Introduction

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Mosaic 55.4 is a general issue covering a broad spectrum of topics, but it also strings together a set of essays that variously touch upon forms of death as much as time's mediating role in that encounter. The appearance of these questions is not coincidental. Death has left an indelible mark on philosophy as much as critical theory, literature, and the visual arts for a very long time. In this issue, literal death tethered to the facts of migration and warfare sits alongside critical work that variously chips away at the subject via human exceptionalism, technology, hegemonic power, and the ragged edge between emotion and affect.

The issue begins with Alison Fagan writing on the necrological machine at the U.S./Mexico border that has taken the lives of so many migrants and the counter logic of naming that makes mourning these innumerable and nameless victims a possibility. Ici Vanwesenbeeck brings the problem of grievability to a focus through the recurrent motif of killing stray dogs in Iraqi war writing. Sean Braune problematizes the interplay between human and non-human processes in "digital objects" that hail equally from the hand of writers as "data pours" or "digital stacks," which supplement these texts. Shuyu Lee broaches the double-bind of a contemporary therapeutic culture of self-help (of becoming more than what one once was) on the one hand and those deaths faced as distraction, social anomie, and immersion on the other. Karine Hack explores the temporal ecology of "small things" that give voice to the traumas of

the subaltern. From out of a fictive mortician's dream of transforming corpses into "sleeping beaut[ies]," Jeffrey Clapp and Chen Yanyi uncover an undervalued notion of craft and the broader politics of a literary practice. With emphasis placed on the temporal dimensions of both affect and emotion, Magdalena Sawa brings two exemplary theorists into dialogue around that event, which of all events, is the most important to think. And finally, Keith Moser explores the "ethical summons" of the "other than human gaze."

With this meta-theoretical spectre in mind, we feature the colour field paintings of Mark Rothko. The choice will be confusing to some readers, but "expressing basic human emotions—tragedy, ecstasy, doom," as he put it in 1957, was central to the artist's practice (M. Rothko, "Notes" 119). In 1958, and with more clarity, he would list "a clear preoccupation with death—intimations of mortality…. […] the knowledge of death" first among things a good painting had to contain" (M. Rothko, "Address" 125). And in his collected notes, published as *The Artist's Reality,* Rothko calls "pain, frustration, and the fear of death […] the most constant binder between human beings" (35). Still, these statements do not translate easily to the visual, and neither are Rothko's classic paintings from the 1950s the first works one might think of in relation to death. The worst cliches abound, here, and there are many wrong turns. Taking up the tragic facts surrounding the artist's biography, and the works left unfinished in the studio at the time of his suicide, would be one example. Believing one faces some sort of existential void when looking at these paintings is another: they are content-rich. Less misguided would be to concentrate on the far darker palette from 1957 onward, the hellish reds and maroons of the *Seagram Murals* (1958-61), the solace and sanctuary so many find in the subdued monochromes of the *Rothko Chapel* (1964-67), or the shocking reduction in means one confronts in the sharp horizons, brushy surfaces, and lack of illusionistic depth in the late *Black on Grey* paintings (1969) (Figure 1) (Novack and O'Doherty 269-73). Others may simply be oriented to the intensity and heaviness of colours, or the somber, low light conditions that dominate many of the darker works from the classic period, but then even these moody paintings which seem to strike the right chord lighten up with time spent in front of them. Nevertheless, classic works like *Light Cloud, Dark Cloud* (1957), *The Ochre (Ochre, Red on Red)* (1954), and *No. 14* (1960) bring death to a focus in an especially sharp way (Colour Inserts 1-3). In these and so many other of the colour field works, death turns on a subtle form of repetition that is implicit to each and every encounter. The reflective sheen one struggles to see past or through by bobbing and weaving about in face of many later paintings is the most frustratingly embodied example of this repetition, but it is only one example in a long genealogy which points to the two-fold nature of the obstacles to be overcome.

