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Writing on the Wall:
Brice Marden's Chinese Work and Modernism

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Abstract

Brice Marden (b. 1938) began his career in the late 1960s as a "Minimalist" painter, but he soon reacted against the Western post-modernist idea of "the death of painting" and turned to Chinese calligraphy to revitalize the idea of the picture plane mounted on the wall as the most distinctive element of painterly art, an idea referring to the allover flat, non-illusionist pictorial surface which is epitomized by Jackson Pollock's mural-sized paintings (1947-1951) according to the formalist art criticism of Clement Greenberg (1909-1994), influential in discourses and practice of American art from the 1940s until it is discredited by the late 1960s. Having journeyed from Western classical and modern art through the wall supposedly separating Eastern art, Marden was inspired by Chinese poetry and dancers depicted on the walls of the Tang period and garden rocks of Suzhou. He reinvented the modernist wall metaphor in the sense of pictorial depth and created a vision of material and spiritual transaction between East and West through rediscovery of art history. Vis-à-vis the modernist and post-modernist dogmas in regard to painting, Marden let the world in again by bringing together different pictorial cultures into the indisputable space of the picture plane.

Keywords: Brice Marden, modernism, painting, Twentieth Century

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I. Tiles and Walls

II. Cold Mountain and the Wall for Meditation

III. Inter-textual Writing on the Wall

To talk of a wall—that is, a surface that blocks the gaze from proceeding into a deeper visual field—is to engage with the major issues in the modernist theory of painting. Clement Greenberg, a leading proponent of modernist theory in the wake of World War II, promoted what he called the freshness of American abstract painting (also known as Abstract Expressionism or Action Painting) *vis-à-vis* the decline of easel painting of bourgeois Europe. He observed among American avant-gardes a persistent urge "to go beyond the cabinet picture, which is destined to occupy only a spot on the wall, to a kind of picture that, without actually becoming identified with the wall like a mural, would *spread* over it and acknowledge its physical reality."[1] Greenberg identified the contradiction between the public, architectural setting of the wall and the private, intimate circles in which such advanced art was produced as the crisis in contemporary mainstream painting — a crisis that he had earlier named "the dynamic of modernism." He insisted on the strict separation of the arts from the synaesthetic (or multi-sensory) developments in the early twentieth century, and held that avant-garde painting involved "a progressive surrender to the resistance of its medium." In his view, abstract painting turned away from the illusionist depth of Renaissance perspective towards the purity of the picture plane.[2] For Greenberg, the principal drama of modern painting was this struggle between depth (a window on the world) and flatness (a wall on which images of the world would be mounted) for the soul of any individual

1 Clement Greenberg, "The Situation at the Moment" (1948), *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Vol. 2: Arrogant Purpose, 1945-1949*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 194-195.

2 Clement Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoon" (1940), in *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Vol. 1: Perceptions and Judgments, 1939-1944; Vol. 2: Arrogant Purpose, 1945-1949*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 34.

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picture. In 1960, he once more claimed "the integrity of the picture plane" to be the precondition of pure painting, as the essence of Modernism was in "the use of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence."[3]

Greenberg's modernism, which has been commonly described as formalist, was influential in establishing the hegemony of Abstract Expressionism of the New York School and in dissociating it from pre-war "leftist" avant-gardes during the so-called Cold War.[4] His formalism was further purified by the critic Michael Fried, who emphasized the integrity of the picture plane in such artists as Morris Louis and repudiated artists' effort to appeal to the spectator's imagination to help arrive at its meaning, particularly the sense of theatricality in Minimalist works of the 1960s.[5]

But formalist criticism was soon considered by others to be too dogmatic. Unrest in the arts long preceded a critical consensus. Jackson Pollock (1912-1956), a leading practitioner of Abstract Expressionism in his so-called "all-over" paintings (1947-1951), returned to painting symbolic figures in a later phase of his career. In 1962, the art critic Leo Steinberg noted Jasper Johns' sovereign disrespect for "the integrity of the picture plane" in his broken strokes reminiscent of Cézanne.[6] In 1972, Steinberg observed that the upright surface of the Renaissance picture plane, permitting distinctions among the observer, the surface, and the virtual space lying behind the plane, persisted in Abstract Expressionism. Moreover,

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3 Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting" (1960), in *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Vol. 4: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 85, 87.

4 Serge Guilbaut, trans. by Arthur Goldhammer, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 165-194.

5 Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood" (1967), in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 148-172.

6 Leo Steinberg, "Jasper Johns: the First Seven Years of His Art," in *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 42-43. Apparently poking fun at Greenberg's dictum, Johns talked about his wish for a plane that carries a lot of pictures; Michael Crichton, *Jasper Johns* (New York: Abrams, 1977).

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Robert Rauschenberg's picture plane that incorporated all kinds of materials offered a new model for post-modernist painting. His work, simulating opaque flatbed horizontals rather than vertical visual fields (even if it would be hung on a wall), was related to making rather than just seeing, and letting the world in again.[7] Nevertheless, Greenberg's analogy between the picture plane and the wall underlies "off the wall" practices since the 1960s, as avant-gardes turned away from the gallery wall as the presupposed space of art works, and in some cases, from painting altogether.

In the present essay is an exploration of how Brice Marden's (b. 1938) paintings reinvent Greenberg's modernist metaphor of the painting as a wall. Maintaining "the indisputability of the plane" (1974)[8] and honoring the example of Pollock's late work (1952-1956),[9] Marden joined Greenberg's and Steinberg's debates on the picture plane.[10] Above all Marden has disagreed with the post-modernist idea of "the death of painting." In 1986 he declared that the post-modernist idea of everything having been done drove him "up the wall."[11] As shall be seen, this was true in several senses: it caused him to mount and even transcend the often imagined wall between "Western modern" art and "Asian traditional" art, to adopt elements of Chinese calligraphy and wall painting, and to reinvent the metaphor of

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7 Leo Steinberg, "Other Criteria," in *Other Criteria,* 72-73, 82-91. For a comparison of Steinberg's view and Michel Foucault's poststructuralist view on classical perspective, see Craig Owens, "Representation, Appropriation, and Power," in Owens, *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 88-107.

8 Brice Marden, *The Grove Notebook*, summer 1974, in *The Grove Group* (New York: Gagosian Gallery, 1991), 25. Marden worked as Rauschenberg's studio assistant in the 1960s, but turned more to Johns's pictures.

9 Brenda Richardson, *Brice Marden: Cold Mountain* (New York: DIA Center for the Arts, 1992), 39.

10 Marden, however, says that he was never interested in formalism, thus putting some distance between himself and Greenberg; Lilly Wei, "Talking Abstract," *Art in America* 75:7 (July 1987, New York), 83.

11 Marden, in "Brice Marden: Interview with Robert Storr on October 24, 1986," in Rosemary Schwarzwärder, ed., *Abstract Painting of America and Europe* (Klagenfurt: Ritter, 1988), 71; quoted in Richard Shiff, "Force of Myself Looking," in Gary Garrels et al., *Plane Image: A Brice Marden Retrospective* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2006), 55. The author is indebted to Richard Shiff for providing me with copy of his manuscript in June 2006.

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paintings as walls on which images of the world can be posted.

Indeed, "up the wall" was a logical place for a painter of Marden's interests to go. At first categorized as a Minimalist painter, he worked on "plane images" (this was also the name of his studio) until the early 1980s, whereas most of the minimalists in the 1960s used (fabricated) objects as their artistic medium.[12] By 1977, Marden compared his own paintings with his father's stone walls: "My father ... used to build beautiful dry stone walls and everything has to fit together right in order for it to stand, and I make paintings and everything has to fit together right in order for it to stand."[13] His *Grove Group I* (Fig. 1), a grayish green canvas evoking Greek land and sea was mounted on a stretcher of about seven centimeters in depth. As such, it referred to the physicality of a wall.

