

# Mark Rothko: Art as an Experience. The Significance of Interaction between Painting and Viewer in the Rothko Chapel

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## **Abstract**

This article aims to investigate the possible terms and conditions that Mark Rothko imposes on the encounter between painting and viewer, especially concerning the paintings he made for the Houston Chapel, also called the Rothko Chapel, in 1965-1967, which in many ways differ significantly from his earlier paintings. In particular, the article seeks to throw light upon as well as to discuss the conditions that allow the viewer to interact with the paintings and derive a kind of meaning or content from the paintings and, on the other hand, the limitations and paradoxes that meet the viewer in that same process. Conclusively, the article suggests a nuanced view on the chapel paintings recognizing that these dark, inaccessible, almost monochrome paintings contribute to an essential discussion of the very role and meaning of art in a late modern context.

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## **Introduction: purpose and background**

[1] The title of this article is suggestive in the sense that it is implying that the interaction between artwork and viewer is a crucial element in the investigation of the possible terms and conditions for the encounter with Mark Rothko's late classical paintings. In this respect the article is placing itself in the context of the current interdisciplinary discourses within the humanities in general and of art historical research specifically acknowledging theories such as those of Presence and Performativity.<sup>1</sup> In his book *Production of Presence. What Meaning Cannot Convey*,

<sup>1</sup> See e.g.: Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence. What Meaning Cannot Convey*, Stanford 2003; Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, "Performance Studies", in: *The Performance*

literary and cultural theorist Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht is challenging the exclusive reliance on interpretation, and thereby on the reconstruction and attribution of meaning, which he considers the predominant paradigm within the humanities.<sup>2</sup> According to Gumbrecht, that way the humanities risk the "loss of world", the capability of addressing a dimension in all cultural phenomena that has equal importance as meaning. In the dimension of presence cultural phenomena such as artworks become tangible and have direct influence on our senses and bodies. Thus, Gumbrecht is exploring the lived experience of presence, the "presence effect", which is much different from the practice of interpretation sustained in traditional hermeneutics. The production of presence, though, is not being viewed simply as an "anti-hermeneutical" approach but, rather, as an attempt to balance the dimension of presence to the dimension of meaning. Furthermore, Gumbrecht emphasizes that it is not possible to be upholding presence and, at the same time, to be analyzing something. According to Gumbrecht's *presence*-aesthetics it is a question of losing oneself in moments of aesthetic intensity. Hence, a work of art may imply a temporary loss of oneself whereby artwork and viewer are being synchronized. This synchronism requires a state of mind of the viewer that is open as well as concentrated. In this way, the artwork can induce an experience of a "here and now", which appears to be both intransitive and intense, and not having any particular purpose or meaning. In our current society, which is allegedly overloaded with information calling for interpretation at all hours, the state or condition of presence seems to appeal to us in the sense that it provides for us the possibility of turning off the ever ongoing meaning-production which overwhelms us.

[2] As this article will show, the state or condition of presence seems to be of crucial importance for the encounter with the paintings in the Rothko Chapel. Not that there is no meaning at all to be unfolded in the encounter with Rothko's paintings but, rather, in the sense that the understanding of the painting occurs in the moment of interaction between painting and viewer, which is somewhat different from an intellectual, interpretative analysis. In addition, performance studies or theories of performance and performativity, which to some extent may be seen as a rethinking of phenomenology, seem to put into perspective the topic of this article in terms of emphasis on the entanglement of the perceiving subject and the object perceived as well as the unfolding of meaning-content in the encounter between artwork and viewer. Theories of performance and performativity do, however, also consider the social, cultural and historical space, in which perception is taking place. In this regard, these theories may be seen as an expansion of the phenomenological inquiry. According to the performative approach to art, attention is focused on the transformative effect of art, on performativity as an art form, on performative

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*Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Bial, London and New York 2004; Irit Rogoff, "Looking Away: Participation in Visual Culture", in: *Art Criticism: New Responses to Art and Performance*, ed. Gavin Butt, Oxford 2005; Angelika Nollert ed., *Performative Installation*, Cologne 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence. What Meaning Cannot Convey*, Stanford 2003.

processes, on artworks, which in different ways apply performative instruments rising questions such as how the artwork is presenting itself "on stage", how the artwork produces emotional impact and apprehensible effect, how the artwork relates to other artworks, how the artwork interacts with the viewer and with reality in terms of perceptual, ethical, or political aspects. Accordingly, when it comes to paintings, the viewer has to reflect on notions such as what is happening on the canvas, what is happening between painting and viewer, what kind of space is the painting creating around itself, what kind of situation is the painting creating in terms of involvement of the viewer. In this regard, performative art is approaching the viewer's own self directly, which means that the viewer has to reflect on his/her [below, feminine gender only] experience encountering the artwork and has to question her personal feelings and actions exerted in this encounter. In this way, it could be argued that Rothko's art is performative in the sense that it is presuming a self-reflecting viewer taking part in a dialogue with the artwork pointing forward, even, towards contemporary art forms such as interactive installation art.

[3] In 1964, Mark Rothko (1903-1970) is signing an agreement of creating a sequence of paintings as part of the indoor arrangements of a chapel, which is to be built on the campus of the University of St. Thomas in Houston, Texas. St. Thomas is a Catholic university enjoying the support of Dominique and John de Menil both highly cultivated and cosmopolitically oriented benefactors and collectors of art. The Menils' commission is to be executed in an exclusive collaboration with the architect Philip Johnson (1906-2005). On the request of Rothko, Johnson is drawing the original floor plan as an octagon, though later on he is withdrawing from the commission. The purpose-designed octagonal building eventually offers Rothko a customized setting where the architecture is subordinated to the demands of his paintings. Rothko is creating twenty-three panels, fourteen of which are installed the year after his death. By the time of the dedication in 1971, the Rothko Chapel is one of the world's broadly ecumenical centers, a holy place open to all religions. It has become a center for international cultural, religious, and philosophical exchanges, for colloquia and performances of different kinds as well as a place for private prayers of all faiths.<sup>3</sup>

[4] Rothko's artwork in the chapel consists of a triptych placed at the central wall, two triptychs placed respectively on the left and right hand wall, four individual paintings placed in between the triptychs, and finally, one individual painting facing the central triptych on the opposing wall at the entrance of the chapel. The paintings are carrying out a subtle interplay of very carefully juxtaposed colors of deep reds, browns, purples and blacks and seem almost like monochrome paintings. Visitors are caught in the tension created between the closed black canvas at the entrance and the more open and vibrant purple colored triptych at the central wall. The individual paintings are done in oil paint of several thin layers and measure around 5 to 10 by 15 feet each. The octagonal chapel is without windows, however the vaulted ceiling offers natural light to stream in.

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<sup>3</sup> For the history of the commission and execution of the Rothko Chapel see: Annie Cohen-Solal, *Mark Rothko. Toward the Light in the Chapel*, New Haven and London 2015.

[5] In the Houston Chapel Rothko makes great demands on the viewer, demands of substantial emotional input, of bringing herself into play and engaging actively with the paintings. In his book *Mark Rothko. From the Inside Out*, Rothko's son Christopher (born 1963) points out that, according to him, Rothko's works are suggestions or ideas expressed through color more than actual paintings, and that the real meaning of the painting manifests itself to the individual viewer in that precise moment where painting and viewer interact with one another. In other words, the content of the painting lies hidden in the interaction between painting and viewer. At the same time, Christopher Rothko describes that inside the chapel, as a viewer, one feels very much alone, isolated, and left to oneself without any obvious incentive to having a conversation or dialogue with the paintings. In other words, it is all about the viewer and the viewer's own ability to look at herself and to immerse herself completely in the encounter with the paintings.<sup>4</sup> Christopher Rothko's personal knowledge of Mark Rothko as a private person as well as an artist seems to put in perspective the subject of my investigation; his argumentation will therefore constitute a crucial focal point of the article's discussion.