1. Black on Grey. Left to right: Mark Rothko, Untitled (1969); *Untitled* (1969); *Untitled* (1969. Sculptures: Alberto Giacometti, *Homme qui marche I* (1960); *Grande Femme III* (1960). Vue d'installation de l'exposition Mark Rothko, galerie 10, niveau 2, salle Black and Gray, Giacometti, exposition présentée du 18 octobre 2023 au 2 avril 2024 à la Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris. © 1998 Kate Rothko Prizel & Christopher Rothko – Adagp, Paris, 2023.

Rothko's best and closest critics have made headway in this regard but have never made the correspondence between death and these typically colourful paintings explicit. One of a number of exceptions is Jeffrey Weiss's account of "temps mort" or dead time, which builds on Michelangelo Antonioni's dialogue with Rothko and the cross-wiring of painting and cinema (45). Specifics aside, recourse to the notion of "Greek cheerfulness" and the tension between Apollonian and Dionysian onto which that concept maps is the rough guide (Nietzsche 67). The tenuous balance Nietzsche struck between a crushing pessimism and a pragmatic approach to thinking and doing just the same struck a chord with many artists in the period. Rothko's scribbled notes on *The Birth of Tragedy* confirm his engagement with Nietzsche's text and its difficult dialectic sometime in the 1940s, but isolating what the artist cribbing the philosopher described as "the poignancy of feeling the pain not seen […] but felt in itself" is another story (M. Rothko, "Scribble Book"). Not surprisingly, perhaps, blindness to the question of death, or "feeling the pain not seen," is inversely proportional to the highly-wrought surfaces we confront: always upright, cloudy, divided in roughly rectangular sections, and with three-colour groupings of colour that seem to hover not only one on top of another, but to "float" at or on the surface of these paintings. "Pictures must be miraculous," as Rothko put it (C. Rothko 84).

This raises what is perhaps the most essential aspect of our encounter with painting. All painting demands that we attend to its surface. And of course, classic modernist criticism, which emerged at roughly the same moment as Rothko's classic

paintings, has directed our attention to the flat surface of the modernist picture above all else. The flat surface of painting is where all the great compositional and aesthetic decisions are made and there should be little doubt that one of the basic decisions Rothko made was precisely to maintain the flatness of the post-cubist picture all the while achieving painterly effects that were more than flat. These "pictorial" or "optical" effects, as Clement Greenberg has described them, are easy enough to see ("Modernist" 90). In the example of *Light Cloud, Dark Cloud,* the central red band moves forward relative to the rectangle of washed out dusty rose above and with more thrust than the swirl of white below. Add to this the radiance or glow, the modulations in hue and the translucency of colour areas, worked up through the handling of innumerable glazes, and one must weigh the impossibly contradictory experiences of fact and effect against one another. The play of colours creates the optical illusion of space where no space exists, for again, Rothko's surfaces are very flat, devoid of impasto, often without the trace of brush marks, and so on. What one does note in terms of texture is the warp and weft of the canvas itself. This is visible in or through all the colours. Rothko's paint is very thin and washy. More often than not it is stained and worked into the support rather than painted or covering the support, something true even when it is clear that an area of surface has been worked over and over again. This is the case with the white of *Light Cloud, Dark Cloud,* which appears as a white-out but is porous enough to allow some visual penetration, especially at the edges. It is also true most surprisingly of the red, the intensity of which should come attached to a veneer and reads as an exercise in masking, but it is especially apparent in the roughly five-inch terracotta coloured strip that functions as an inert ground and which frames the red, white, and dusty pink bands on all four sides (see back cover). This internal frame, which is part of the surface, plays a constitutive role in Rothko's painting.