But Marden apparently came to consider the physicality of his monochrome picture planes as risking excessive momentousness and he consequently went through a period of inactivity around 1985. With his portfolio of *Etchings to Rexroth* (1986-1987) and his series on the theme of the *Cold Mountain* (1988-1991), Marden soon shifted to line drawing inspired by Chinese calligraphy and poetry.[14] More recently, his works have been inspired by inscriptions on Tang-period walls, tombstones and garden rocks. Calling the revolt against his own minimalist style of the 1970s a mid-life crisis, he uses Asian calligraphy because it is a pure form of expression, energetic and elegant, while painting has less line but tends to be defined by color, pigment and form.[15] Withal, he has reinvented Greenberg's wall metaphor by endowing his flat paintings with more depth, without returning to the illusionist perspective of the earlier "modern" West.

Marden's cross-cultural creation has encountered both resistance and

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12 For an overview of Minimalist objects, see Ann Goldstein et al., *A Minimal Future? Art as Object: 1958-1968* (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 2004).

13 Marden, on the sound track to Edgar Howard and Theodore Haimes, *Brice Marden* (New York: Tuckeruck Productions, 1977).

14 Brice Marden, *Thirty-six Poems by Tu Fu translated by Kenneth Rexroth, with twenty-five etchings by Brice Marden* (New York: Peter Blum Edition, 1987). For images of *Cold Mountain*, see Brenda Richardson, *Brice Marden: Cold Mountain*, or http://www.diabeacon.org/exhibs/marden/coldmountain/.

15 Paul Gardner, "Call It a Mid-Life Crisis," *Art News* 93:4 (April 1994, New York), 140-143.

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support among contemporary art critics. On the one hand, Yve-Alain Bois argues that the paradigm of formal structure offered by Chinese calligraphy is more distracting than illuminating. He sees Marden's multi-procedure painting as being based on discontinuous temporality, not on the forward movement of writing or sketching, and proposes instead the corporeal metaphor of the body's internal structure as the pictorial effect of Marden's glyphs.[16] Bois, moreover, dismisses the effect of Chinese poetic content on Marden's calligraphic style. In this resistance to the example of cohabitation offered by Chinese poetry and painting one may see an echo of Greenberg's insistence that twentieth-century arts grow out of their own media and cannot serve another medium (hence his rejection of Surrealist painting as too "literary"). However, Bois' identification of calligraphy with literariness and linearity is not self-evident. A historian of Chinese art, Jonathan Hay, contends that the practice of calligraphy is founded on "the tensions between the grid and its decomposition, between unilinear temporality and a pictorial negation of that temporal order, and between graphic flatness and surface depth."[17] In other words, it participates in the same struggles that Greenberg ascribed to avant-garde painting. Hay also notes an expansion of Marden's Chinese frame of reference since 1993, paralleled by a further engagement with the body or corporeal form. Marden's recently-adopted studio name, "Propitious Garden of Plane Image," combines a Chinese reference (propitious garden) with the core concept of modern art and modernist criticism (plane image).

The present essay first discusses Marden's Chinese work in relation to the artistic and spiritual quest in his early abstract paintings. Emphasis is placed on their ground, or their handling of the pictorial support — canvas, paper, etc.—, and focuses on the exchange between window and wall metaphors inspired by Piet Mondrian's (1872-1944) studio wall-works and Abstract Expressionism. Second, more details are offered on the relationship

16 Yve-Alain Bois, "Marden's Doubt," in Bois, et al., *Brice Marden: Paintings 1985-1993* (Bern: Kunsthalle Bern, 1993), 19, 35, 37. He considers Richardson's monograph (1992) as a representative case of a perfunctory mode of critical entry through calligraphic reading since 1987 (17, n. 2).

17 Jonathan Hay, "Marden's Choice," in Jonathan Hay, *Brice Marden: Chinese Work* (New York: Mathew Mark, 1998), 10-11.

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between word and image in his *Cold Mountain*, a group of paintings and drawings inspired by the poems of Hanshan (*fl.* 627-649). Third, Marden's action of writing will be related to the Chinese literary tradition of writing poetry on walls or rocks. In his recent China-related work, Marden revives dance subjects of wall decorations in Western modern art and thus rediscovers pictorial foundations common to both Western and Chinese cultures. By means of *painterly* drawing inspired by Chinese calligraphy, Marden paradoxically reinvents the modernist wall metaphor—no longer as a synonym for flatness but as a pictorial support for virtual volume and depth, in the sense of openness and breaking through modernist and post-modernist dogmas.

I. Tiles and Walls

Marden was first known as a minimalist painter because of the literalness and conceptual complexities of his monochrome panels, whose physicality (what Michael Fried called "objecthood") inspire the spectator's poetic imagination.[18] Marden worked on subdued color planes or panels, on a scale comparable to the human figure, until the mid-1980s. To avoid too much brightness on the picture plane, he used beeswax mixed with oil paint.[19] Marden's use of wax also indicates his interest in the sense of slowness in Jasper Johns' painting. Johns first consistently used wax to allow the paint to dry faster so that he could put on another stroke without altering the first.[20] But the color plane was not Marden's sole artistic penchant. While a student at Yale University (1961-1963), Marden had already become interested in drawing and he acknowledged more influence from Esteban Vicente, an Old-World Spanish painter, than from Josef Albers, who

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18 Marden's statements in Carl Andre, "Line Work," *Arts Magazine* (May 1967, New York); quoted and commented in Goldstein, *A Minimal Future?*, 276.

19 For the view that Marden's color planes are post-minimalist, see Linda Shearer, "Brice Marden's Paintings," in Shearer, et al., *Brice Marden* (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1975), 9-27.

20 Michael Crichton, *Jasper Johns*, 28. The sense of slowness is comparable to Cézanne's conspicuously separate brushstrokes.

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promoted abstract color interactions.[21] As shall be seen, his interest in drawing turned out to be crucial to his cross-cultural contributions to painting in the 1980s.

In the 1960s, Marden multiplied the axial bisections of his surface to form a compositional grid, giving varied textures to each equally divided rectangle. The compositional grid pattern had been much exploited by Mondrian and Dutch De Stijl artists, and it has become an emblematic form of abstraction. Marden's grid pattern at this point recalled Johns' number paintings, which Marden had studied closely at the Jewish Museum in 1963. Many of his earlier paintings were of a monochromatic field with a three-sided border. *Decorative Painting* (1964) was intended to fit in a space on a wall in his New York studio.[22] This practical motive makes the reference to the wall an interactive process for painting, not a one-way circuit as Greenberg described it. In other words, a wall and a painting designed for it articulate each other. However, Marden actually began making grid drawings in Paris in 1964, at first by doing rubbings of kitchen tiles, simply because he had no place to paint (Fig. 2). He painted a blank surface over a preliminary grid of the kitchen tiles and developed his multiple layering of color planes. He tended to leave unpainted a lower edge of one-half to one inch wide, where drips of paint accumulated and thus left traces of the painting process.[23] During his four-month stay in Paris, Marden became fascinated with the old walls being cleaned up (an initiative of the Minister of Culture André Malraux). He "sat and watched them plaster walls all day, do[ing] this fantastic accumulation of drips" on the old walls. At the same time, he was reading the journal *Art International*, in which Greenberg was championing Morris Louis's and Kenneth Noland's works as the new models of modernist painting, on account of the optical identification between color and ground (canvas) in their paintings. Marden also saw his first Nolands and Louises in Paris, at Lawrence Rubin's gallery. Marden compared Jasper Johns's grid paintings with his own experimental efforts in

21 John Yau, "An Interview with Brice Marden," in Eva Keller and Regula Malin, eds., *Brice Marden* (Zurich: Daros, 2003), 55.