[6] The question of "art as an experience" seems to be quite essential to Rothko who emphasizes several times throughout his artistic career the relation between painting and viewer. In 1951, Rothko pronounces that he is desirous of establishing an intimate and human relation between painting and viewer and of making paintings, which involve the viewer in such a way that she is experiencing herself being inside the painting.<sup>5</sup> Several art critics and theorists address the question of engaging in the chapel paintings in Houston. This article will discuss a few selected art critics who, from their individual standpoints, discuss Rothko's ambition to convey a religious or transcendental experience to the viewer.

[7] In the book *Art and Phenomenology*, Violetta L. Waibel reflects on Rothko's ability to provide an experience of transcendence in immanence by drawing a comparison to encounters with his paintings from the early 1950s. She points out the way in which Rothko manages to evoke an experience of three-dimensionality or depth in the viewer, which, according to her, is the beginning of a dialogue with the painting. Furthermore, Waibel points out that the viewer is experiencing herself being inside an enclosing entity, and also the fact that the viewer's concentrated attention on the painting creates an interplay between the exhibition space, the painting's space, and the space surrounding the viewer.<sup>6</sup>

[8] In her book *Mark Rothko. Toward the Light in the Chapel*, Annie Cohen-Solal points out that Rothko claimed full control over the presentation of his paintings. At his first

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<sup>4</sup> Christopher Rothko, *Mark Rothko. From the Inside Out*, New Haven and London 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Mark Rothko, "How to Combine Architecture, Painting, and Sculpture" [statement at a symposium, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1951, convened by Philip Johnson], in: Mark Rothko, *Writings on Art*, ed. Miguel López-Remiro, New Haven and London 2006, 74.

<sup>6</sup> Violetta L. Waibel, "Horizon, Oscillation, Boundaries. A Philosophical Account of Mark Rothko's Art", in: *Art and Phenomenology*, ed. Joseph D. Parry, London 2011, 77-89.

exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1954 he meant to take on the role as both curator and painter. The paintings were produced "not as isolated works of art but rather as a genuine and holistic interactive experience for the public."<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, Cohen-Solal points out that until the end Rothko insisted on carrying out his idea of "art as an experience" through his obsessive preoccupation with the light in the chapel in Houston.<sup>8</sup>

[9] All the selected art critics touch crucial issues related to this article's investigation and, therefore, their argumentations will to a certain degree constitute part of the article's discussion. The hypothesis of this article is that for a contemporary viewer being used to visiting art museums on a regular basis, to engaging in conversations, dialogue, and interaction with artworks as well as other museum visitors, and to constantly sharing her experiences on social medias and thereby contributing to what one might call a digital culture of scattering and feedback when it comes to experiences with art, it might be a challenging task to interact with the paintings in the Rothko Chapel. However, the article proposes a nuanced view on these paintings and a recognition of the fact that even these dark, inaccessible, almost monochrome paintings contribute to an essential discussion of the very role and meaning of art in a late modern context; the latter is actualized by the increasing technologization and digitalization that characterizes the current development of society.

[10] In his book *Our Broad Present. Time and Contemporary Culture*, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht is elaborating on the question of "Infinite Availability" and the consequences of hyper-communication dominating contemporary society. Gumbrecht is reflecting on the notion that electronic interventions tend to imply that we are consciously somewhere else than where we are with our bodies. Gumbrecht states that "As we are so eager to make our consciousness universally available, we end up spreading thin our physical presence: nothing is ever absolutely new any more and nothing is ever irreversibly over."<sup>9</sup> The art museum offers, in principle, a space in which the viewer can engage herself actively in the artworks and at the same time uphold that physical presence, which Gumbrecht is calling for. However, the constant need of being available and the habit of sharing, giving, and receiving feedback on social medias such as Facebook, Instagram or Twitter may, in fact, turn out to be counter-productive regarding the capability of engaging actively in interaction and dialogue with the artworks. The function of the Rothko Chapel is fundamentally different from that of the art museum, since the contemplation of the individual viewer is in focus and, furthermore, for the part of some visitors the chapel is primarily a place for meditative silence and prayer. At the same time, the chapel paintings do not seem, as Rothko's earlier paintings do, to involve the viewer by means of accessibility.

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<sup>7</sup> Annie Cohen-Solal, *Mark Rothko. Toward the Light in the Chapel*, New Haven and London 2015, 142.

<sup>8</sup> Cohen-Solal, *Mark Rothko. Toward the Light in the Chapel*, 208.

<sup>9</sup> Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Our Broad Present. Time and Contemporary Culture*, New York 2011, 68.

All the more it seems relevant to throw light upon as well as to discuss the terms and conditions, which Rothko imposes on the encounter between painting and viewer in the chapel in Houston as compared to his earlier artworks.

## Theoretical and methodological considerations: a phenomenological inquiry

[11] The phenomenology of perception of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) is the main source for this article's phenomenological inquiry, since his re-articulation of the relation between subject and object, self and world through an account of the lived and existential body, as well as his non-dualistic analysis of our embodied experience in the world seem highly relevant for this article's discussion of the relation between artwork and viewer. Merleau-Ponty is presenting his thesis in *The Primacy of Perception*<sup>10</sup> based upon his preliminary study *Phenomenology of Perception*<sup>11</sup>, which were translated and published posthumously in 1964 respectively 1962.

[12] In *The Primacy of Perception* Merleau-Ponty states that:

*By these words, the "primacy of perception", we mean that the experience of perception is our presence at the moment when things, truths, values are constituted for us; that perception is a nascent logos; that it teaches us, outside all dogmatism, the true conditions of objectivity itself; that it summons us to the tasks of knowledge and action. It is not a question of reducing human knowledge to sensation, but of assisting at the birth of this knowledge, to make it as sensible as the sensible, to recover the consciousness of rationality.*<sup>12</sup>

Thus, Merleau-Ponty puts emphasis on perception as our experience or, even, our presence at the moment when things are constituted for us, stating, further, that

*We experience a perception and its horizon "in action" rather than by "posing" them or explicitly "knowing" them. Finally the quasi-organic relation of the perceiving subject and the world involves, in principle, the contradiction of immanence and transcendence.*<sup>13</sup>

[13] Merleau-Ponty elaborates on this contradiction of immanence and transcendence and underlines that perception is paradoxical in the sense that the perceived thing or object is paradoxical in itself, since it only exists in so far as someone is perceiving it, due to the fact that it is not possible to imagine a thing or an object in itself. Hence, Merleau-Ponty states that:

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<sup>10</sup> The original French title is: "Le primat de la perception et ses conséquences philosophiques", published in the *Bulletin de la société française de philosophie* 42 (1947), 119-153.

<sup>11</sup> The original French title of this book is: *Phénoménologie de la Perception*, published in 1945.

<sup>12</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, edited by James M. Edie, Evanston, Ill. 1989, 25.

<sup>13</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, 12-13.

*[...] the things which I see are things for me only under the condition that they always recede beyond their immediately given aspects. Thus there is a paradox of immanence and transcendence in perception. Immanence, because the perceived object cannot be foreign to him who perceives; transcendence, because it always contains something more than what is actually given.*<sup>14</sup>

However, Merleau-Ponty points out that these two elements of perception are, in fact, not contradictory, since

*if we reflect on this notion of perspective, if we reproduce the perceptual experience in our thought, we see that the kind of evidence proper to the perceived, the appearance of "something", requires both this presence and this absence.*<sup>15</sup>

In other words, what seems to be a paradox in the perception of the object "for-us" and "in-itself", is in fact an interdependence of subject and object that is evident in all aspects of perception and subjectivity.