"These are frameless paintings, but they are not without borders," as the artist's son, Christopher Rothko, reminds us (34). In the case of *Light Cloud, Dark Cloud* this very literal, un-aesthetic terracotta edge is the decisive "measure" of the aesthetic—a key word for the artist (C. Rothko 53). When scanning from the "inside out"—the subtitle of Christopher Rothko's account—this flat border directs our attention back to the dramatic push and pull of colours that is the heart of the painting. Second, the border crystallizes the relationship between what is inside the rectangular gestalt of painting and what lies beyond the limit of that rectangular support. In this sense, the internal frame comes attached to a finitude of sorts, a blurry, five-inch finitude to be sure, but one that marks the threshold from inside to outside and conversely outside to inside. Thus, when scanning inward from the framing edge, the terracotta border marks our leaving taking of the world as we know it and ushers us into the fictive

world of the painting, the first and most important step of which is determining or pinpointing the terracotta border and its absolutely flat pictorial surface. No miracles of any mention here! It is a starkly literal perimeter that is only distinguished from the wall by the "preparatory" nature of the surface. The internal frame showcases the figural effects of the essentially three-colour composition from the wings and does so by covering its tracks. The dusty rose, which seems a bleached-out version of the terracotta, figures forth as an absence or recession in the surface, while the swirling white assumes a middle position between the latter and the red, which "floats" above the rest (C. Rothko 116). This lifts and separates the picture plane from the limp surface at the edges. Indeed, the invisible picture plane in *Light Cloud, Dark Cloud* assumes a number of confoundingly different levels, each of which is variously keyed to the buoyancy of individual colours and measured by the zero degree of float achieved in the terracotta frame. For Rothko, the instability of colour relations makes or creates space. The three-colour bands take up a position in space relative to one another as well as the terracotta ground, and depending on one's focus, variously move in and out of space in such a way that they "float," sink into depth, remain half-submerged, or become identified with the actual support.

What is beside the point or sidelined in the standard account of modernist "opticality" that I have just rehearsed is where Rothko's classic colour field works touch the question of death, or more succinctly, graze the question. When one is involved in differentiating the supporting wall from the painterly gestalt, one cannot isolate the internal frame from its operational role in the optical effects for which it serves as ground. The process of determining these absolute limits is itself a shroud. Or as Derrida puts it, "This partition of the edge is perhaps what is inscribed and occurs everywhere" (7). This said, the temporal finitude or supplementary nature of the internal frame is what makes the intimate nature of the encounter with these paintings possible. The differential play of colour that begs projective reading-in turns on its literal qualities. The slow, cryptic dramas that unfold as if for we viewers alone gain traction here. And though colour is ultimately indeterminable, the internal frame filters reference in from the outside. Its flat, lifeless quality, proximity to the wall, and identification as a supporting structure that sits on top of another supporting structure is the crux. Thus, with the motionless dusty pink rectangle reading as a bloodless version of the terracotta, the slightly cruciform layout and broad swathe of red and narrower white hint at a kind of urgency jetted in from the side. *(Such horizontal vectors are rarely mentioned by Rothko's respondents because of their disturbing effects on the whole. The irritation one feels in tracing the horizontal stringers in* No. 5/No. 22 *[1950], which is the key transitional piece the artist made before he settled on the three-*

colour format, is the best example [Figure 2]. Movement sideways tends to ground what little float there is. Atmospheric and watery metaphors dry up. Horizon separates the one from the other and turns the conflicted orientation of Rothko's paintings into an affair of "stacking" alone [C. Rothko 112]. The likes of even Rothko's Slow Swirl at the Edge of the Sea *[1944] becomes earthbound [Colour Insert 4]: its ambivalent space suffers the indignity of being mapped directly onto landscape.)* Here, one should also mention the influence of literature and the importance of the New Criticism's promotion of ambiguity as an ideal of poetic language. One must run with metonymic associations rather than resist the temptation which is so common among critics. No matter that it fires the most naïve terms of engagement. Trying on meanings one after another is part of the process. Nor should the paucity of results put one off, for it is dialectics working overtime. To my eye, the variable intensities of colour, speed, flatness, scale, layout, and texture convey the referential force of an ambulance. Note, too, that in relation to the white cloud, the forward thrust and wide screen effect of the red is further suggestive of a blindfold, seeing red, and a blood-soaked version of the clean gauze below.