22 John Yau, "An Interview with Brice Marden," 45.

23 For a thorough description of Marden's technique until 1973, see Roberta Pancoast Smith, "Brice Marden's Painting," *Arts Magazine*, 47:7 (1973, New York), 36-41.

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that direction, and he said that the grid should be "equally divided."[24] Thus, the reference to everyday life in Johns' art provided a counterpoint to Greenberg's pure abstraction. However, the modular grid also reflects the influence of Mondrian's Neo-Plastic compositions and Marden's handling of color was in the monochromatic vein of Franz Kline (1910-1962). The conjoined influence of Mondrian and Kline accounts for the temporality (in the sense of in process) and the meditative quality of Marden's early work.

The experience of viewing old Parisian walls appears to have inspired his search for painterly action. Returning to New York, he came to conceive of paintings as "large areas of one color, maybe two strips down the outside, or just like two rectangles ... put on with a brush and worked with a palette knife, lots of varnish, [with a] very oily kind of surface."[25] In the 1970s, arranging several panels of identical shapes in each painting allowed Marden to emphasize the variations in color. The *Annunciation* series, five groups of assembled vertical and horizontal panels, focused on the permutation of color to depict the five states of mind of the Virgin Mary — *Conturbatio* (Disquiet), *Cogitatio* (Reflection), *Interrogatio* (Inquiry), *Humiliatio* (Submission), and *Meritatio* (Merit) — as interpreted in Michael Baxandall's sociological study on fifteenth-century Florentine painting.[26] The painting was conceived during the pregnancy of Marden's wife, Helen.[27] Art and life are almost always associated in Marden's painting. Moreover, different from Baxandall's idea of a period eye specific to fifteenth-century Florentines, Marden's

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24 Brice Marden, "Oral history interview with Brice Marden," interview by Paul Cummings, October 3, 1972. In *Archives of American Art,* [online database] Smithsonian Institute. See also Clement Greenberg, "Louis and Noland," *Art International,* Vol. 4 (May 1960, Lugano); repr. in *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Vol. 4,* 97, 99. Marden probably also read Michael Fried's "New York Letter: Louis, Chamberlain and Stella, Indiana," (1962) and "New York Letter: Noland, Thiebaud," (1963), both published in *Art International.*

25 Paul Cummings, "Interview with Brice Marden."

26 Jean-Claude Lebensztejn, "Mûmu. Autour de cinq *Annonciations* de Brice Marden," *Avant-guerre,* 1 (1980), 11-15. Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972, 1988, 2nd ed.), 45-56. See Klaus Kertess, *Brice Marden: Paintings and Drawings* (New York: Abrams, 1992), 98-102, plates.

27 Charles Wylie, *Brice Marden: Work of the 1990s; Paintings, Drawings, and Print* (Dallas: Dallas Museum of Art, 1998), 28.

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abstract color panels seem to hint at cross-cultural and intertemporal correspondences.[28]

In the early 1980s, Marden's multi-panel Greek paintings often involve subtle variations of the picture plane. One of his best-known "post and lintel paintings," *Thira* (1979-1980), composed of eighteen panels, refers to the myth of Theseus, the Minoan palace of Knossos, and the classical Doric style of architecture (Fig. 3).[29] The arrangement recalls the painted walls and labyrinthine division, enclosure and opening, of a reconstructed Minoan palace.[30] *Thira* is the ancient name for the island of Santorini, while the homophonic Greek word *thyra* means door.[31] *Thira* is intended to make a space through color variations of value among the panels, while, according to Marden, "modernist painting has been about how the color comes up closer to the surface and how that affects the viewer."[32] For Greenberg, who preferred the optical identification between color and ground in modernist painting to the tactile or spatial effect of Cubist light and dark, "color meant areas and zones, and the interpenetration of these, which could be achieved better by variations of hue than by variations of value."[33] The critic also regretted the immediate perception of illusionistic space "behind the frame" in Abstract Expressionism.[34] The reference to architecture and space becomes a major theme in his Greek work.[35] Marden's color and surface produce the physicality and spatiality of walls.

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28 According to Marden, "art is not about sociology or criticism, art is about art"; Lilly Wei, "Talking Abstract," 83.

29 Niki Hale, "Of a Classic Order: Brice Marden's *Thira*," *Arts Magazine*, 55:2 (October 1980, New York), 152-153.

30 Vincent Scully's *The Earth, the Temple, and the Gods: Greek Sacred Architecture* has been one of Marden's favorite readings; John Yau, "An Interview with Brice Marden," 49.

31 The author would like to thank Haun Saussy for his instruction in Greek language, October 2005.

32 Marden's statement in John Yau, "An Interview with Brice Marden," 51.

33 Clement Greenberg, "Louis and Noland," 96-97.

34 Clement Greenberg, "After Abstract Expressionism," *Art International*, Vol. 8 (October 1962, Lugano); repr. in *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Vol. 4*. 124.

35 Marden is also interested in artifacts from other ancient cultures, such as the false doors in an Egyptian tomb providing a sense of blocked opening; Jeremy Lewison, *Brice Marden: Prints 1961-1991: A Catalogue Raisonné* (London: Tate Gallery, 1991), 42.

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In the early 1980s, too, Marden comes closer than before to the spiritualist abstraction that had inspired Mondrian's choice of a grid structure.[36] In studies for the stained-glass windows at the Basel cathedral (1978-1985), Marden stopped using wax and focused on line drawings brightened by almost transparent color, but he introduced the diagonal to combine the colors in lines and planes. For example, he produced three colors in linear figures (red, yellow, blue) and four monochromatic panels (red, green, yellow, blue) in *Second Window Painting* (Fig. 4).[37] The diagonal lines are distributed according to three axes falling along the central axis and two vertical borders of the central panel, which is rendered with mixed and diluted colors of the other four panels. The variations of colors and angles of the diagonals make the grids underlying each panel more translucent and interrelated. Marden treats his canvasses as walls, doors, windows, and grids — in short, his painting incorporates architectural surface and space, reversing Greenberg's formalist predictions of the absolutely flat picture plane.

Marden discovered Asian calligraphy from his wife, Helen, a Californian with a particular affinity for Asian culture. (Again Helen played the role of cross-cultural muse.) After traveling for two or three months with his family in Asia in 1984, Marden became fascinated with Eastern calligraphy.[38] He would be most impressed by the exhibition of Japanese masters of calligraphy at the Asia Society and the Japan House galleries in New York.[39] His calligraphic-style paintings from 1985 to 1987 came out of the drawings he made in Thailand. Looking at calligraphy as painting, rather than as writing, he tried to follow the particular stroke order of the script to see how a character is made. This yielded a completely new reading to

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36 On interpretations of Mondrian as a formalist or spiritualist, see respectively Yve-Alain Bois, "The Iconoclast," in Bois, et al., *Piet Mondrian, 1872–1944* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1994), 313-372; and Carel Blotkamp, *Mondrian: The Art of Destruction* (New York: Abrams, 1994).

37 John Yau, "An Interview with Brice Marden," 51.

38 Paul Gardner, "Call It a Mid-Life Crisis," 143.

39 Brenda Richardson, *Brice Marden: Cold Mountain*, 49. See the exhibition catalogue, Yoshiaki Shimizu and John M. Rosenfield, *Masters of Japanese Calligraphy: 8th to 19th Century* (New York: The Asia Society Galleries; Japan House Gallery, 1984).

