# I AM THE OBJECT Featuring Jack Whitten's work of the 1990s

HAUSER & WIRTH

By Richard Shiff

## A–Z

In 2015, Jack Whitten composed a statement that he titled 'Beyond Abstraction.'[1] He meant 'abstraction' as a mode of visual art that lacks a mimetic component, save perhaps the imitation of other forms of abstraction. But he may also have been considering the abstraction involved in the familiar process of logical thinking, the cognitive operation that proceeds from point A to point B to point C, eventually to Z.[2] Whitten took an alternative route, a non-route. Despite the methodical nature of his craftsmanship, when devising a design strategy, he would skip the intermediaries and pass directly from A to Z. This type of thinking is hard to plot or graph because no concept, no conceptual abstraction, connects A to Z, guiding the process. A, B, C, and so on connect by logical order and entailment, by induction or deduction. Not so, A and Z. From the vantage of A, Z appears as an insight, an intuition, perhaps a guess. In a graph, this type of thought process would require broken rather than continuous lines between the elements, or merely their conjunction, A–Z or even AZ—a linkage that leaves no graphic trace.

We engage in, and may be victim to, a culture of ideological fantasies: trickle-down economics and the like, but perhaps also such benevolent principles as human equality—these are ideological constructs. Our quotidian processes of thought are guided by a culture of reasoning, which some would regard as natural to the human species, while others might consider this, too, as founded ideologically (reason being favored over magic and myth). Ordinary language serves as the medium for reason and logical discourse.

Within the relatively recent historical past (according to our reason), technological changes in imaging and communication—from lithography to photography, to the telegraph, typewriter, and telephone, to sound recording and film, to electronic scanning and transmission of audio and video signals, to pervasive computerization and digitization—all this must have had an effect on how members of our modern society perceive the data that informs them. Technological development would seem especially significant because, within the length of a contemporary lifetime, an individual receives data in modes different from those in which the same individual has already been indoctrinated. Novel representational technologies, often merely replicating the functions of the soon-to-be-outmoded media they replace, challenge the human sensorium to adapt.

Friedrich Nietzsche presented a different challenge to the modern intellect and its culture of reason: 'How should explanations be at all possible when we first turn everything into an image, our image!' He meant, an image of discrete bodies and subjectivities, experiencing discrete moments of time, like photographic snapshots. 'Cause and effect: such a duality probably never exists,' Nietzsche wrote; 'in truth we are confronted by a continuum out of which we isolate a couple of pieces … An intellect that could see cause and effect as a continuum and a flux and not, as we do, in terms of an arbitrary division and dismemberment, would repudiate the concept of cause and effect and deny all conditionality.'[3] To abandon reliance on reasoning in terms of causes that lead to effects and effects that necessitate the postulation of causes, this would constitute a radical turn in the course of modern thought. Rather like the compressed logic of A–Z.

Technologies, I have suggested, demand adaptation. Understanding and explanation are factors of adaptation, though not essential ones. Individuals can survive in ignorance, merely by mastering collective habits. Contemporary academics commonly argue that our response to technologies, at least the conscious aspect of it, will have been mediated by our existing cultural norms. Culture will stand between technological transmission and human reception. Especially with respect to self-reflection and adaptive understanding, culture will buffer, which is to say, it will distance the reasoning process from its objective, avoiding shocks disruptive to habit. Epitomizing the conclusions of several of her media colleagues, theorist Vivian Sobchack wrote in 2004: 'The technological 'nature' of the photographic, the cinematic, and the electronic is graspable always and only in a qualified manner—that is, less as a technological essence than as a cultural theme.'[4] The 'technological essence' remains within its impenetrable shell. Culturally acceptable reasoning tells stories about technologies, their origins, their benefits, their dangers. A technology can become a principal character in science fiction. But reasoned discursive accounts, factual or fictive, offer no effective means of worming inside a technology to perceive its full potential.

All this is only to propose that, in his countercultural manner, Jack Whitten reasoned over and beyond photographic and digital technologies. Contemplating the technologies that were responsible for the contemporary environment of images, he proceeded from A immediately to Z, rather than from A to B to C and so on. By his reckoning—through his medium of paint—he discovered the 'technological essence' of the photographic process and other imaging technologies. This 'essence' existed beyond any rationally ordered 'cultural theme' (to invoke Sobchack's differentiation), that is, 'beyond [rational] abstraction' (Whitten's formulation). As if he had been reading Nietzsche at the time, Whitten wrote in 1979: 'As an artist, I merely present and dare not explain!'[5]

Striking the Z-note, Whitten released the spirit or soul of the modern technologies that were organizing human perception. He opened a door that had been opened at least once before, and it remains to be seen, after the artist's death in January 2018, whether the door has closed again behind him. The once before involves Paul Cezanne. In 1891, Émile Bernard described Cezanne's art as a process specific to a medium rather than to a culture of preexisting themes: 'He opened to art this amazing door: painting for itself' [fig. 1].[6] Just as academic criticism and philosophy—reasoning-for-itself—amounts to abstraction, so does painting-for-itself, but of a decidedly material type. Such painting may be better suited to burrowing into technologies of sensory perception than verbal reasoning is, despite a general culture that favors critical analysis by discursive logic. To think with materials has always been a viable alternative to the accepted norm, even within a culture of linguistic abstraction, a culture of the word. 'The image,' Whitten said, 'must come out of the process.'[7] In his case, out of matter.

