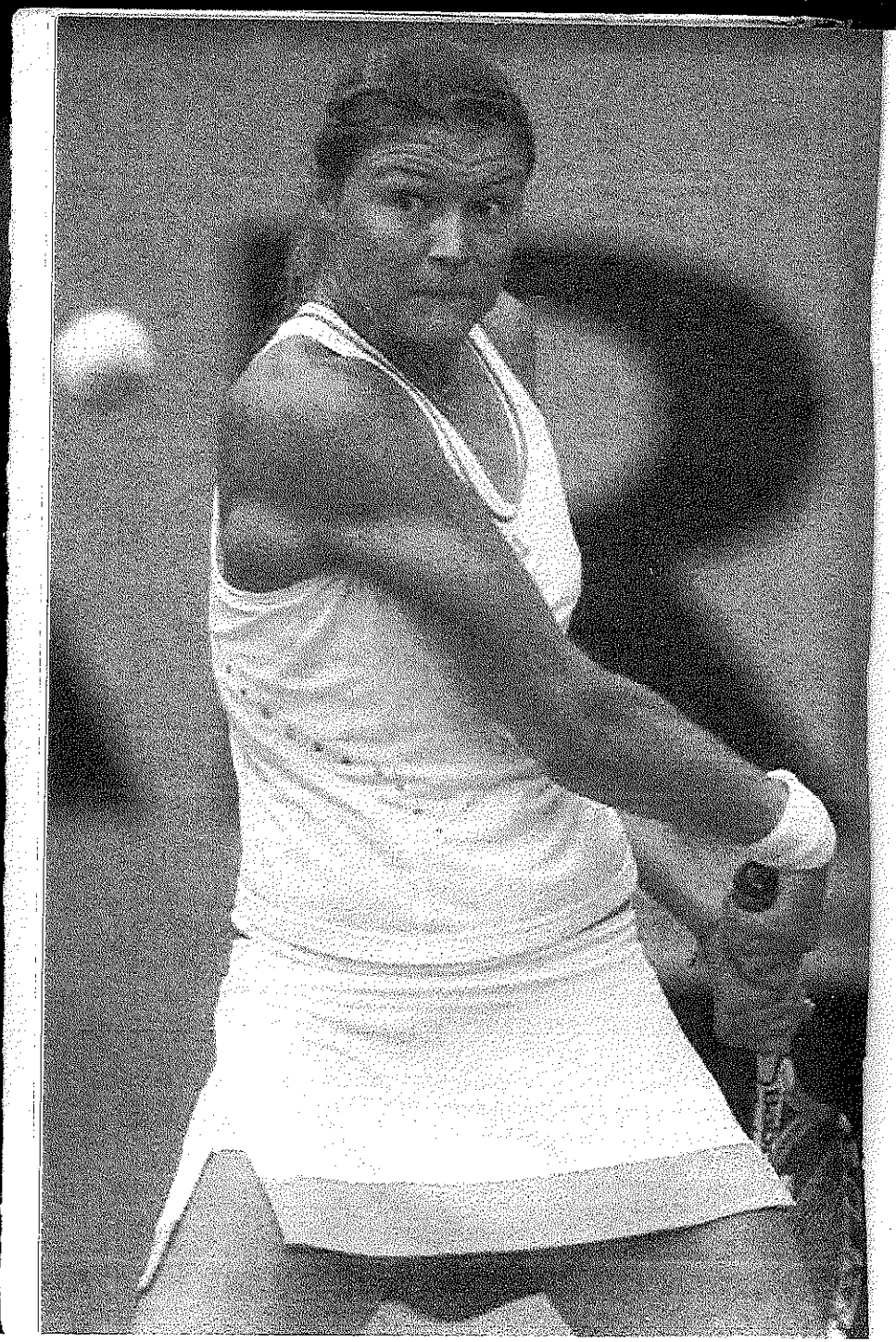

John Kelsey, Rich Texts: Selected Writing for Art, 2010

100%*

How much of the painting is already in the TIFF? And in the end, after the file has been selected and commanded to print, how much actually comes out of the Epson? Where does painting go when it's sent and received like this—as a *code*? The work of art seems to go outside of itself when it decides to picture the weightless, groundless, dimensionless, and genderless qualities of information, in the cybernetic sense; or when the image itself assumes such qualities in order to experience how abstraction happens today. The first thing the work abandons is the *act* of painting, and with it, manual space. Replacing the "diagram" with the program or code, painting suddenly leaves the ground and approaches something like a post-Fordist condition of abstraction. Now the space of the work is no longer either optical or manual, but communicational, extending itself along a network that links one apparatus to another. The object in the gallery is now like a hard copy or alias of the source file on the drive, and what we are looking at is perhaps less a painting than a "rendering." What this work displays is the difference between sending information and receiving aesthetic objects in the gallery, or what happens when "black" moves from desktop to printer to museum, and whatever is lost along the way. The monochrome is a record of a circulation. As it is copied and communicated, discrepancies are produced. And these are what now stand in for painting.