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Marden, one in his view "much closer to the real energy of [the script] — the complexity and the control — and this is when it [the Chinese inspiration] really starts soaring."[40] This "new reading" actually corresponds to the Chinese "traditional" synthesis of writing and painting. Marden developed in his glyphs (1986) a further link with gestural painting of Abstract Expressionism.[41] For him, they were like the skeletons or structures of his early paintings.[42]

Marden did not approach Chinese poetry and painting as a specialist. "I don't know anything about the (Chinese) language, but Ezra Pound says if you are in any way receptive, you'll get it."[43] His initiation into Chinese poetry came from Ezra Pound's (1885-1972) *Cathay* (1915) and Kenneth Rexroth's translations of thirty-six poems by Du Fu (712-770), as well as Peter Matthiessen's *Nine-Headed Dragon River: Zen Journals 1969-1982*.[44]

Between 1988 and 1991, Marden did six renderings of *Cold Mountain*, together with a series of drawings. They were based on Red Pine's (Bill Porter) translations of the poems by Hanshan that had Chinese text on one page and the English translation on the other.[45] Marden's efforts in visualizing Hanshan's poems proved to be crucial to his pictorial transformation. He had first come across Hanshan's poems through Gary Snyder's (b. 1930) translation when he was in college in the early 1960s.[46] Snyder's translation was very popular among the Beats: in fact, Jack Kerouac's (1922-1969) *The Dharma Bums* (1958) was dedicated to Hanshan and quoted Snyder's Hanshan repeatedly.[47] For Marden, who had been carrying around Arthur Waley's

40 Jonathan Hay, "An Interview with Brice Marden," in Jonathan Hay, *Brice Marden: Chinese Work*, 24-25.

41 Klaus Kertess, "Plane Image: The Painting and Drawing of Brice Marden," in Klaus Kertess, *Brice Marden*, 42-44.

42 Paul Gardner, "Call It a Mid-Life Crisis," 142.

43 Lilly Wei, "Talking Abstract," 83.

44 Brenda Richardson, *Brice Marden: Cold Mountain*, 51, 76.

45 Hanshan, *The Collected Songs of Cold Mountain*, translated by Red Pine, Port Townsend, (Washington: Copper Canyon Press, 1984), 200, rev. ed..

46 Brenda Richardson, *Brice Marden: Cold Mountain*, 51. Gary Snyder, "Cold Mountain Poems," *Evergreen Review*, No. 6 (August 1958, New York); Gary Snyder, *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems* (Washington, D. C.: Shoemaker & Hoard, 1958), 35-67.

47 Jack Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums* (1958), (New York: Penguin, 1976), 21-22, quotations of

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(1889-1966) *The Way and Its Power* (1958) for years, "the poems of Hanshan, his life, the landscape, [and] its spirituality" took on a very real focus. In contrast to Snyder's dense rendition, Red Pine's translation is in a more Zen-like style — very short sentences composed of everyday words without any signs of punctuation — in which the meaning depends on the syntactical break of each line, so as to enhance its openness.[48] In short, Red Pine's translations conformed more than Snyder's to Marden's ideal of *plain* images.

The transposition of Chinese calligraphy to abstract painting had been already accomplished within European modernism. In his quest for a new art free of inherited representational conventions, Roger Fry (1866-1934) looked to certain non-European traditions, including the Egyptian, the Byzantine, and the Chinese, for compositional principles (i.e., related to the pictorial surface) in non-representational art. He believed that useful objects attract no particular attention — only certain things such as Chinese decorative objects or jewelry, could arouse aesthetic thinking.[49] Fry posited that Chinese art is concerned with compositional equilibrium, and he thought that some contemporary European artists had more affinity to Chinese art than to the "grand tradition" of European art. He identified three characteristics of "Chinese art": the linear rhythm of calligraphic drawing, the rhythmic continuity on the pictorial surface (i.e., a regular compositional

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Gary Snyder, #8, #3, #10.

48 Take for instance, the poem about the path to Cold Mountain in the two versions. Gary Snyder #8 reads: "Clambering up the Cold Mountain path, / The Cold Mountain trail goes on and on: / The long gorge choked with scree and boulders, / The wide creek, the mist-blurred grass. / The moss is slippery, though there's been no rain / The pine sings, but there's no wind. / Who can leap the world's ties / And sit with me among the white clouds?" Red Pine #32 reads: "Who takes the Cold Mountain Road / takes a road that never ends / the rivers are long and piled with rocks / the streams are wide and choked with grass / it's not the rain that makes the moss slick / and it's not the wind that makes the pines moan / who can get past the tangles of the world / and sit with me in the clouds". Red Pine's translation approaches the Daoist non-interference promoted by Wai-lim Yip, *Ezra Pound's Cathay* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969).

49 Roger Fry, "An Essay in Aesthetics," *New Quarterly* 2 (April 1909, London), 171-190, repr. in J. B. Bullen, ed., *Vision and Design* (London, 1920); repr. New York: Dover, 1998), 12-32 (18).

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pattern), and round shapes such as globe, egg, and cylinder.[50]

After World War II, some accomplished artists such as Henri Michaux (1899-1984), Mark Tobey (1890-1976), and Franz Kline, drew on Chinese calligraphy. For example, Pierre Soulages (b. 1919), inspired by Victor Segalen's (1878-1919) *Stèles*, simulated ideograms on a large shiny surface.[51] Many Western artists have tended to be fascinated with the rhythmic and gestural (or corporeal) quality of Chinese calligraphy. Marden, on the other hand, had a special interest in visual organization. Seeing Kline's intention of appropriating "flying white" strokes as efforts in a single element, Marden chose to study the notion of "skeleton (bones)" in Chinese calligraphy.[52] Marden thus appropriates the interplay of drawing, surface and depth in Chinese writing and painting, which distinguishes his Chinese effort from the work on surface of his precedents.

II. Cold Mountain and the Wall for Meditation

Marden followed the classical principles of Chinese calligraphy that connect abstraction with figuration. In the supposed words of the primordial master calligrapher Wang Xizhi (c. 321-379), calligraphy should be "music without sound, image without form, every horizontal stroke is like a mass of clouds in battle strength, every dot like a falling rock from a high peak, every turning of the stroke like a brass hook, every drawn-out line like a dry vine of great old age, and every swift and free stroke like a runner on his start."[53] The figural evocation calls to mind Daisetz Suzuki's (1870-1966)

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50 Roger Fry, "The Significance of Chinese Art," repr. in *Chinese art: an introductory handbook to painting, sculpture, ceramics, textiles, bronzes and minor arts*, Roger Fry, et al. *Burlington Magazine* (monograph, 1925); new edition, with an introduction by Madame Quo Tai-Chi (Taipei: Southeast Asia, 1967), 1-5.

51 Michael Sullivan compares Kandinsky's theory of resonance to the principle of spiritual resonance in Chinese painting, and suspects the close parallels between the existentialist gestures of Pollock, Kline or Soulages and Zen ink painting are not accidental. Michael Sullivan, *The Meeting of Eastern and Western Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989; 1997, rev. ed..), 244-246.

52 John Yau, "An Interview with Brice Marden," 57-58.

53 Lilly Wei, "Talking Abstract," 83.

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comparison of the world of Zen to the artist's world of creating "forms and sounds out of formlessness and soundlessness."[54]

The line drawings in Marden's six paintings of *Cold Mountain* show a development from vertical figural drawings based on calligraphic couplets towards intricate web weaving. Marden says he was thinking in terms of a calligraphic handscroll.[55] In *Cold Mountain I* (Fig. 5), for example, he simulated four couplets on a grid module, a very common way of presenting the Chinese regular style of writing (C: *kaishu*). From *Cold Mountain II* to *Cold Mountain IV*, he moved toward the constantly changing characters of Zen writing, not unlike the "wild cursive" (C: *kuangcao*) of the *Autobiographical Scroll* (777) by the famous Chan (J: *Zen*) monk-calligrapher Huaisu (c. 725-785).[56] In *Cold Mountain IV*, some vague human figures emerge from the web of drawing and look as if they are moving toward one side or the other. In *Cold Mountain VI*, the horizontal and the diagonal connecting the columnar figures become stronger, evoking more balanced and interrelated movement from one side to the other.