[14] In *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty elaborates on the phenomenon of the body and that of the thing stating that

*The fact is that if we want to describe it, we must say that my experience breaks forth into things and transcends itself in them, because it always comes into being within the framework of a certain setting in relation to the world which is the definition of my body.*<sup>16</sup>

In this respect we are our bodies, and our lived experience of this body denies the detachment of subject from object, mind from body. In other words, the perceiving mind is an incarnated body, a perceiving "body-subject", which is mutually informing the actions of the "body-subject", since we have access to the world precisely through the body. There is hence an interconnection of action and perception, which means that perception is not conceived as merely passive sensory stimulation; rather, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, perception requires an active involvement:

*It is, therefore, quite true that any perception of a thing, a shape or a size as real, any perceptual constancy refers back to the positing of a world and of a system of experience in which my body is inescapably linked with phenomena. But the system of experience is not arrayed before me as if I were God, it is lived by me from a certain point of view; I am not the spectator, I am involved, and it is my involvement in a point of view which makes possible both the finiteness of my perception and its opening out upon the complete world as a horizon of every perception.*<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, 16.

<sup>15</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, 16.

<sup>16</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, translated by Colin Smith, London 1992, 303.

<sup>17</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 303-304.

[15] Thus, according to Merleau-Ponty, there is a dialectical relation between the perceiving subject and the object perceived. Merleau-Ponty concludes that "Inside and outside are inseparable. The world is wholly inside and I am wholly outside myself".<sup>18</sup> In this respect, due to the inseparability of inner and outer, the study of the perceived object ends up revealing the subject perceiving. Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty points out that "Intellectualism cannot conceive any passage from the perspective to the thing itself, or from sign to significance otherwise than as an interpretation, an apperception, a cognitive intention".<sup>19</sup> In fact, according to Merleau-Ponty, an intellectual analysis

*distorts both the sign and the meaning: it separates out, by a process of objectification of both, the sense-content, which is already 'pregnant' with a meaning, and the invariant core, which is not a law but a thing; it conceals the organic relationship between subject and world, the active transcendence of consciousness, the momentum which carries it into a thing and into a world [...].*<sup>20</sup>

It would seem, then, that the quasi-organic relation of the perceiving subject and the world, the active transcendence of consciousness, is equivalent to the dialectical relation between the perceiving subject and the object perceived. Consequently, the perceived sense-content is the actual "meaning-content", which cannot be acknowledged by any intellectual analysis.

[16] The phenomenology of perception as unfolded by Merleau-Ponty seems very fitting to support Violetta L. Waibel's point of analysis and, subsequently, to back this article's discussion of that same point of analysis, regarding Rothko's classical paintings (see further below). Waibel states that she wishes to explore

*The boundaries and crossings of the realms of the real and of art, of artistic intention and the viewer in dialogue with the artwork, of immanence and transcendence as the expression of the tragic in human existence, and of the rigidity and liveliness of the organic,*

and that she wishes to do so

*as a way of introducing Johann Gottlieb Fichte's theory of the "schweben" (oscillation, hovering, suspension) of the imagination between the finite and the infinite, as he coined the term in his early *Wissenschaftslehre*.*<sup>21</sup>

In this respect Waibel points out that

*The structure of Fichte's working model seems to be especially well suited to a consideration of Rothko's art from a phenomenological perspective.*<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 407.

<sup>19</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 152.

<sup>20</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 152-153.

<sup>21</sup> Waibel, "Horizon, Oscillation, Boundaries", 78.



[17] According to Merleau-Ponty, man

*does not live only in the "real" world of perception. He also lives in the realms of the imaginary, of ideality, of language, culture, and history. In short, there are various levels of experience, and phenomenology is open to all of them and recognizes in each its own irreducible specificity, its own meaning and value structures, its own qualitatively distinctive characteristics.*<sup>23</sup>

Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty believes that

*in all these other levels or realms of experience we will rediscover the fundamental structures of perceptual consciousness, but transformed and enriched and therefore qualitatively irreducible to perception as such.*<sup>24</sup>

However, Merleau-Ponty also points out that

*we never completely escape from the realm of perceptual reality, and even the seemingly independent structures of categorical thought (or "rationality") are ultimately founded in perception. We are always immersed in the world and perceptually present to it.*<sup>25</sup>

In this way Merleau-Ponty puts emphasis on the body as the primary site of "knowing" the world as well as the embodied inherence in the world, maintaining that the body and that which is perceived cannot be disentangled from one another. As this article will show, this seems to be a crucial point of analysis for Waibel in her exploration of the boundaries and crossings of the realm of the real and of art.

[18] Furthermore, Waibel states that:

*Fichte's conception of the oscillation of the imagination can be understood as a foundational model for the reception of the artwork that requires that one respect the boundaries both in the viewer's act of perception (the check) and the interpretive processing (spontaneity), but also in the clarified intention of the artist and the actually achieved result within those particular boundaries that delineate the permissible as well as the unpermissible crossings or "transgressions" of these parameters.*<sup>26</sup>

Thus, it would seem that Waibel is fundamentally basing her analysis of Rothko's classical paintings on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception recognizing the fact that precisely within the boundaries of the viewer's act of perception as well as the interpretive processing, within the clarified intention of the artist and the actually

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<sup>22</sup> Waibel, "Horizon, Oscillation, Boundaries", 78.

<sup>23</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, xvi.

<sup>24</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, xvii.

<sup>25</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, xvii.

<sup>26</sup> Waibel, "Horizon, Oscillation, Boundaries", 81.

achieved result lie the crossings or transgressions of these parameters that she wishes to explore. Border crossings or transgressions are, according to Waibel, conceived by Fichte as "a 'Zusammenfassen' (to unite, integrate), which ultimately is performed by the imaginative faculty that is active within his paradigm of consciousness".<sup>27</sup> In this way Waibel concludes that "[...] a representation can be created in the intuition and, at the same time, a consciousness-transcending object can be deposited outside consciousness".<sup>28</sup> This conclusion seems to correspond with that of Merleau-Ponty stating that "the synthesis which constitutes the unity of the perceived objects and which gives meaning to the perceptual data is not an intellectual synthesis".<sup>29</sup> Rather, Merleau-Ponty points out that in perception the object is "real" stating that "[...] it is given as the infinite sum of an indefinite series of perspectival views in each of which the object is given but in none of which is it given exhaustively".<sup>30</sup> Hence, according to Merleau-Ponty, "the perceptual synthesis thus must be accomplished by the subject, which can both delimit certain perspectival aspects in the object, the only ones actually given, and at the same time go beyond them".<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty states that "this subject, which takes a point of view, is my body as the field of perception and action [...]".<sup>32</sup> In this regard Merleau-Ponty defines perception as "[...] a reference to a whole which can be grasped, in principle, only through certain of its parts and aspects".<sup>33</sup> Consequently, he points out that

*The perceived thing is not an ideal unity in the possession of the intellect, like a geometrical notion, for example; it is rather a totality open to a horizon of an indefinite number of perspectival views which blend with one another according to a given style, which defines the object in question.*<sup>34</sup>

Accordingly, Waibel points out that "realistically seen, the imagination produces a unity of subject and object that, viewed from the idealist perspective immanent within consciousness, changes itself into a unity of the subjective and the objective".<sup>35</sup> Thus, Waibel seems to take into account the quasi-organic relation of the perceiving subject and the world, the active transcendence of consciousness, the contradiction of

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<sup>27</sup> Waibel, "Horizon, Oscillation, Boundaries", 80.

<sup>28</sup> Waibel, "Horizon, Oscillation, Boundaries", 80.

<sup>29</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, 15.

<sup>30</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, 15.

<sup>31</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, 16.

<sup>32</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, 16.

<sup>33</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, 16.

<sup>34</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, 16.

<sup>35</sup> Waibel, "Horizon, Oscillation, Boundaries", 80-81.

immanence and transcendence, which would be a highly significant notion in the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty. Furthermore, her clarification of the imaginative faculty seems to put into perspective Merleau-Ponty's notion of the body conceived not only as a container of thought but as a apprehending entity in itself.