This is certainly projection and a good part wild interpretation, but it is also the necessary beginning of an actual encounter with *Light Cloud, Dark Cloud.* One has to risk focused misinterpretation of specific paintings in order to discover the "constant binder[s]" Rothko speaks of in relation to death. Generalized discussion of the practice will simply not do, nor will isolating Rothko's painting from the literary, or basic biology and physics. In face of his paintings, one always has the sense that the viewer's work, or beholder's share, is only complete when the uniquely formal elements of each painting are reinvested with the emotional force and purchase on the world they had for the artist before he abstracted the latter from the equation and left only the relative intensities invested therein. Such cathect is immanently reproducible. We fall to work without thinking, seeing red when we see red, or adopting the lightness and/or darkness of a cloud when reading a title. This re-enchantment of form and colour on the flat, with an entire world of relational dynamics attached, amounts to one of a number of measurable effects that counteract the movement of things from the inside-out. As a congerie of unique relations with a time stamp attached, the beholder's share allows us to build upon and complicate Christopher Rothko's account of his father's practice that turns principally on a model of interiority. But then developmental processes understood from the "inside out" are always shaped by developments penetrating from the outside in. This is especially the case with the author's very sensitive thoughts on his father's recurrent interest in rectangularity, its grounding in his early architectural motifs, its purchase on perceptual experience, and

2. Mark Rothko, *No. 5/No. 22.* 1950 (dated on reverse 1949). Oil on canvas, 9' 9" x 8' 11 1/8" (297 x 272 cm). Gift of the artist. © Kate Rothko Prizel & Christopher Rothko / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY.

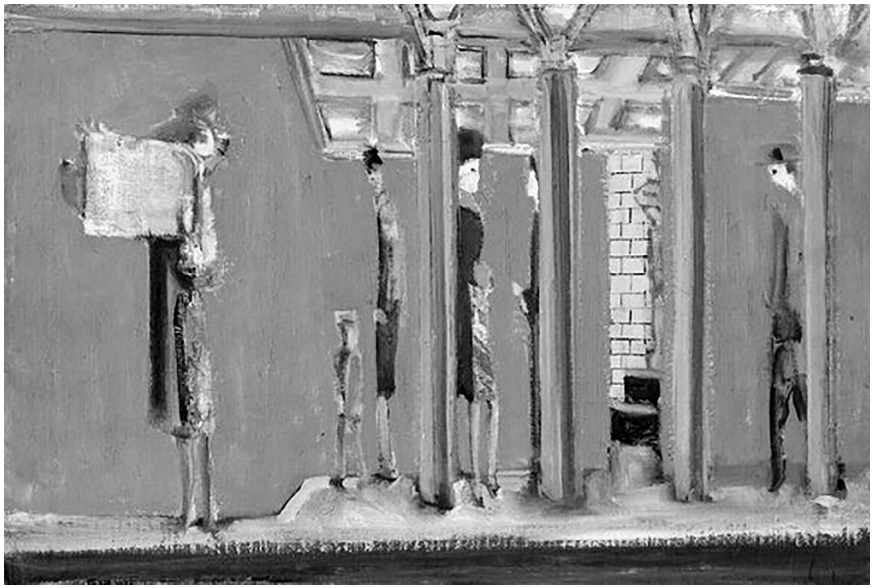
finally, his propensity for orchestrating groupings of works or his far more seamless integration of painting and architecture. That interiority is stamped by exterior conditions is as true for Rothko the artist who paints a picture and the singular viewer who beholds it, as it is for Rothko's singular paintings, his groupings of works, and for that matter his architectural installations. Here I isolate a pattern of repetition or set of recurrent tropes, which include mirroric relations between a subject and an object, that is consistently animated throughout Rothko's corpus.