Marden's rendering of the ground in this series is distinguished from that in earlier paintings. In general, the picture planes appear lighter and occasionally have some transparent spots due to thin over-painting. In *Cold Mountain II*, smudges and dripping of faded dark green tones under brighter lines add to the sense of immediacy of the act of painting, in contrast to the finished quality of controlled line drawing. Such incidental marks also allude to natural traces on exterior or garden walls. Marden works the ground more or less like a house painter. He thins the paint with terpineol, a very strong solvent, which demands to be done in one go for a large canvas. He works top to bottom that results in dripping. He then reworks the canvas, "putting the paint on with a house-painting brush, and scraping the excess off with a knife," to prevent excessive buildup. The process of scraping down, because

54 Daisetz Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture* (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1959), 17.

55 The artist's statement, in Brenda Richardson, *Brice Marden: Cold Mountain*, 56.

56 See Chih-liang Na, ed., *Choice Works of Calligraphy in the National Palace Museum* (Taipei: National Palace Museum, 1969), 61-62, plate 4. See also Yee Chiang, *Chinese Calligraphy: An Introduction to Its Aesthetic and Techniqu* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979, 3rd ed..), 97. See also Tseng Yuho, *A History of Chinese Calligraphy* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1993), 261-269, on wild-cursive script and Huaisu's art.

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of the nature of the solvent, dissolves as well some of the layer beneath. Different layers of ground colors will mix, yielding an opaque color.[57]

Although Marden's *Cold Mountain* paintings are not precisely illustrations of the poetry, he did subtitle three paintings of the six and suggested, without specifying, their meanings. In the plain style of Zen verse, Hanshan wrote about various emotions experienced on his quest for the "true path" (*dao*, or *tao* in Red Pine's translation) — frustration, independence, nostalgia, doubt, and openness. Marden seems to relate Hanshan's poems to his own artistic quest, a relatively isolated and "archaizing" path in the contemporary art world. *Cold Mountain I (Path)* has a subtitle revealing Marden's reflection on the verbal tendency in contemporary art (Fig. 5). Red Pine's translations use the word *path* sparingly (#89, #207), while most of the words corresponding to *dao* in Chinese are rendered as "way" (#16), "road" (#32), or "trail" (#35). One of the rare instances of the word "path" is in a poem about the Buddhist practice of reciting:

> They don't walk the Noble Path
> They say they believe as they go astray
> Their tongues don't stop before buddhas
> Their hearts overflow with envy
> In private they eat fish and meat
> In public they chant *O-mi-to-fo*
> If this is how they cultivate
> How will they deal with disaster (Red Pine #76)

Hanshan mocks practitioners who take the common path of recitation, instead of the higher path of Zen meditation (see below).[58] Marden noted in 1974 the situation of a painter in New York: "I've heard it said, / Painting is dead. / Too much mouth / Not enough eyes." Marden personally heard this chant uttered, often by artists on completion of a new piece, in downtown Manhattan. Moreover, it was accompanied by "a gleeful soft step dance too

57 Jonathan Hay, "An Interview with Brice Marden," 19.

58 Gary Snyder first translated the word *tao* into path (Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums*, 21), and changed it into *trail* in the final version (1958, 46); Jacob Leed, "Gary Snyder, Hanshan, and Jack Kerouac," *Journal of Modern Literature* 11: 1 (March 1984, Bloomington, IN), 192.

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complicated to define," but clearly signifying joy.[59] The robust materiality in Marden's *Grove Group* thus marks his reflection on the origins of painting at a Greek site, as a way out of the sophisticated art world in contemporary New York.

In *Cold Mountain I (Path)*, the semi-calligraphy follows a clear pattern on the right, turning into freer strokes and shapes toward the left.[60] The last vertical line simulates three or four characters — not five as it is in the poem, to leave an opening on the lower left. Thus, the figural drawing appears with gesticulation, each columnar figure pointing at another, and gradually merging into the void on the lower margins. The indeterminate figuration appearing through gray wash indicates a movement leading into and out of the pictorial space, recalling the elusive trail in such late Pollock paintings as *White Light* (1954, Museum of Modern Art, New York) that Marden admired. In other words, the ambivalent figuration of human size in the *Cold Mountain* paintings enacts the virtual space of the picture plane, relating the wall metaphor to transparent pictorial depth which invites the spectator to trace the interwoven trails or get lost in it.

Marden's resolve in his spiritual quest can be seen in *Cold Mountain V (Open)* (Fig. 6). In his words, he was bent on producing these paintings that "offer open situations that are not infinitely open but are rather more open than a lot of other situations." The painter would not be able to just *attain* such situations but would have to come across them in the process of painting. He would have to avoid identifying himself with his painting; he would have to forget himself.[61] The resulting unmade openness would be at the same time monumental and vulnerable to change.

The subtitle *Open* is related to the description of Hanshan's dwelling, material and spiritual:

> Cold Mountain owns a house
> with no partitions inside
> six doors open left and right
> from the hall he sees blue sky

59 Brice Marden, *The Grove Group*, 21.

60 Brice Marden, *Cold Mountain I (Path)*, 1988-89, oil on linen, 274.3 x 365.8 cm, Thomas Ammann, Zürich.

61 The artist's statement, Brenda Richardson, *Brice Marden: Cold Mountain*, 74.

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wherever he looks it's bare
the east wall greets the west
nothing stands between them
no need for anyone's care... (Red Pine #167)

The "six doors" refer to the six senses of the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and will in Buddhist terminology. Hanshan's poem leads us to interpret the walls as the external structure, or shell, of the human body, open to nature. For a Zen Buddhist temple, two rooms are essential: the meditation–(or Zen) hall (C: *chantang*, J: *zendo*) and the recitation hall (C: *nianfotang*), representing two different paths for spiritual exercise. Most practitioners choose the path of chanting *O-mi-to-fo* (name of the Amitabha Buddha). However, illustrious monks have almost always performed Zen sittings for five or six years before reaching enlightenment. The Zen meditation hall, with one opening as the sole entrance and exit, is sparsely furnished with a stone bank along the four walls. During their meditation sessions, two seasons every year, practitioners sit on the bank, facing the wall, to inquire through the six senses, in memory of Bodhidharma's (c. 440-?) meditation that involved nine years of sitting facing a rock wall.[62] Red Pine characterizes Bodhidharma's teaching of wall meditation as the equation of Zen with buddhahood along with the everyday mind, and his "walls of emptiness connect all opposites, including self and other, mortal and sage." Bodhidharma's meditation was that of Mahayana Zen, not Hinayana Zen — symbolized by the sword of wisdom, not the meditation cushion.[63] Hanshan claims to have written all of his 600 poems on rock walls (Red Pine #268), apparently alluding to Bodhidharma's meditation. In the eighth century, the Chan (Zen) monk Huaisu expanded the practice, writing on walls, rocks and various other more banal surfaces,[64] apparently engaging in typical Zen activity.

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62 The author is indebted to Chou Po-Kan for his instruction on Buddhist practice, October 2005. After translating Hanshan's poems, Gary Snyder also turned toward the zendo; Gary Snyder, *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems*, 66.

63 Red Pine, trans., *The Zen Teaching of Bodhidharma* (New York: North Point Press, 1987), xi-xv, 3, 115, n2. Bodhidharma, the (lengendary) patriarch of Zen Buddhists, was a Hindu Brahman and prince by birth who converted to Buddhism. He supposedly brought Zen to Southern China around 475 C.E..