[19] Another source for this article's phenomenological inquiry is the hermeneutical phenomenology as unfolded by Hans-Georg Gadamer in his great philosophical work *Truth and Method*, which was originally published in 1960.<sup>36</sup> In *Truth and Method* Gadamer elaborates on the concept of the *hermeneutical circle* launched by Martin Heidegger in his book *Being and Time*<sup>37</sup>, which was originally published in 1927. Gadamer points out that the hermeneutic circle

*[...] is not primarily a prescription for the practice of understanding, but a description of the way interpretive understanding is achieved. The point of Heidegger's hermeneutical reflection is not so much to prove that there is a circle as to show that this circle possesses an ontologically positive significance.*<sup>38</sup>

[20] Gadamer quotes Heidegger himself suggesting the circular structure of understanding:

*[...] In the circle is hidden a positive possibility of the most primordial kind of knowing, and we genuinely grasp this possibility only when we have understood that our first, last, and constant task in interpreting is never to allow our fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception to be presented to us by fancies and popular conceptions, but rather to make the scientific theme secure by working out these fore-structures in terms of the things themselves.*<sup>39</sup>

Gadamer thus defines the hermeneutical task primarily as an investigation of the things in themselves and, furthermore, he underlines that this "reading of what is there" is "a completely correct phenomenological description".<sup>40</sup> For Heidegger, though, and in clear contrast to Merleau-Ponty "[...] it is not this world but the Being of beings which is the primary reality, and any analysis of human experience, perceptual or otherwise, is only a means to pose the more fundamental question of this Being."<sup>41</sup> However, they both agree on "the unitary character of 'human reality' as a world-

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<sup>36</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, Tübingen 1960; Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, transl. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, second, revised edition, New York 1994.

<sup>37</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, Halle 1927; Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, transl. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, reprinted edition, Oxford 2001.

<sup>38</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 266.

<sup>39</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 266.

<sup>40</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 269.

<sup>41</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, xviii.

directed, active intentionality in whose experience the world is constituted as the human life-world".<sup>42</sup> In this respect they seem to agree on phenomenology as a "reflective" practice in the sense, that it is a reflection on *experience*, a first-person lived experience in which the world is constituted as the human life-world.

[21] In his essay *The Origin of the Work of Art*, which was originally published in 1960, Heidegger applies the concept of the hermeneutical circle to artworks.<sup>43</sup> Heidegger points out that in order to establish what is the work of art, we must know the nature of art. Furthermore, in order to establish the nature of art, we must make a comparative examination of actual art works. In this way, we move in circles in order to discover both the nature of art and the actual artwork. Heidegger states that:

*Thus we are compelled to follow the circle. This is neither a makeshift nor a defect. To enter upon this path is the strength of thought, to continue on it is the feast of thought, assuming that thinking is a craft. Not only is the main step from work to art a circle like the step from art to work, but every separate step that we attempt circles in this circle. In order to discover the nature of the art that really prevails in the work, let us go to the actual work and ask what and how it is.*<sup>44</sup>

[22] The concept of the hermeneutical circle appears to be relevant for this article's discussion of David Anfam's analysis of Rothko's chapel paintings.<sup>45</sup> That appears to be reviving the basic conditions of human existence, as Plato, according to Anfam, indicates in his cave allegory (see further below). In this regard the viewer finds herself in a constant emotional movement between generalization and clarification, between entirety and detail in the encounter with the paintings. Viewing the hermeneutical circle, to quote Gadamer, as a description of the way the interpretive understanding is achieved would thus appear meaningful applied on Rothko: The viewer's knowledge of human limitations, which she is subject to, seems to be actualized by Rothko, as well as the very fact that the viewer seems to be moving "in circles" in the process of understanding the paintings in the chapel. According to Merleau-Ponty, though, understanding is not an intellectual process but, rather, "to experience the harmony between what we aim at and what is given, between the intention and the performance – and the body is our anchorage in a world".<sup>46</sup>

[23] This notion of understanding so closely related to perceptual experience as well as the body is thus of crucial significance in this article's overall discussion of Rothko's

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<sup>42</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, xviii.

<sup>43</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes*, Stuttgart 1960; Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art", in: *Poetry, Language, Thought*, transl. Albert Hofstadter, New York 2013.

<sup>44</sup> Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art", 18.

<sup>45</sup> David Anfam, *Mark Rothko. The Works on Canvas. Catalogue Raisonné*, New Haven and London 1999.

<sup>46</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 144.

chapel paintings and the viewer's experience encountering them. A clarification of some crucial notions used in this article such as transcendence, immanence, absorption, and the Divine seems to be in order. Notions of transcendence and immanence are occurring in the spheres of religion, philosophy, and phenomenology each upholding different meanings and connotations accordingly. In religious tradition the concept of transcendence and immanence are used with reference to God's relation to the world with particular importance to Theology. In this context transcendence means that God is completely outside of and beyond the world. Conversely, immanence means that God is wholly manifested in the world. In religious experience, hence, transcendence is a state of being that has overcome the limitations of physical existence and is asserted in various religious traditions' concept of the Divine. Absorption may be seen, accordingly, in that same context as a sensory experience commonly identified as divinely inspired. In phenomenology it would seem that immanence is referring to the thing "in-itself" beyond its immediately given aspects and outside the perceptual consciousness, the *objective* world. Transcendence would seem, on the other hand, to be referring to the thing "for-us", manifested in its immediately given aspects and within the perceptual consciousness, the *experienced* world. According to Merleau-Ponty, the perceptual experience "breaks forth into things and transcends itself in them", which appears to be the cause of the contradiction of immanence and transcendence. However, in stating that "it is my involvement in a point of view which makes possible both the finiteness of my perception and its opening out upon the complete world as a horizon of every perception", Merleau-Ponty seems to accept the possibility of transcendence *in* immanence.<sup>47</sup> Since this article is discussing both religious and phenomenological aspects of Rothko's art, the use of the concepts of transcendence and immanence is corresponding with each aspect respectively.

[24] In her book *Mark Rothko. The Art of Transcendence* Julia Davis employs the notion of transcendence on Rothko's chapel paintings stating that "the symbolic discourse of the motif of the doorway is inescapable".<sup>48</sup> Davis thus emphasizes the transitional or transformative structure in the sense that the paintings imply a transition or transformation from one place or state of being to another. In this respect, the paintings inevitably evoke a sense of transcendence in the viewer. Hence, according to Davis, transcendence is corresponding to the implied transition or transformation from one place or state of being to another in Rothko's art. Furthermore, Davis points out that Rothko himself "spoke of quests, of progression, of moving towards something ('clarity' for example)" and that "the worrying thing is that the doorways in the paintings may actually lead [...] nowhere. And that Rothko had no idea where he wished the viewer to go".<sup>49</sup> Davis states that Rothko was highly inspired by the blind windows in the Laurentian Library of the Medicis in Florence as well as the frescoes of

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<sup>47</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 304.

<sup>48</sup> Julia Davis, *Mark Rothko. The Art of Transcendence*, third ed., Kent 2007, 82.

<sup>49</sup> Davis, *Mark Rothko. The Art of Transcendence*, 82.

the San Marco Monastery, which were made, of course, for spiritual contemplation. Davis concludes that:

*This may also be Rothko's project: to hint at doorways and transcendence, whereas he knows, as mediæval mystics knew, that any form of transcendence begins with the self, with self-transcendence. The point of Rothko's murals, at Harvard, Houston or London, then, may be to throw the viewer back to the viewer's own self.*<sup>50</sup>

[25] In this way Davis is emphasizing the religious aspects of Rothko's late paintings sequences suggesting that the project of Rothko could be to invite or lead the viewer into spiritual contemplation and self-transcendence. Conversely, an emphasis on perceptual *experience*, a first-person lived experience in which, according to Merleau-Ponty, the "meaning-content" reveals itself, would seem to be in accordance with Christopher Rothko's account of the paradox related to the communication between painting and viewer in the Rothko Chapel (see further below). According to Christopher Rothko, Mark Rothko seems to be holding up a mirror for the viewer to see herself in, which makes it all the more demanding in terms of engaging actively and emotionally in the paintings. However, the viewer needs to bring forth her own inner self, her inner world, and to offer substantial emotional input encountering the chapel paintings, whereby the paintings or, to be more precise, the suggestions or ideas come into being and take on meaning, that is, personal meaning for each individual viewer. In this respect the chapel paintings may be introducing an element of physical self-awareness into the process of perception further strengthened, even, by the arrangement of the paintings surrounding the viewer. At the same time, the lived experience of presence, the "presence effect" proclaimed by Gumbrecht might be applied on this encounter as well in the sense that the viewer is losing herself temporarily in the artwork, whereby artwork and viewer are being synchronized. Since this synchronism between artwork and viewer, according to Gumbrecht, can induce an experience of a "here and now", which appears to be without any particular purpose or meaning but, on the other hand, both intransitive and intense, it could be that the viewer losing herself temporarily in the artwork is, in fact, the equivalent of being immersed in the world.