These examples all blur inside-outside relations, reverse straightforward chronologies of development, criss-cross horizontal and vertical orientations, fuzz the distinctions between cause and effect, the human and non-human, and hence transform the formal instabilities and optical effects one sees in Rothko's work into what we might call a psychomachia of the creaturely. What I mean here is that when Rothko described his paintings as "'portraits' of states of the soul" (167) to Dora Ashton, we should picture a mechanism at work in the human that pointed back through evolutionary history to the first "organism" (165-67). Like a few other Abstract Expressionists, Rothko understood the mechanics of emotional transference in terms of a sensitivity to light that was rooted in the primordial genealogy of the

human. Our actions and reactions to perceptual stimuli were the not-so-distant cousin of the far less mediated cause-and-effect relations precipitated by light sensitivity in the single celled organism. Ancestral ties with Eukaryotes, the subsequent reproduction and segmentation of multi-cellular life with emphasis on the development of plants and animals, and particular stress placed on the evolution of somites and metameres in the higher invertebrates and vertebrates filled a gap in knowledge that reason could not breach. A psychomachia of the creaturely, then, because pitting light against dark amounted to an allegorical battle for the soul, and not merely the human soul but the soul of the living organism that was folded up within that far more sophisticated and contradictory developmental shell that was the human.

This phylogenetic inheritance folded within the ontogenesis of the individual is perhaps what Rothko was gesturing towards in his well-known but oddly cryptic text "The Romantics were Prompted." When addressing the issue of pictorial shape, he says, "They have no direct association with any particular visible experience, but in them one recognizes the principle and passion of organisms" (M. Rothko, "Romantics" 59). And on the same subject in the same text, in flagrant opposition to the contemporary moment and with a developmental trajectory in mind, he writes, "They are organisms with volition and a passion for self-assertion. They move with internal freedom, and without need to conform with or to violate what is probable in the familiar world" (59). Here the artist of 1947 puts his finger on an early conceptualization of biopower and its limits, as well as maps this on to the increasingly worrisome presence of dispositifs that conjoined evolutionary development and a society of control. In this regard, Rothko's sectional compositions are a skeleton key. The serial or sectional nature of the compositions, like the segmented somites of our more distant kin within the broader parameters of the kingdom Animalia, would conceivably light up a similarly elemental structure in the beholder.

Though all of this borders on the speculative, it roughly jibes with David Smith's concurrent attempts to rid his sculpture of a backbone or vertebral column altogether. The primordial soup that at least one critic sees stirred up in the artist's multiforms, which immediately precede the classic works, gains some historical force (Cooper 227). Jackson Pollock's roughly parallel experiments with an internal frame in the context of work on the mural and the problem of the decorative finds an echo. The thread leading back to the biomorphic abstractions of Rothko's surrealist period, where animal and plant-like parts blur to make composite figures of wildly different origins, are not far off. And Rothko's subway paintings from the late 1930s, where the alienation of solitary figures is inseparable from the penal architecture of modern urban life, comes into focus as an inescapable horizon subject to repetition (Fig. 3).



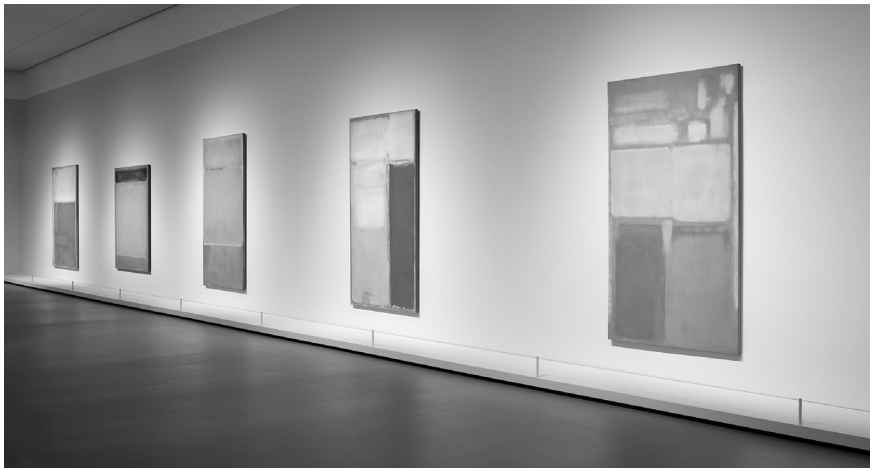
3. Mark Rothko. *Untitled (subway)*, 1937, huile sur toile, 51.1 x 76.2 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington. Gift of The Mark Rothko Foundation, Inc. © 1998 Kate Rothko Prizel & Christopher Rothko – Adagp, Paris, 2023.