64 Chih-liang Na, ed., *Choice Works of Calligraphy in the National Palace Museum*, 103-104.

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In all six *Cold Mountain* paintings, the repeated scraping and sanding made the canvas ground appear similar to old walls or ancient rocks.[65] Marden's color drawing thus approaches Hanshan's act of writing on walls. *Cold Mountain, Zen Studies 1* in its early state (1990) communicates some anxious twisting confined to a regular grid pattern, some of the large dark strokes showing dramatic movements and sudden stops or turns.[66] In *Cold Mountain 5 (Open)*, the fluid movement of the figural evocation over the whole pictorial space, produced by means of interweaving black and grayish blue lines, appears solemnly organized and is therefore distinguished from the frantic interlacing of the previous four *Cold Mountain* paintings.

Marden's earlier paintings had already manifested a contemplative quality. In the vertical monochrome panels of *Fave* (1968-1969) and *For Pearl* (1970), Marden intended to "stop the flow of sensation."[67] Referring to Goya's seemingly static female presence in a tripartite verticality in *D'après la Marquise de la Solana* (1969, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York), the narrow gap between the panels, emphasized by the dark color on the sides, produces an ambivalent effect somewhere between closing and opening, between moving and stopping, like stone walls and gates in an enchanted palace. With the earlier monochrome paintings, the spectator contemplating the physicality of the picture plane experienced temptation and enlightenment, illusion and disillusion.

In contrast, after his "brush" with Chinese calligraphy, Marden is able to assert firmer control over the fluid meditation. The modular grid in *Cold Mountains* is based on the ground structure in regular Chinese writing and printing. Calligraphers strove to render the spiritual resonance of the universe in complex skeins of handwriting. The calligraphers' *qi* (literally, the "breath") communicates from one line to the next, emerging from and going beyond the grid.[68] This spirituality actually involves coordinated body

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65 See also Brenda Richardson, *Brice Marden: Cold Mountain*, 67.

66 Brenda Richardson, *Brice Marden: Cold Mountain*, 121, illustration.

67 On *Fave*, *For Pearl* and other monochrome paintings, see Brice Marden's conversation with Richard Shiff, February 12, 2006; Richard Shiff, "Force of Myself Looking," in Gary Garrels, *Plane Image*, 59.

68 Concerning the *qi* or *qihou*, see the nineth-century author Zhang Huaiguan's theory on *cao* (cursive) script, as commented upon in John Hay, "The Human Body as a Microcosmic

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movement and breathing. Putting down vertical lines from right to left, the calligrapher usually maintains the brush at a certain distance from the paper, the wall or some other support, to allow the optimum reflection on the handwriting. In so doing, the calligrapher breaks up the boundary between art and nature, as the writing surface structured by a grid recaptures the body movement of the calligrapher in harmony with nature. In using the grid system of Chinese calligraphy, Marden reinforces the stability of his work. Moreover, the direction in which the drawing is done (from top to bottom) relates to Marden's earlier work, where there was dripping along the bottom edge.[69] In short, Marden's Chinese work enhances his articulation of the spatio-temporal structure of the picture plane.

III. Inter-textual Writing on the Wall

With the layering of drawing and painting, the six *Cold Mountain* paintings appear as monumental surfaces of memory, but not to be remembered, only to be looked at.[70] Drawing that simulates writing is intended to be seen, not read, as traces of man becoming one with nature. There is apparently a psychological *double-entendre* in Marden's handwriting of Chinese characters, or, the artist's presence through Chinese *characters*. Chinese calligraphy is, after all, about energy or vitality materializing through the brush into the ink-trace.[71] In Marden, the energy embodied in the materiality of Chinese calligraphy is metamorphosed into the act of drawing. In the *Cold Mountain* paintings, some shimmering surfaces interlace with the skeins of drawings, and the color washes take on a shamanistic aspect. Marden painted things out, making corrections by painting over with white. In this way, "what was painted out also became a

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Source of Macrocosmic Values in Calligraphy," in Susan Bush and Christian Murck, eds., *Theories of the Arts in China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 87-88.

69 John Yau, "An Interview with Brice Marden," 58.

70 Jonathan Hay, "An Interview with Brice Marden," 20.

71 John Hay, "The Human Body," 89; quoted as being from *Theories of Art in China* [*sic*] in Yoshiaki Shimizu and John M. Rosenfield, *Masters of Japanese Calligraphy*, 33. Shimizu and Rosenfeld's exhibition catalogue is one of Marden's favorite references.

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positive image. It was sort of like a ghost image."[72] The act of erasure turns into a positive act with its own trace, indicating the presence of something beneath, behind, or beyond.

The aesthetics of presence (not representation) relates Marden's drawing to the Chinese tradition of writing on walls. Writing poems on walls, a Chinese literary tradition starting from the seventh century, turns the wall into a site of memory. Inspired by the site, literati would leave their handwriting on a wall, usually in public spaces, which in turn might inspire literary acquaintances or newcomers with corresponding states of mind to express their thoughts in poetry. Recording poems through chance spiritual encounters and losing them through time, the inscribed wall turns into a memento of continuity and discontinuity of human emotion. Poems inscribed on walls, known in Chinese as *tibishi*, tend to elicit a melancholy response to the evanescence of life and the inevitability of loss. However, the materiality of writing on a wall related to a strong spiritual presence, and was sometimes associated, particularly in the seventeenth century, with ghosts whose intense emotions made them restless revenants.[73]

One could imagine that, in the same spirit, the tradition of New York painting becomes the historical inscription *in* the wall which Marden contemplates and writes through. Pollock could become both a material and a phantasmagoric presence in Marden's line-based paintings after 1989. Creating Marden's own historicity through the reminiscence of Pollock's picture plane, Marden used his drawing to probe in depth the wall/ground of painting and writing. On the other hand, the modular grid refers to a formal device that has been much exploited in abstract art from Mondrian and Dutch De Stijl artists.[74] In the grid system of *Victory Boogie Woogie* (1944, Gemeentemuseum, The Hague), Mondrian reinforces the flickering light at the crossing of different color bands. The jumpy surface relates at the same

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72 Pat Steir, "Brice Marden. An Interview," in *Brice Marden: Recent Drawings and Etchings* (New York: Matthew Marks Gallery, 1991), n.p.

73 Judith T. Zeitlin, "Disappearing Verses. Writing on Walls and Anxieties of Loss," in Judith T. Zeitlin and Lydia H. Liu, eds., *Writing and Materiality in China: Essays in Honor of Patrick Hanan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 73-125.

74 Rosalind Krauss, "Grids," in *The Originality of the Avant-garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), 8-22.

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time to materiality and spirituality. Mondrian's New York works are particularly relevant for Marden, who professes a rooted identification with the lights in the city.[75] Marden made a "boogie-woogie print," begun in 1973, carried on until 1979, and finally released in 1988. The layering of Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* might have inspired one of Marden's *Homage to Art* drawings (1973-1974).[76]

Marden's calligraphic drawing stresses the act of writing itself, not the resulting script, and thus approaches the first definition of writing in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: "The action of one who writes, in various senses," before "the penning or forming of letters or words; the using of written characters for purposes of record, transmission of ideas, etc."[77] Focused on the action at the expense of legibility, Marden's *Cold Mountain* paintings thus constitute a counter action to other contemporary artists' cynical use of language to teach the death of painting, a demise now enthusiastically embraced by magazines, galleries and museums. In Marden's view, "art isn't about cynicism; it's about faith and hope."[78] Breaking down the boundary between drawing and writing, Marden's line drawing comes close to Roland Barthes' (1915-1980) idea of graphism: "The artist's gesture (artist as gesture) does not break the causal chain of the acts, what Buddhists call the *karma*, ... but blurs it and relaunches it until its meaning gets lost." Graphism is, in short, an act of rupture reminiscent of the *satori* (enlightenment) in Zen.[79] Reminiscent of André Masson's (1896-

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75 The artist's statement; Brenda Richardson, *Brice Marden: Cold Mountain*, 79.