### Striving for clarity: the transcending reality of art

[26] The concept clarity seems to relate decidedly to Mark Rothko's late work practice, the period from 1949-1970 where he paints his classic non-figurative works. In 1949, Mark Rothko declares that the progression in the work of a painter must be towards clarity:

*The progression of a painter's work, as it travels in time from point to point, will be toward clarity: toward the elimination of all obstacles between the painter and the idea and between the idea and the observer. As examples of such obstacles, I give (among others) memory, history or geometry, which are swamps of generalization*

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<sup>50</sup> Davis, *Mark Rothko. The Art of Transcendence*, 82-83.

*from which one might pull out parodies of ideas (which are ghosts) but never an idea in itself. To achieve this clarity is, inevitably, to be understood.*"<sup>51</sup>

[27] This declaration might indicate a very unique experience for each individual viewer, in which the artist's idea is communicated in a way that ensures the viewer's deeper understanding of this idea. At the same time, this declaration is made at a time in Rothko's artistic career where all recognizable reference points from the immediately visible reality disappear from his paintings: Rothko's artistic expression moves towards the pure color-abstractions that characterize his late work practice. At the beginning of the 1950s, the subject matter in Rothko's paintings typically consists of two or more color blocks that seem to hover or float on top of each other, confined in the inner frame. This change in subject matter is characterized by an almost vibrating, pulsating vitality, which is facilitated by an inner light that seems to radiate from the painting's background.



1 Mark Rothko (1903-1970), *Untitled*, c. 1950-1952, oil on canvas, 190 x 101.1 cm. Tate Collection, London (© Mark Rothko/copydanbilleder.dk; photograph: © Tate, London 2016)

[28] In the words of Violetta L. Waibel, the viewer gets the sense of finding herself in front of a spectacular color landscape, enthused by the colored planes, and a suggested horizontal line that instinctively attracts the viewer's eyes and indicates a depth or three-dimensionality in the painting. Waibel speaks of the suggested horizon that draws the viewer's glance into the distance and optically forms a line that

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<sup>51</sup> Declaration originally published in *The Tiger's Eye*, No. 9, October 1949, 114; cited according to *Mark Rothko 1903-1970*, eds. Irving Sandler and Robert Rosenblum, exh. cat., London 1987, 85.

commonly belongs to both heavens and the upper part of the earth. In this respect, Waibel describes the experience of the viewer as that of *transcendence in immanence*. At the same time, however, other elements in the painting create an outward movement towards the picture plane, thereby accentuating the two-dimensionality of the painting. Waibel describes this movement as an oscillation in the viewer's imagination: "A game, or better, an oscillation in the imaginative faculty takes place between the phenomenal reality of the image and the illusion of a landscape, and this oscillation is apprehended as such in constant motion."<sup>52</sup> The painting's inner frame, according to Waibel, imparts the experience of an enclosed entirety to the viewer that works like a fence, which is captured by the viewer in the internal motion of the paint, whereby she is released from the phenomenal reality that surrounds her. The soft, blurred outlines of the color blocks support the experience of a calm, peaceful pulsation of life, which spreads to the viewer's body and mind. The viewer's concentrated gaze creates an interplay between the space surrounding the viewer, the painting's space, and the mental and bodily space of the viewer. In this way Waibel emphasizes that the viewer's perception of spatiality, her bodily-sensory perception, or, in other words, her perceptual engagement is conducted by Rothko in order to preserve for the viewer a delicate interactive experience. The oscillation in the viewer's imagination, the experience of *transcendence in immanence* reflects the viewer's embodied inherence in the world, the unity of subject and object produced by the imagination. Hence, the active involvement of the viewer in the dialogue with the painting seems to be of highly importance to Rothko. However, Waibel points out that for Rothko, painting had a mythological and pantheistic religious significance beyond the sensory perception of spatiality. It was essential to him to convey this to the viewer and so, he aimed at what he considered to be the horizon of human existence in his paintings. Waibel argues that the pictures influence the viewer's sensibility in a guarded, measured, and distant way, which reflects awareness of the vulnerability and fragility that characterize human existence.<sup>53</sup>

[29] During the 1950s and 1960s, Rothko's pictures grow steadily darker, less pulsating of life, and less available for the viewer to interact with. The quality of plasticity or vitality that characterized Rothko's early abstract paintings, and which enabled a tactile, sensory perception of spatiality in the viewer, seems in his late paintings, such as those in the chapel in Houston (1965-1967), to be downplayed to a degree that the meeting between painting and viewer is actually challenged.

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<sup>52</sup> Waibel, "Horizon, Oscillation, Boundaries", 84-85.

<sup>53</sup> Waibel, "Horizon, Oscillation, Boundaries", 87.





2 Rothko Chapel, Houston, Texas, interior view with (from left to right) West triptych, Northwest painting and North triptych by Mark Rothko, 1965-1967 (photograph © Hickey-Robertson)

[30] James E.B. Breslin considers the paintings in the Houston chapel remarkably dark, withdrawn, and inaccessible; and in his biography about Rothko he problematizes the idea of the chapel as a place where the viewer can experience contemplative serenity and ease.<sup>54</sup> In this light, it seems interesting to address the question: How does this change of expression affect the experience for the viewer encountering the paintings of Rothko's late work practice? Stephen Polcari argues that the viewer is absorbed by Rothko's modern paintings contemplating "figures" moving out towards the viewer, dragging her into the painting. By creating a sacral or chapel-like atmosphere, Rothko extends the *holy* light into the space of the viewer and surrounds her with it. Polcari refers to Rothko himself, who in 1951 states that, as a viewer, one is simply *within the painting*, without it being consciously chosen or striven towards. The individual viewer is absorbed and shaped by the structures and effects of the painting's subject matter, which are contingent on Rothko's idea of the ultimate power of human destiny. Polcari further argues that Rothko in his classic paintings modernizes traditional metaphors in the effort to express ritual or religious experiences. According to Polcari, Rothko increasingly uses the light, or the illumination, which is traditionally regarded as a metaphor for the Divine.<sup>55</sup> However, since the 1950s onwards, his paintings become continuously darker in their expression. Contrasts are toned down, and their colors are predominantly executed in blue, brown, and grey nuances; just as the darkness and the inner light become intangible, indefinable traces of the divine, which is comparable to the light in Gothic cathedrals. Polcari emphasizes that Rothko, during his travels in Europe in 1959, visits the Laurentian Library in Florence, an eminent monument of the Renaissance. The empty or hidden windows in the vestibule, and

<sup>54</sup> James E. B. Breslin, *Mark Rothko. A Biography*, Chicago 1998, 481.