We are no longer experiencing painting as a relation between a manual diagram and an optical catastrophe, which was how Deleuze theorized the practices of Jackson Pollock and others.[1]

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1 Gilles Deleuze, "The Diagram," in *The Deleuze Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 193–200.

If diagrammatic abstraction was linked to the work of the hand and to the introduction of a sort of blindness within the visual order, programmatic abstraction is more about the displacement or neutralization of the painterly act itself. And where the diagram produced blindness and visual violence, the program only functions, displaying the hands-off violence of design, perhaps, or something like designer violence. Instead of blindness, there is now only the possibility of interrupting communication. Painting is either on or off.

Printing out mailing-address labels might be something like degree-zero painting in a world still coming to terms with the increasing loss of distinction between the production of art objects and the daily labor of communication. "Print" is an action selected from a menu; nobody actually performs it. The rest—the printing, the painting—is mostly automatic: a connection between the design program and the printing apparatus has been okayed as the artist manages and monitors his production from the side. This could even be a definition of contemporary art: an encounter with our own absence in the midst of the very activities we manage and monitor. Such encounters also involve a reckoning with the ways in which we ourselves are inhabited and even predicted by the readymade programs whose users we say we are.[2] Most of the time, we don't realize how *activated* we've become as artists and users. The monochrome is a means of displaying this. At the same time, it can be a way of reducing to a minimum the degree of our activation in the midst of communication. In this case, the monochrome signals

2 Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000). In theorizing an emergent postindustrial era in terms of a shift from a text-based to an image-based culture, Flusser proposes that the photographer is, first of all, already a function of the camera's program.

the creative subject's possible deactivation, or even disconnection, from the program of painting. If the "blank" TIFF (Who would still call this rectangle a "field"?) is still related to the painterly blank, the former no longer pretends to be anything less than 100% information. It is this 100% that also now stands in for the act of painting.

For the eye that still inhabits the modern spaces of literature and painting, and that scans pages and walls for sense and sensation, the monochrome is the image of a radical minimum. It is a spiritual or ascetic void, a pictorial purification. But in the discursive or "connexionist" space, where work and life now lose their difference, 100% black is the *most* a machine or an artist can say, do, or send, a total saturation and total activation of the space of communication. Here, black may still stand for a minimum, but from the angle of function or performance, it is a maximum. If Mallarmé were still here, he might say that black is the full dress of sense (and its shadow too), the formal attire of every possible transmission.

On the contemporary screen, where writing, too, finds its image, black is the color of "automatic." It is what 100% looks like. Here, in the visual space that writing now shares with design and communication, black is both a kind of information and a means of informing. When it is not selected, it is the default color of anything we do or send, including literature. Here, writing and painting are no longer so much about spilling ink, but about managing shades, sizes, styles, and quantities of information. And writers and painters have never been so neighborly: they share the same screens and same postures. Already the canvas—like a Rorschach—starts to resemble the sequenced pages of a book, with a seam or margin (some say "zip") down its middle. It is a picture of information without a message, a

post-literary document. It is also a sort of shadow painting of the TIFF it was composed with.

Do graphics exist? The "painting" commands the wall and the room, but its source file is only a few compressed kilobytes of code. And just as the designer fills in a rectangular box with what is referred to as "#000000" (or black) in the invisible source code of a digital "page," Wade Guyton has filled or blackened exhibition spaces in New York, Paris, and Frankfurt. These three shows are like one show repeated in or communicated between the three cities. The filling in of digital windows is followed by the distribution of ink across canvases, and then by the ritual installing and staging of black in the galleries. In order to show itself here, communication becomes décor.

But the TIFF is nothing in itself. It only really exists or becomes visible through use, or when one device communicates it to another. It is much less than an idea, and much more efficient. A means of circulating information between two or more machines or galleries in a network, the TIFF, we could say, is potential communication, the pure possibility of transit, which in Guyton's case is used to send "black" from hard drive to printer to canvas to wall. Black is circulated and also at a strange standstill in the paintings and in the gallery. Here, the installation produces an optical rhythm that departs from the painterly dance of the diagram in order to approach the on/off, on/off of the program. This binary pattern will sometimes produce effects reminiscent of Bridget Riley's Op art.

In the gallery, a false floor of black plywood introduces a material hollow beneath the viewers' feet. It's a strange feeling to realize that one is standing in the same space as information, as if formatted along with it, a body dragged and dropped in a room

full of ink. It's the same in the city, where we transmit ourselves through the urban program of Manhattan. We say we are like tourists here, but we are also like files on the move, opening and closing, constantly updating and duplicating ourselves. Under our feet, the hollow, flimsy feeling of a stage renders the body strangely present in the act of scanning the show. And this feeling is accompanied by a perception of how completely absent the body has become in the paintings.

