essentially limited existence, yet not limited by an expiry date—that of death—external to itself."³⁷

To conclude, Congdon's abstract painting also conveys the unity of apparent opposites typical of the kind of metaphysics we have been exploring. Congdon's way of looking at the fields over the surface of the earth; his abolishing of depth, and his conception of the canvas as a ground; his gleaning of the superficial changes in crops as they go through the seasons: these reflect an attempt to focus on the surface in order to arrive at the depth of things. Congdon seeks a depth that is not beyond the surface, but rather *is* the surface itself. There is no opposition between the profound and the superficial, between the mysterious and the obvious. Aristotelian metaphysics does not distinguish between opposites either, unlike the metaphysics that modern thinkers, from Immanuel Kant to Deconstruction, sought to destroy. The sole opposition that "poor" metaphysics knows is the opposition between being and non-being. Profundity and mystery do not stand in opposition to superficiality because there is no "beyond," only surface. "In effect, everything is

³⁶ Fernando Inciarte, *Imágenes*, 59.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

surface, but the surface is deep, that is to say, it is inexhaustible.”³⁸ Changes in the surface also let us perceive the world's coefficient of indeterminacy, its forever unfinished nature, neither total nor absolute, its fragility.

The quest for immediacy, a process of which Congdon's late painting is an expression, it is long and in the end, because it is utopian, only half-accomplished. In theory, to gain access to the world, one needs only to open one's eyes, easy as that. The problem is that reality never appears as easily as that. “To see only matter, the path is very long; it is necessary to separate out everything else, all meaning Opening one's eyes to what is there and nothing else. That is the ideal of all philosophy.”³⁹ If we opened our eyes as soon as we were born, perhaps it wouldn't be such a long road. But humans are late to look, to open our eyes. Merely looking is particular to the old artist, the sage, who has needed to learn how to see over an entire lifetime. To arrive at reality and nothing but that, to reach the immediacy to which humans aspire, requires a whole life of stripping back and reducing the mediations. And even that may not be enough; after everything, it may also still be necessary to die.

³⁸ Fernando Inciarte, *Imágenes*, 104.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 164.