<sup>55</sup> Stephen Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience*, New York 1991.

their impression of introversion, greatly inspire Rothko. To him, they symbolize passages, or rather gateways to the Divine, a symbolism that is expressed in his later works. Polcari refers to Rothko himself, who talks about his paintings as entrances or openings, and emphasizes that these openings or entrances represent the transcendent, or rather the threshold, which the individual must transgress in order to cross from the profane to the divine world:

*Rothko spoke of his work as a doorway and often stressed that it represented the transcendental. Such themes are part of the symbolization of the ritual passage to sacred places. Fundamental to all religious and mythic conceptions is the founding of a sacred space. To enter it one must pass through a threshold, which is often symbolized by a door, and in so doing, one transcends the profane world.*<sup>56</sup>

[31] Polcari further states that Rothko precisely in the Houston chapel reaches a climax in his work practice with regard to content, namely the immersion of the viewer in the spiritual surroundings that Rothko creates in the chapel. An immersion that includes the cultural and emotional past of the individual, that actualizes the spiritual history of humans, and that predicts the ultimate destiny of humankind. Polcari likens Rothko's pictures to the Greek tragedies, and points out that Rothko reinvents the Greek tradition in his effort to inspire in the viewer an understanding of the modern gods that form her destiny: Psyche, environment, nature, and tradition. In this way, Rothko's pictures are manifestations of history, continuity, and the holiness of human life.<sup>57</sup>

[32] Thus, Rothko seems to regard art as a transcendental experience, and as a response to the hostility and mediocrity that characterize human existence. As early as 1947 Rothko, in his famous essay "The Romantics Were Prompted", claims that art cannot enact the human drama without the myths, without the monsters and the gods that ruled in antiquity, and that art, in its most significant moments, expresses frustration with the loss of these. In these instances, art becomes dark and melancholic.<sup>58</sup>

[33] The loss of the myths and the grand narratives means the loss of unity and possible perspectives on the future. Without the shared narrative, the individual stands alone in the face of the unknown, without any concepts with which to comprehend the unknown. It seems plausible that Rothko's early pictures presuppose the shared myth or narrative, and that it is therefore necessary for painter and viewer to have a common background or language in the form of the myth's elements. It seems as plausible to argue that Rothko, at the end of the 1940s, reaches the realization that humans no longer have a shared myth, or a grand and shared

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<sup>56</sup> Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience*, 147.

<sup>57</sup> Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience*, 149.

<sup>58</sup> Mark Rothko, "The Romantics Were Prompted", in: *Possibilities*, No. 1, 1947, p. 84; published again in: *Art in Theory 1900-2000. An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, Malden 2007, 571-573, here p. 572.

narrative, which is able to capture our imagination and open up for human kind's never-ending accumulation of knowledge and experience to be transferred to present day people. This realization arguably leads to the disappearance of all recognizable reference points in Rothko's pictures at this point. In the same essay, Rothko stresses that, for him, it is not a question of painting in either an abstract or realistic way, but rather a question of expressing man's fundamental loneliness and fear, caused by the awareness of his own mortality, and the consequent insatiable need for transcendental experiences.<sup>59</sup> It could thus be that Rothko is striving to find a way in which he can directly express the idea of the transcendent drama, his private vision of the transcending reality of art.

[34] In 1943 Rothko, together with his friend Adolph Gottlieb, and assisted by Barnett Newmann writes a letter to a *New York Times* art critic, stating that "To us art is an adventure into an unknown world, which can be explored only by those willing to take the risks".<sup>60</sup> So, it would seem that the experience for the viewer standing alone facing a dark and unknown world in front of Rothko's paintings characteristic of his late work practice is highly different from the experience, which she enjoys encountering his earlier paintings with regard to the sensory perception of spatiality, the experience of transcendence in immanence, and the experience of intimate interplay between the space surrounding the viewer, the painting's space, and the mental and bodily space of the viewer. It would, however, seem that Rothko strives to express his idea of a transcendent drama, his private vision of the transcending reality of art, which may be seen in connection with his statement in 1943. This, therefore, may possibly have strengthened Rothko's wish to emphasize the tragic and timeless in the artistic expression.

### Experiencing the divine: contemplation as an active performance

[35] Roger Wedell broaches the tragic and timeless content in Rothko's pictures. In this regard, he compares Rothko to the Russian philosopher Nicholai Berdyaev (1874-1948), who in his literary works revitalizes human existence with his concepts of the transcendent creative spirit and the innate creative spirit. According to Wedell, both Rothko and Berdyaev understand art as a revelation and as a theological discourse. Berdyaev considers this revelation a mixture of art, the creative act itself, and the divine. He understands the original creative impulse as a demand from God. The product of the artist's creativity, however, is limited by the objectification of the human world, which Berdyaev sees as the tragedy of art:

*This discrepancy between impulse and object Berdyaev calls the tragedy of art. But the created object carries within itself a glimmer of its origin, and, just as it emerges from contemplation on the part of the artist, so by contemplation a viewer may*

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<sup>59</sup> Rothko, "The Romantics Were Prompted", 571-573.

<sup>60</sup> Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb, "Statement", in: *Art in Theory 1900-2000. An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, Malden 2007, 568-569, here p. 569.

*apprehend something of that original creative art. By contemplation Berdyaev means an active engagement, not a passive receptiveness.*<sup>61</sup>

Thus, Wedell highlights the importance of the artist as well the viewer in realizing or experiencing the divine, which is expressed by the original artistic impulse, during contemplation. According to Wedell, Berdyaev understands this contemplation as actively performed. He further points out that, in the Houston chapel, Rothko expresses his experience of the revelation, of the mixture of the work of art, the creative act, and the divine. In the chapel, Rothko offers us the opportunity to experience his vision through contemplation and thereby be confronted with an art of the spirit even in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>62</sup>

[36] However, Wedell emphasizes that the paintings in the Houston chapel indicate a change in Rothko's work practice, since they do not possess the inner luminosity that characterizes his classic paintings, with the exception of the center panel of the triptych in the apse. The colors of dark auburn and violet do not affect the viewer to the same degree that his earlier works do. Furthermore, the inner structure of the paintings has also changed. The soft, blurry edges have disappeared to an extent that it is no longer even possible to talk about shapes; just as Rothko has suppressed the pulsating life of the colors and shapes in the picture plane.

[37] Wedell stresses that Rothko intentionally removed these aspects from his works in the effort to force the viewer to focus on the real subject of the painting. In that context, he simplifies the presentation of the subject matter, the inner life or spirit of the paintings, the inner life of the viewer, as well as the relationship between this spirit and a transcendent unity or entirety. Wedell argues that the viewer is initially left to herself and her own experience, but that she has the opportunity to gain insight into the creative act, the original spiritual impulse, which, according to Wedell, is transforming self and world and proceeds toward the infinite.

[38] According to Wedell, eschatology is central to Berdyaev, not only in relation to art, but also to human realization or experience in general. The creative act, in the eschatological sense, *is* the tragic and timeless content that Rothko strives after in his paintings. Berdyaev regards, according to Wedell, the artist who lets the true, creative spirit express itself as instrumental in transforming the world-as-it-is to the world-as-it-shall-become at the Second Coming.<sup>63</sup> However, Wedell understands the tragic dually: He points out that the response to the paintings in the Houston chapel is contingent on Rothko's ability to manifest the unity-seeking spirituality, upon which he creates his art, and the viewer's ability to contemplate his art. A passive response from the viewer renders insight into the creative act impossible and thus, also the ultimate

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<sup>61</sup> Roger Wedell, "Berdyaev and Rothko: Transformative Visions", in: *Art, Creativity, and the Sacred. An Anthology in Religion and Art*, ed. Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, New York 1986, 304-310, here pp. 304-305.

<sup>62</sup> Wedell, "Berdyaev and Rothko: Transformative Visions", 305.

<sup>63</sup> Wedell, "Berdyaev and Rothko: Transformative Visions", 308.

transformation of the self and the world. Wedell points out that Rothko enters into a dialogue with spirituality in his art, and that his art, through the active involvement of the viewer, becomes a manifestation of a theological discourse. Wedell states that Rothko's art has to be contemplated in order to be understood, and that this understanding gives rise to a revelation of the divine intention behind humanity and the world.<sup>64</sup>

[39] With reference to Plato's Allegory of the Cave<sup>65</sup> David Anfam argues that Rothko's art is platonic in the sense that Rothko absorbs the metaphors contained in the Cave Allegory, and makes them his own – just as Platonism can be found in Rothko's belief that art's presumed universality originates from an essential content, which he equates with *the idea*. Anfam points out that the viewer, in observing Rothko's art, experiences being guided towards the ideal world, in which everything appears in their true form and in their eternal reality as ideas. At the same time, she feels that she is witness to a game of shadows; that she is bound only to notice the incomplete mirror- or shadow-images of the corresponding ideas without the opportunity to behold the real world of pure being. Anfam emphasizes that the myth of the prisoners in the cave reveals the limitations that the viewer is subject to when confronted with Rothko's art. These limitations appear to be opposites: existence and illusion; sight and blindness; the body and its pictorial counterpart; burning, undefinable light and existential darkness. Hence, Rothko's paintings seem, according to Anfam, to revive the basic conditions of human existence, as Plato indicates in his Cave Allegory.<sup>66</sup> Rothko's art thus positions the viewer in a constant emotional movement between generalization and clarification, and between entirety and detail in the encounter with the painting.