Finally, this rough sketch of the logic that frames Rothko's version of expression provides a foothold into the dominant account of character structure posed by post-Freudian psychoanalysis in New York in the late 1940s to 50s. For a handful of artists and intellectuals, character structure was precisely an internal frame, filter, and defensive system through which the subject experienced the world. As a kind of bio-technological as much as socio-cultural accretion within the self, character was stamped by the existential pressures of place and time, and consequently had a functional relation to the limits placed upon the individual's capacity for experiencing.

First generation Abstract Expressionists were variously consumed by this mediation, capture, and packaging of experience and as a result foregrounded the avant-garde hunt for new experiences that consumerism, popular culture, social conformity, mass prejudice, etc., curbed. Thus, if we know that Rothko spent long hours looking hard at his paintings, it would be very interesting to know if he did so partly in accord or identification with the battery of post-war approaches to perceptual psychology whose goal was to isolate character and personality as a first line of defense against politically regressive tendencies. The symptomatic nature of the constraints Rothko formalized in his practice, his commitment to the basic compositional layout of the classic works, conviction in the subtly different forms of experience they offered up,

and the continual expansion of his corpus on the model of the internal frame as late as the black and grey paintings would all seem confirmation of this.

Take the finitude of the internal terracotta frame one last time. If it serves as the ground for the central performance in dusty pink, white, and red, this distinctly literal surface at the framing edge also accrues meaning otherwise. By virtue of its literal nature, unaesthetic look, and metonymic proximity to the wall, it ushers into the interior of the organism the geometry of the built environment. No matter that Rothko worked untiringly over a twenty-year period to rid painting of mimetic reference or that he always used an upright portrait format over the horizontal orientation of landscape, even colour bares the signature of the outside. The rectangular metameres, the internal frame, painting's gestalt form, or its repetition and expansion in and as architecture is where death encounters life on a regular basis. Alongside the mysteries of phylogenetic evolution, for Rothko rectangularity is a cipher of urban life, and a measure of modernity that is opposed to pure interiority. Both free of mediation and mediated. Thus, too, *Light Cloud, Dark Cloud.* Though hardly the dimensions of a standard 4 x 8 sheet at 66 x 61 ¾ inches, when hung between *Number 9 (Dark over Light Earth/Violet and Yellow in Rose)* (1954) and *No. 7 (Dark over Light)* (1954) and flanked by eleven other paintings of variable dimensions as it was at the Foundation Louis Vuitton in Paris in October 2023, the repetitive nature of the frame is earmarked (Figures 4-5). The regimentation and repetition of the basic rectangular format in any Rothko retrospective is a killer, but the "dull horror" of it all is always passed over for the surface of things (Greenberg, "Present" 163). What saves each of the classic paintings is the unique play of colour relations, the different dimensions which are all somehow keyed to the human scale, or the crushing of expectations when viewing any one painting from up close. The degree of uniformity seen in the late black and grey paintings is another matter: the patience of even close and careful viewers is placed under considerable strain. This intensified version of repetition, which clearly borders on the aesthetics of minimalism, confirms Rothko was not only courting sameness as a limit all along but acutely aware of the shifting historical ground upon which he was working. Thus, Barbara Novack and Brian O'Doherty tell us that "Among the reciprocal paradoxes of the Seagram paintings at the Tate is their resistance to a lax diffusion of effect. The sheer extension of the horizontal paintings circumscribes them with the contours of an idea" (272). Or Jeffrey Weiss, who reports that a number of the black and grey paintings possess the internal frame as "a narrow white band" and that those which do not possess painted surfaces extending across "the tacking margins of his stretched canvases, which opened the works visually to the space of the wall and the room" (Weiss 239). These respective examples suggest that



4. Left to right: Mark Rothko, No. 8 (1949); *Untitled (Blue, Yellow, Green on Red* (1954); No. 7 (1951); *No. 11/No. 20* (1949); *No. 21 (Untitled)* (1949). Vue d'installation de l'exposition Mark Rothko, galerie 2, niveau –1, salle Multiformes et début des oeuvres dites « classiques », exposition présentée du 18 octobre 2023 au 2 avril 2024 à la Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris. © 1998 Kate Rothko Prizel & Christopher Rothko – Adagp, Paris, 2023.