76 Jeremy Lewison, *Brice Marden: Prints 1961-1991*, nos. 35, 148, 45; Saul Ostrow, "Brice Marden Interview," *BOMB* (Winter 1988); both quoted in Yve-Alain Bois, "Marden's Doubt," 27, 29, n. 7.

77 The second definition is quoted as applicable to conceptual artists in Simon Morley, *Writing on the Wall: Word and Image in Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 6.

78 Lilly Wei, "Talking Abstract," 83. For an introduction to conceptual art, see Tony Godfrey, *Conceptual Art* (London: Phaidon, 1998).

79 Roland Barthes, "Cy Twombly ou Non multa sed multum," excerpt of Yvon Lambert, *Cy Twombly: catalogue raisonné des oeuvres sur papier* (Milan, 1979), in *L'obvie et l'obtus: Essais critiques* (Paris: Seuil, 1982), 148; trans. by Richard Howard, in *The Responsibility of Form* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 160-161. On *satori*, see Daisetz Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture*, 6, 10, 218-221.

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1987) inter-textual, cross-cultural writing, Marden's graphism also refers to various manners of inscription not so much bound to spelling out characters as to conveying the fluid energy of the artist's body.[80] In the same vein, Henri Michaux also remarks on the general tendency of eschewing the primitive ideographic legibility in different Chinese styles of writing and calligraphers' pursuit of liberty in gestural quality: *Voie par l'écriture*.[81]

In the 1990s, Marden drew on Chinese calligraphy and Greek classicism in his quest for natural forces. He noticed that, as he shaped his calligraphic work in the form of couplets, figures started to appear. As he worked, his paintings became much more about the movement of the body, making gestures. This led to a group of paintings and drawings about the nine figures of the Muses.[82] In the *Muses* (1991-1993), Marden maintained the grid as a compositional principle, though he also drew on the imaginary Maenads, predecessors of the Muses, who were not depicted in grid form.[83] Marden based his series of *Muses* on the interpretation of Robert Graves, who described them as *Bacchantes* intent on performing orgiastic dances, figures of Dionysian madness. Marden thus connects to the ancient theme of dance and riot, order and disorder.[84] In this series, he extends the act of writing toward what Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) described as "not only the physical gestures of literal pictographic or ideographic inscription," but "all that gives rise to inscription in general, whether it is literal or not and even if what it distributes in space is alien to the order of the voice: cinematography, choreography, of course, but also pictorial, musical, sculptural 'writing.'"[85]

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80 Roland Barthes, "Sémiographie d'André Masson," (1973) in *L'obvie et l'obtus*, 143; *The Responsibility of Forms*, 154.

81 Henri Michaux, *Idéogrammes en Chine* (Paris: Fata Morgana, 1975), n.p. Marden also owns a work of Henri Michaux; Jeremy Lewison, *Brice Marden: Prints 1961-1991*, 50.

82 Jonathan Hay, "An Interview with Brice Marden," 26. Brice Marden, *The Muses*, 1991-93, oil on linen, 274.3 x 457.2 cm, Daros collection, Switzerland.

83 John Yau, "An Interview with Brice Marden," 59.

84 Jonathan Hay, "An Interview with Brice Marden," 26; Mario Codognato, "A Cut through the Frieze of Time," in Mario Codognato ed., *Brice Marden. Works on Paper 1964-2001* (London: Trolley, 2002), 19.

85 Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Minuit, 1967); trans. by Gayatri C. Spivak, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 9.

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Marden's calligraphic drawing transformed the Maenads' physicality into a springboard for spirituality.

On the other hand, in *Chinese Dancing* (1993-1996), the interweaving curvilinear movement of relatively even lines of color evokes the ribbon dance.[86] The even distribution of paint on each single line ensures the physicality of the movement, which is consolidated by the layered rubbings of gray tones over some preceding colored lines. Billowing ribbons in Chinese dance are associated with clouds, evoking at the same time sensuality and spirituality — the "breath" or atmosphere of body movement. In Chinese visual culture, ribbons and clouds stand for male and female physicality, according to the conditioning terms with which they are associated. Ribbons with lively rhythm represent physical and psychological movement in Chinese painting, as seen in *Admonitions of the Palace Instructress* (British Museum, London), probably a Tang copy of a work by Gu Kaizhi (c.344-c.406). Floating ribbons in particular invoke a superhuman state associated with female rather than male subjects.[87]

In the eighth century (mid-Tang dynasty), Chinese artists, painting on the grotto walls of Dunhuang, preserved the immediacy of the sketch in rendering bodies in action in close relationship to the forces of nature. As Fraser points out, this new level of spontaneity was canonized during the ninth and tenth centuries (late Tang, Five Dynasties and early Song) and was supported by the three spheres of literati calligraphy, Chan meditation, and Daoist action.[88] Marden himself explained the corporeality of his figural painting of specific dances from the caves of Dunhuang as "a transference of

86 Brice Marden, *Chinese Dancing,* 1993-96, oil on canvas, 155 x 274.3 cm, The UBS Art Collection.

87 John Hay, "The Body Invisible in Chinese Art?" in Angela Zito and Tani E. Barlow, eds., *Body, Subject and Power in China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 52-56.

88 Sarah E. Fraser, *Performing the Visual: The Practice of Buddhist Wall Painting in China and Central Asia, 618-960* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 197-229. For example, Wu Daozi (*c.* 685-758) was canonized by the Tang Dynasty art historian Zhang Yenyuan on account of his "sparse style" of calligraphic drawing; Yenyuan Zhang, *Lidai minghua ji* 歷代名畫記 [Record of Famous Painters through the Ages, *ca.* 845-47], in Yu Anlan, ed., *Huashi congshu* [History of Painting Collection]. Taipei: Wenshi zhe, 1974, Vol. 1, 25-27.

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your [the artist's] own dance to the canvas."[89] Because of its Buddhist overtones, Chinese art of the eighth century such as the cave paintings at Dunhuang explicitly depicted elements of nakedness, especially of foreign bodies.[90] In this perspective, "Chinese dance" was a metonym of *Bacchante* sensuality and physicality. Marden's robust line drawing in *Chinese Dance* registers such physicality incisively and rediscovers the aesthetics of spontaneity of the Tang.

Marden transposed the dance on the wall in the caves of Dunhuang to the dance on the canvas. Dance on the canvas is also an apt metaphor of European modern painting, calling to mind Henri Matisse's (1869-1954) dance subjects for wall decoration. In addition to these pieces, Marden was also fascinated by the figure of The Hour in Botticelli's (1444-1510) *The Birth of Venus*, whose feet "both do and do not touch the ground."[91] In this way, Marden moves toward broader inter-cultural and inter-temporal references.

Marden moved further into cross-cultural painting with his trip to Suzhou in November 1995, when he was most impressed by the past influence of scholars in this city.[92] He also observed firsthand the famous rocks from Lake Tai, such as the *Cloud-Capped Peak* rock in the Garden of Lingering in Suzhou.[93] His *Suzhou, Before and After* (1995-1996) was inspired by and reflected the weird shapes of these rocks hollowed out by the action of strong currents in the lake.[94] The "physiognomy" of the rock, the foraminate texture and upright stance, evokes the human body in motion.[95] Such rocks were both the frame of a garden and, as symbols of

89 Jonathan Hay, "An Interview with Brice Marden," 21.

90 John Hay, "The Body Invisible in Chinese Art?" 59.

91 Marden also reported having seen, one summer in the late eighties, his daughters dancing in the light-filled room of his studio at Hydra, a vision of late childhood and the impending loss of their virginity; conversation with Brenda Richardson, about *#3* at the Baltimore Museum of Art (1987-88), 1991; Brenda Richardson, "Brice Marden, Lifelines," in *Abstraction, Gesture, Ecriture. Paintings from the Daros Collection* (Zurich: Scalo, 1999), 95.