[40] In this connection, it appears relevant to relate Rothko's concept of the image to the hermeneutic circle, i.e. a way to describe how the interpretive understanding of an artwork is achieved (see above). In this way, Rothko actualizes the viewer's knowledge of human limitations, which the viewer is subject to, and the premises that enable the viewer to realize the underlying idea. At the same time, the viewer is stalled off in a sort of meditative uncertainty in the encounter with the work of art. The paintings appear as walls of emptiness that invite the viewer to seek to enter "into" or "behind" the pictures in an attempt to reach their deeper meaning.<sup>67</sup> Anfam cites Nietzsche who, in his book *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits* from 1878 relates to antique architectural principles that, according to Anfam, have inspired Rothko with regard to the chapel's design:

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<sup>64</sup> Wedell, "Berdyayev and Rothko: Transformative Visions", 309.

<sup>65</sup> Plato, *Republic*, edited and translated by Chris Emlyn-Jones and William Preddy, vol. 2: *Books 6-10*, Cambridge, MA 2013, here book 10.

<sup>66</sup> David Anfam, *Mark Rothko. The Works on Canvas. Catalogue Raisonné*, New Haven and London 1999, 99.

<sup>67</sup> Anfam, *Mark Rothko. The Works on Canvas*, 99.

*In general we no longer understand architecture. [...] An atmosphere of inexhaustible meaningfulness hung about an ancient building like a magic veil. Beauty entered the system only secondarily, without impairing the basic feeling of uncanny sublimity, of sanctification by magic or the gods' nearness.*<sup>68</sup>

Anfam precisely underlines that an atmosphere of undefinable meaningfulness is predominant in the chapel, and he points out that the ubiquitous emptiness that Rothko manifests in the paintings in the chapel may confront the viewer with the distant or hidden God, a jointly Judaic and Christian concept. In this connection, Anfam refers to the ancient Greeks, to whom the empty spaces or voids signify the language of the spirit. At the same time, Anfam inserts the chapel paintings into a modern context according to their non-figurative expression: "After all, we are dealing here with what was a thoroughly contemporary endeavor involving a non-objective syntax."<sup>69</sup>

[41] So, Wedell as well as Anfam touch upon the tragic aspects of Rothko's art. Wedell emphasizes the tragedy of the fact that Rothko's paintings must be contemplated in order to be understood; and that the reception of the paintings depends partly on Rothko's ability to manifest the unity-seeking spirituality, partly the viewer's ability to contemplate, i.e. to actively engage with the paintings. Comparing Rothko to Berdyaev, Wedell underlines that both of them perceive the objectification of the human world as the tragedy of art, and, so, the contemplation on the part of the artist as well as the viewer is crucial in order to apprehend the original creative impulse. In this respect, contemplation is understood as an active performance. A passive response from the viewer, however, renders insight into the creative act, the original spiritual impulse impossible; and the viewer remains left to herself and her own immediate experience. With reference to Plato's Cave Allegory Anfam emphasizes the tragedy of the fact that the viewer experiences being guided towards the ideal world but at the same time she feels bound to see only the shadows of the essential ideas. Rothko actualizes the viewer's knowledge of the human limitations and of the premises that enable the viewer to realize the underlying idea. The viewer is stalled off in a meditative uncertainty due to the fact that the paintings appear as walls of emptiness. However, the viewer needs to seek into or behind this emptiness in order to find a deeper spiritual meaning. Again, it would seem crucial that the viewer engage actively in the paintings in the chapel in order to derive a kind of meaning or content from them regardless of the limitations she meets in that same process. She needs to face and to cope with her own inner feelings of uncertainty and anxiety and to be able to accept the state of being in a constant emotional movement taking on her part of the dialogue with these particular artworks.

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<sup>68</sup> Anfam, *Mark Rothko. The Works on Canvas*, 96; the original title of Nietzsche's book is: *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches. Ein Buch für freie Geister*.

<sup>69</sup> Anfam, *Mark Rothko. The Works on Canvas*, 96.

## Interacting with the painting: the content of the painting and the content of the viewer coming together

[42] According to Christopher Rothko, the chief paradox related to the communication between painting and viewer in the Rothko Chapel is the fact that Mark Rothko creates art that seeks to express universal, human emotions and to communicate these emotions at a basic, human level, whereas, at the same time, the communication can only take place meaningfully with each individual viewer. In other words, each individual viewer is having her own unique experience encountering the paintings in the chapel, and so, the meaning deriving from these paintings can only be understood on a very personal, individual level. Christopher Rothko emphasizes the dilemma of Mark Rothko stating that a painter's work is always moving "toward clarity", though making paintings that are only completed by the viewers's individualized response to them. In this respect, the specific content of the painting may seem unclear. However, Christopher Rothko points out that the content or real meaning of the work lies in the interaction between painting and viewer:

*To my mind, the content, the "truth" of the work, lies in interaction – the interaction between painting and viewer. I will even posit that these are hardly paintings at all, but more suggestions or ideas, expressed through color, that only come into being and take on specific meaning – that is, personal meaning – at the moment of that interaction.<sup>70</sup>*

[43] Thus, each individual viewer brings forth her own inner self, inner world to this interaction, which highlight the fact that the meaning occurs when the content of the painting and the content of the viewer come together. In that sense, a Rothko painting unfolds itself during time spent in real engagement and active involvement from the side of the viewer, whereby she obtains her own personal understanding of Rothko's artistic aim or idea. Christopher Rothko underlines that the works of the 1960s seem more difficult to approach than the works of the 1950s, in the sense that Rothko is demanding more from the viewer:

*Rothko is, quite simply, demanding more from his viewer. The demand is not in terms of harder work to understand the painting. It is an emotional demand – you as viewer need to bring more of yourself to the painting. The color does not leap off the canvas or lure you in the same way. You need to meet these paintings more than halfway, and offer more of your own emotional input.<sup>71</sup>*

[44] At the same time, reflectivity makes out an essential change of the visual appearance characterizing the works of the 1960s in terms of forms of almost similar color interacting with one another through subtle differences in reflectivity and rectangles often less penetrable than those of the 1950s meeting the viewer with a reflecting sheen. In this respect, the 1950s paintings seem inviting and involving, whereas the 1960s paintings are keeping the viewer in arm's length, which, according

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<sup>70</sup> Rothko, Mark Rothko. *From the Inside Out*, 36.

<sup>71</sup> Rothko, Mark Rothko. *From the Inside Out*, 37.

to Christopher Rothko, is due to the fact that the 1960s paintings are all about the viewer. In other words, Rothko seems to be holding up a mirror for the viewer to see herself in, which makes it all the more demanding in terms of engaging actively and emotionally in the paintings.<sup>72</sup> Christopher Rothko recognizes that the Rothko Chapel is a very disturbing place to some people, which might even provoke an immediate existential crisis. However, the very unnerving experience he himself had during a visit to the chapel before opening hours turned out to be a highly rewarding experience in the end, as he became aware of the fact that he had to adjust to the process of looking at himself and only at himself and to learn from what he saw in order to be able to understand the Rothko paintings surrounding him.<sup>73</sup>

[45] So, according to Christopher Rothko the interaction with the painting seems absolutely crucial in terms of obtaining a personal understanding of Rothko's artistic aim or idea, which means that the viewer needs to bring forth her own inner self, her own inner world, and to offer substantial emotional input encountering the paintings. In this respect, the meaning occurs only and in the precise moment when the content of the painting and the content of the viewer come together. However, an obvious question could be raised whether the contemporary viewer is in fact prepared or even capable of unfolding the adequate level of physical presence and self-awareness in order to fully interact with the paintings in the Rothko Chapel. It would seem relevant to argue that the act of providing both physical presence and self-awareness encountering these particular artworks requires adjustment as well as skills, which are not necessarily being promoted nor supported by the constant demand of hyper-communication dominating our current society. At the same time though, it might be the case that the contemporary viewer finds it both meaningful and rewarding to spend time and effort in real engagement and active involvement in these paintings for that very same reason.