The gallery is no longer a theater of human activity or even passivity, but an activated space where information, bodies, and money are rapidly circulated, and where this power of circulation is momentarily frozen in images and objects. In other words, the canvases on view are not so much finished, final things as they are a series of interrupted movements. These are abstractions torn from and at the same time irretrievably lodged in a condition of productive mobilization. And in its interruption, "painting," too, is put at a strange, fresh distance. The blankness that surrounds us here is both "on" and "off," and is perhaps working on a third possibility in the relation between the two.

Because their surfaces expose information dropouts and discrepancies between source image and printout, we could say these paintings are failed attempts at picturing TIFFs, a serial repetition of this. Often, a canvas is over-printed multiple times so that several copies occupy a single surface, overloading it. But no matter how awash in ink they are, these images will never achieve the thickness of painting. And we wonder if the Epson is even capable of failing the way a painting can.

Connoisseurs will insist on the many subtle and unpredicted differences produced by the Epson's struggling printer heads, mechanical glitches, and even the rough traces of the studio

floor on the canvas's sensitive surface. As if whatever escapes the program is now painting. As if painting occurred finally as information dropout (or overload), as mechanical malfunction. These minor traffic accidents are what produce images of transit and transmission: They make us see the TIFF in the room precisely because it never finally arrived here. And 100% black is a way of displaying the fact that the artist and his gestures have already exited the space and the moment of the picture's production. We are in a sort of shadow land of painting.

In a way, Guyton is dragging and dropping these shows into New York, Paris, and Frankfurt. We get the feeling that the spaces he fills have in the meantime abandoned the possibility of experience, that they are more like magazine pages than rooms. At an opening, bodies circulate against walls of TIFFs, and we remember that Warhol's shadow paintings were used as a backdrop for fashion shoots, and that his wallpapers, films, and publishing ventures were also means of displaying the being-in-mediation of postindustrial, post-Expressionist bodies. Against such backdrops, Warhol elaborated a real style of disappearance, or disappearance as a style of use. Guyton's updated décor, on the other hand, stages the productive relation between communication and appearance: Work is not what we do, but how we show up, like on a screen. Making the Epson struggle, the artist causes a sort of material stammering within the program, putting communication in closer proximity to interruption. It is a stammering of the Epson and also of painting.

The monochrome is a document that tells us of nothing but its own circulation, presenting the pure possibility of communication by a possible artist. And if the artist no longer locates himself in manual space, if the picture is automatic, then the

painter is somewhere out here on the floor with us, another dislocation. Here is where black is momentarily extracted from its program, casting a shadow that's as good-looking as Kasimir Malevich and Calvin Klein.

The contemporary artist's productive displacement is constantly encountering its own image—also like a shadow—on the screen, on the wall, and on the page. So if the artist, as he works, is already producing images of communication, he must find ways of intervening exactly there, in this space and moment where displacement becomes appearance. In this way—by working on both the distribution and display of information—he can perhaps begin to recover what Giorgio Agamben has called the "gestural sphere."[3] How can we picture and interrupt our own endless transmission within the networked spaces we inhabit and extend today? The monochrome can be taken up as a means of re-appropriating everything that already disappears us in the midst of our productive activities. On the one hand, the Epson is exploited to produce the feeling of an easy, convincing, institutional décor. On the other hand, this décor is a direct occupation of discursive space, returning the possibility of use. And if the painter prefers not to show up here, the user—his double—is already working overtime.

Not long ago, Guyton was printing over other artists' images, using pages torn from catalogues and the back issues of art magazines. Sending these pages through a desktop printer, interrupting them with his programmed marks, Guyton intervened directly within the mediation of artistic practice, discourse, and value. Taken up as a pure means, employed as a

3 Giorgio Agamben, "Notes on Gesture," in *Infancy and History: On the Destruction of Experience* (London: Verso, 2007), 150.

discursive and material support, the magazine or catalogue became a display system for new and possible gestures. And as the painter or printer elaborates ways of using that somehow remain out of reach or blind to the author, he also learns to displace himself with a strange ease between discourse and design, communication and image. This ease is accompanied by a certain indifference to the ownership of messages and signatures. It also involves simply letting the program function. The artist intervenes where the production of communication by means of communication happens, in the black of the font and in the sending of the image, outputting paintings like pages and putting transmission on display.

One could imagine a rule (≠ law) of the Neutral: it would consist in finding a way to disseminate intelligent stuff, as though between the lines (cf. the monochrome) of a flat, dumb (verbal) fabric.
—Roland Barthes, *The Neutral*