92 Charles Wylie, *Brice Marden: Work of the 1990s*, 42.

93 Jonathan Hay, "An Interview with Brice Marden," 21.

94 Charles Wylie, *Brice Marden: Work of the 1990s*, No. 21.

95 On the association of Taihu rocks with the human body, see John Hay, *Kernels of Energy,*

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mountains, the principle agent of spatial-temporal transport.[96] By painting such rocks, Marden introduced further abstraction on his picture planes, but always with a natural reference.

Marden may also have been inspired by Suzhou to recoup some of the work of the modernists. Consciously or unconsciously, the capricious flow inward and outward of the picture plane in *Suzhou, Before and After* seems to paraphrase the stormy surge of Pollock's *The Deep* (1953, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris). Furthermore, the abstractness of rocks was also a favorite subject of Cézanne, whom Marden once called "my hero."[97] In Marden's *Red Rock 1* (2000/2002), red traces interpenetrate with the olive green ground (Fig. 7). The movement of the yellow and gray-blue lines is balanced by the large but hollow shape of red and yellow. The title and composition of this painting clearly refer to Cézanne's well-known *Red Rock* (Musée de l'Orangerie, Paris), in which the rock seems to hover as an abstract impression of orange color in the Provençal shimmering verdure. Marden's *Red, Yellow, Blue Drawing* also recalls the rich color and changing aspects of Cézanne's *Trees and Rocks near the Caves of the Château Noir* (1902-1906, Musée d'Orsay, Paris). In referring to Cézanne's rocks, Marden pushed further his reflection on the forms and subjects of modern painting.

In Marden's *Extended Window Painting* (1986-2001), solid curvilinear lines of yellow, red and black are painted over a greyish-white wash, which in turn is painted over some red lines on the left and a rectangular window grid, most visible on the right (Fig. 8). The four corners of the picture are painted over with yellow and black, which reconfigure the original grid. In *Red Rocks (1)* (2000-2002), the curvilinear movement is integrated into a fundamental grid structure. *Red Rocks (1)* is enacted by a strong flow of energy, invoked by geological structure. The dark purple ground appears as an infinite site of this inner mobility. The lower left corner is left open for

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Bones of Earth: the Rock in Chinese Art (New York: China House Gallery: China Institute in America, 1985), 20-22.

96 John Hay, *Kernels of Energy, Bones of Earth,* 15-17.

97 Brice Marden, "Past Recent Now," in Trevor Fairbrother, *Brice Marden: Boston* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1991), 30; quoted in Brenda Richardson, *Brice Marden: Cold Mountain*, 46.

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the passage of energy flow, and the other three corners are definitely enclosed. With the undulation of color lines around the edge, the picture plane itself becomes a sculpted body evoking a Taihu rock. In both works, the picture plane becomes the site of a dialectic between movement and stasis, a fusion of materiality with human rhythm through the framework of spirituality.

*

Since 1985, Marden has been working on "inter-textual" writing on the modernist metaphor of the wall surface, using Chinese calligraphy to articulate the spatio-temporal variations of the picture plane in contrast to the presumption of a single flat surface. In Marden's most recent work, three versions of *The Propitious Garden of Plane Image* (2000-2006), each composed of six panels, the color lines flowing inward and outward of the panels of spectral colors constitute a wall of light, recapturing the architectonic structure of *Thira*.[98] The interweaving acts of reclusion and expansion configure an imaginary space of eremitism in the modern city. The multiple pictorial spaces correspond to the complex structure of Cézanne's rocks on the one hand, and the spatial-temporal shifting in the garden imagery of Suzhou on the other.

According to Fry and others, linearity, rhythm and spirituality have been the major resources that Western artists have drawn from Chinese art. For Marden, the relationship among lines and between lines and the ground are equally fundamental. He distinguishes his line from Pollock's: Pollock's line falls on the surface to make the plane, while his own is embedded in the plane.[99] To talk of embeddedness is to invoke Rauschenberg's "all-purpose picture plane" as Steinberg called it. Marden has an urge to transcend the weight of the gallery wall. To enhance the sense of embeddedness, he prefers to hang paintings low, instead of, as usual, at a hypothetical eye level, because an eye-level picture seems to sit on (as well as hang from) a wall. Doing monochrome triptychs that are also figural, he sought to evoke an

98 See also Brenda Richardson, "Even a Stone Knows You," in Gary Garrels, *Plane Image*, 101-105.

99 John Yau, "An Interview with Brice Marden," 58.

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empathetic response from the spectator standing there.[100] In other words, the spectator is induced to look at his paintings close up, and to get inside his paintings through meditative viewing. In his words, the picture serves as a "trampoline to bounce on spirituality," or, more precisely, a trampoline of spirituality to bounce.[101] In retrospect, one may say that his earlier color panels were conceived as planes of spiritual resonance, similar to the walls of Hanshan's dwelling.

In Marden's hands, and with his persistent effort to fuse the materiality and spirituality from both Chinese and Western cultures, modernist painting becomes an art of inclusion, not exclusion. Marden induces viewers to rethink the physicality and materiality of Chinese art, and the abstractness and spirituality of Western modern art.[102] Insistently tracing his figures on a cultural wall, Marden creates a vision of material and spiritual transaction between East and West. Incorporating but also going beyond Greenberg's anti-representational purism, he re-invents and re-invigorates the multiplicity of modern painting. Marden let the world in again by bringing together different pictorial cultures into the indisputable space of the picture plane.

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100 Jonathan Hay, "An Interview with Brice Marden," 22.

101 Brice Marden, *The Grove Notebook*, Summer 1974, in *The Grove Group*, 21.

102 Arthur Danto is pleased to see the term "spirit" appear in contemporary discourse, as in Richardson and Garrel's comments on Brice Marden; "Surface Appeal," *The Nation*, 284:4 (January 29, 2007, New York), 34.

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頁 229-232 之八張附圖，因涉及版權問題，電子版無法提供，請見紙本《臺大歷史學報》40 期。

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書寫牆面
——布萊斯・馬登的中國作品與現代主義

劉 巧 楣*

提 要

布萊斯・馬登（Brice Marden，1938~）在 1960 年代末期開始作畫，被視為「低限主義派」，他很快就反對西方後現代主義者認為「繪畫已死」的觀念，並轉向中國書法尋求靈感，以復甦裝置於牆面之畫面觀念，作為繪畫之特徵。依照克里蒙・格林堡（Clement Greenberg，1909~1994）的形式主義藝術批評，以牆面為畫面根基的概念，意味著完全平面、非三度空間幻覺的圖畫表面，其典型為美國抽象表現主義畫家波洛克（Jackson Pollock，1912~1956）在 1947~1951 年間的壁畫式大尺幅油畫。格林堡的理論在 1940 年代末開始成為當代藝術論述與實作中最具影響力的說法，直到 1960 年代末才被質疑。馬登多方嘗試西方古典與現代藝術，又穿越一般看法中隔絕東方藝術之牆，從中國詩與唐代壁畫中的舞者，以及蘇州園林的湖石中汲取靈感。他重新發掘藝術史，因而重新解釋現代主義對畫面如牆面的譬喻，創造東方與西方之間的物質與心靈互動。相對於現代主義與後現代主義對繪畫的教條，馬登將不同的繪畫文化放在不容質疑的畫面空間，將世界的內容再度引進藝術的範疇。

關鍵詞：布萊斯・馬登　現代主義　繪畫　二十世紀

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