[46] Annie Cohen-Solal explains how Rothko was deeply inspired by the medieval church of Santa Maria Assunta in Torcello, near Venice, and especially by the mosaic of the Last Judgement on the inner side of the entrance wall contrasted by the gold-background Madonna and Child in the apse. Referring to an interview with Robert Motherwell made by Dominique de Menil and Susan Barnes in 1980, Cohen-Solal states that the tension between condemnation and promise, tragedy and hope, was the exact tension that Rothko sought to recreate in the chapel in Houston between the triptych in the north wall apse and the one-panel painting on the south wall. Quoting de Menil, Cohen-Solal points out that Rothko arranged the paintings in the chapel axially, one in the apse

*as dialectically opposed as the mosaics in Torcello's church, the Last Judgement and the celestial vision of the Madonna and Child. These powerful images hovered in Rothko's mind and consciously he recreated the same tension. A hanging black field,*

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<sup>72</sup> Rothko, *Mark Rothko. From the Inside Out*, 38.

<sup>73</sup> Rothko, *Mark Rothko. From the Inside Out*, 39.



*an impending doom, at the entrance, is cancelled out by the central panel of the apse, painted in a warmer tone – a more vibrant purple.*<sup>74</sup>

[47] Cohen-Solal puts emphasis on the fact that Rothko throughout the 1960s concerned himself deeply with technical considerations, as he "continued to develop his art, increasingly obsessing over radical forms of cohesion and pursuing his quest for higher standards". According to Cohen-Solal, Rothko strived to convey a true experience to the public: "He aimed to offer the public not just a painting but also a whole environment, not a simple visit but a true experience, not a fleeting moment but a genuine revelation. This compelled him to innovate."<sup>75</sup> In this respect also, concerning the light in the chapel, Rothko categorically refused to accept the idea of surmounting the chapel with a truncated pyramid that would diffuse light onto the walls inside the chapel put forward by the architect, Philip Johnson: "He wanted his paintings to enjoy in their definitive settings the same light that had presided at their conception."<sup>76</sup> Cohen-Solal concludes that in many ways Rothko was crossing boundaries and taking risks up to the end as he insisted on carrying out his idea of "art as an experience" for the individual viewer through his last preoccupation with the light in the chapel.<sup>77</sup> Furthermore, Cohen-Solal questions an assertion made by the Tate Gallery on its current website claiming that Rothko "began darkening his palette to counter the perception that his work was decorative".<sup>78</sup> Cohen-Solal argues that Rothko is rather conducting an aesthetic research:

*Instead, could one not more accurately attribute such a development to the profound intellectual project already at the core of his artistic research, ever since he wrote The Artist's Reality? In fact, Mark Rothko's aesthetic research took the form of a long, coherent, and obsessive quest, as it became more and more evident during the last decade of his life, when his preoccupations went beyond a simple matter of palette.*<sup>79</sup>

[48] In his book *The Artist's Reality. Philosophies of Art*, Mark Rothko differentiates between the philosopher and the artist, since he recognizes that both reduce all external, temporal things perceptible to man into a generalization but, as opposed to the philosopher, he notes that the artist makes the reduction of the subjective as well as the objective with the end of infusing human sensuality. According to Rothko, the artist strives to facilitate a direct contact with the eternal principles through a reduction of those principles to the sphere of sensuality, which Rothko perceives as

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<sup>74</sup> Cohen-Solal, *Mark Rothko. Toward the Light in the Chapel*, 189.

<sup>75</sup> Cohen-Solal, *Mark Rothko. Toward the Light in the Chapel*, 193.

<sup>76</sup> Cohen-Solal, *Mark Rothko. Toward the Light in the Chapel*, 188.

<sup>77</sup> Cohen-Solal, *Mark Rothko. Toward the Light in the Chapel*, 208.

<sup>78</sup> Cohen-Solal, *Mark Rothko. Toward the Light in the Chapel*, 191.

<sup>79</sup> Cohen-Solal, *Mark Rothko. Toward the Light in the Chapel*, 191.

the fundamental language of all human experience.<sup>80</sup> Thus, it seems that Rothko strives towards a unity-seeking art that bridges the subjective and the objective realms with view to creating a unified reality, the ultimate unity, as Rothko perceives it. In this respect, Rothko makes reference to the ancient Greeks who, according to Rothko, viewed the unknown as a positive element of human reality.<sup>81</sup> Evidently, Rothko emphasizes a form of abstraction of reality in which all temporal phenomena submit to generalization as the constitution of real unity in the modern age. Rothko speaks of the duality of the subjective and objective realms, of the position of implied complementariness rather than opposition, and he implies a return to the Platonic ideas of visible phenomena and their ideals in an inverted significance, though, stating that man will be able to differentiate between reality and his apperception of reality; he equally pointed out the fact that artistic expression and philosophical expression provide equally one of two constituents of the whole.<sup>82</sup> In this light, it seems plausible to assume that to Rothko the manifestation of darkness in the paintings inside the Rothko Chapel is an inevitable development of his philosophical project, which is adding up to his artistic aim to offer the public a true experience and a genuine revelation encountering the chapel paintings.

### Visiting the Rothko Chapel: the role and meaning of art in a late modern context

[49] Viewing Rothko's late work practice overall, it seems indisputable that he as an artist has a very clear artistic aim or idea, which supposedly culminates in the creation of the paintings for the Rothko Chapel. As mentioned in the introduction, the hypothesis of this article is that for a contemporary viewer, it might be a challenging task to interact with these paintings, since they appear as very dark, withdrawn, inaccessible, unyielding monochromes and, thus, in many ways significantly different from his earlier paintings. Christopher Rothko points out that nothing comes from the chapel paintings, which means that it is all up to the viewer. In fact, he concludes that

*They yield only what we put in. The paintings only "work", they will only speak to our inner worlds, when we are open to their invitation or suggestion. Ultimately, to understand a Rothko is to understand what the painting helps us to see in ourselves.*<sup>83</sup>

[50] Obviously, this understanding requires both adjustment and skills in terms of physical presence and self-awareness, which are perhaps unresolved skills for most. On the other hand, it might be the case that the contemporary viewer finds it both meaningful and rewarding to spend time and effort in real engagement and active

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<sup>80</sup> Mark Rothko, *The Artist's Reality. Philosophies of Art*, ed. Christopher Rothko, New Haven and London 2004; the manuscript was written around 1940.

<sup>81</sup> Rothko, *The Artist's Reality, Philosophies of Art*, 27.

<sup>82</sup> Rothko, *The Artist's Reality. Philosophies of Art*, 27-28.

<sup>83</sup> Rothko, *Mark Rothko. From the Inside Out*, 39.

involvement in these paintings for that very same reason. It would seem plausible to argue that the very role and meaning of art in a late modern context might be to provide a space in which these skills can be unfolded and put into play during the process of contemplation and interaction. The fact that the chapel paintings seem to capture the viewer in the tension between condemnation and promise, tragedy and hope, facing an unknown world, which may seem anxiety-provoking or, to say the least, challenging for a contemporary viewer to loose herself in, appears nevertheless to be the very point of the artworks. In this respect, Rothko makes great demands on the viewer, demands of substantial emotional input, real engagement, and active involvement in his highly ambitious attempt to reach a unity-seeking art form and to offer to the public a true experience and a genuine revelation in the Rothko Chapel.

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