5. Left to right: Mark Rothko, *No. 13 (White, Red on Yellow)* (1958); *No. 9/No. 5/No. 18* (1952); *Green on Blue (Earth-Green and White)* (1956); *Untitled* (1955). Vue d'installation de l'exposition Mark Rothko, galerie 4, niveau 0, salle Les années 1950, exposition présentée du 18 octobre 2023 au 2 avril 2024 à la Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris. © 1998 Kate Rothko Prizel & Christopher Rothko – Adagp, Paris, 2023.

for Rothko, the idea, or what Greenberg called "conception," had expand[ed] the possibilities [or limits] of the pictorial" ("After") and that contra Michael Fried, both art and objecthood were forms of death worth thinking (Fried 162).

All of which raises one final question: having developed his signature style of the three-colour composition, we might ask why Rothko was committed to keep painting in this vein until the very end, even in parallel with his larger architectural commissions? First and most importantly, because the repetitive motif of the basic three-colour composition left room for an entire world of variability. Despite their rectangularity, the sameness of their upright portrait format, their characteristic three-colour compositions, and rough equivalence, these are singular paintings. Repetition and difference are unlikely bedfellows, but they do share bunks. The imperfect repetition that makes each of the classic works unique consistently hides a more perfect form of repetition that flows with the same ease as time itself. To backtrack for a moment, I suggested that Rothko's classic works possess a latent biomorphic drive about them, and that despite our anthropomorphic engagement with this drive, the latter should not be dismissed by the beholder, but rather coveted. The rare mechanism it animates is a kind of analytic that links the intensities of the human body to the intensities felt by the organism itself. Strange stuff perhaps, but operational for the body, nevertheless. Through recourse to what phenomenology describes as the problem of body schema, we engineer meaning in face of these works by virtue of our own bodies. Rothko's portrait format is decisive to this mirroric process, but what really matters, because the precise measure of each singular painting, is the variable float of the segmented images, the respective intensities of each, and what is felt on the part of the beholder.

To pick up where I left off with *Light Cloud, Dark Cloud,* my eyes become a mirror of the red band or blindfold and I feel blinded in turn. But just as soon as the whites of my teeth and empty forehead begin to coalesce above and below to form a death's head, I feel a bloody nose coming on and as quickly my body takes shape as a kind of sectional figure in three parts with a rotund centre. Digging the line between death and signification with a gallows humour in tow is the point here, for one doesn't turn up anything that sticks to the painting for long. What matters is the fragility of the correspondence between subject and object, how painting becomes a technical prosthetic of the self, axially dissects first the face and then the body into a segmental structure, and through a chiasmic reversal animates a response in the body looking on. If anything brushes up against what the artist called "the principle and passion of organisms" with "no direct association with any particular visible experience" (Rothko, "Romantics" 59), it is this very fluid process of identification, disidentification, reidentification, and so on. This too is death, or at least a deathward progression, and it is what makes Rothko's classic works from the 1950s his great achievement.

Ultimately, Rothko's classic works mark the moment when the body proper as opposed to merely the surface of painting is foregrounded as the central drama. The theatre of power that drives the precarious relationship between colours, or that once isolated and confined the figure to the oppressive architecture of the modern city, shifts onto the shoulders, head, and legs of the viewer. Technics, time, and the advance of modernity find a new roost in the symptomatic subject. The drama of painting takes a back seat to the tragic drama befalling the body in the present tense.

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