Figure 1. Paul Cézanne. Avenue at Chantilly, 1888. Acquired from the Chester Beatty family under the acceptance-in-lieu procedure, 1990. © The National Gallery, London

Figure 2. Jack Whitten. First Testing Slab, 1972. Photo: John Berens

## A material soul

In 'Beyond Abstraction,' his statement of 2015, Whitten listed aspects of the contemporary situation to which he believed his art had been responding and should continue to respond. At the head of the list: 'Science and Technology have changed our perception of the world.' Analogous change had not come through Christian religious practice, so much a part of Whitten's childhood; the faith was a tradition, ultimately a force for cultural conservatism. And significant change had never developed within the politics of racial difference as Whitten experienced it throughout his life; little on the political front succeeded in dislodging the deepest cultural prejudices. In Whitten's estimation, the desired evolution in the social and cultural realm would hinge on how attentive the society at large might be to changes in the perceptual order that technologies of imaging had already generated. It seemed to him that advances in science and technology had even altered access to the human soul. At the least, this possibility merited investigation. Whitten's guide to art became science and technology, not theology, not political theory.

After Walter Benjamin, after Norbert Wiener, after Marshall McLuhan, it may seem unproblematic to claim that 'science and technology have changed our perception.' Yet Whitten's manner of engaging this new reality represents a curious inversion of the typical attitude. From his foundation in empiricism and material experimentation, he moved toward an aesthetic product of animist or pantheist value, a 'presence' in matter. He would seem to shift from the logic of science and revert to myth: 'If [this presence] is not an illustration of something, then what is it? This thing has its own mind, its own body. It's similar to the animists who believe that all matter holds something in it.'[8] When Whitten composed his statement on abstraction, he had long been structuring his painting on methods and principles derived from advanced studies in physics (quantum theory), biology (DNA), and mathematics (topological surfaces, fractals), all coupled with his understanding of the mechanics and electronics of contemporary technologies. Yet in the studio, many of his raw materials were basic and inexpensive, others were scavenged from the streets, and the tools to fashion them were sometimes makeshift and always direct in their application. Consider Whitten's practice as an art of technological animism, a materially sophisticated elaboration of a reservoir of beliefs deep within the human species, holdovers from a primordial past, with a redemptive value for the present overlooked by most of his peers. Through acrylic paint informed by the digital materiality of the new technologies of imaging—and through studio processes inspired by theories of quantum mechanics and electromagnetic forces—Whitten had been reaching far into the substance we experience as human mind, human feeling, human soul. From high-tech he turned to low-tech, but low-tech informed by high-tech. 'I like going places that the computer cannot go,' he wrote: 'Computers cannot penetrate the soul, but paint can.'[9]

This was his inversion: to discover through paint what the new sciences and technological modes may have concealed within them, a concealment demanding exposure. Paint was Whitten's medium of release. To decode photographic and electronic information he would return to the materiality of paint, as opposed to generating still more photographic and electronic forms. 'There is a gap between knowing and not knowing,' he wrote in 2008: 'In the '60s I called it the extreme middle. Now I call it the gap … In African art it's called presence. … It's purely mental … When matter is used in a particular way, it exudes presence.'[10] Such presence makes itself known, but not as knowledge, not as understanding or explanation. Whitten's 'extreme middle,' 'gap,' and 'presence' represent the Z-notes of his A–Z mode of thought—his intuitive insights. Imagine attempting to theorize the sudden contiguity of A and Z that appears when a person thinks in the A–Z way. Imagine theorizing the

Windows Of The Mind: A Monument Dedicated To The Power Of Painting!, 1995, acrylic on canvas, 259.1 × 345.4 cm / 102 × 136 in

Figure 3. Jack Whitten. Space Is Clement (For Clement Greenberg), 1994. Photo: John Berens

resolution of an issue (the moment of 'knowing') when a logic allowing the resolution to repeat remains obscure (a condition of 'not knowing'). We might postulate—against the geometry or graphics of the situation—that there must be a gap within the conjunction of A and Z, no matter how compelling their fusion. Quantum mechanics, one of Whitten's sustained interests, presents a parallel, for a subatomic particle can assume more than one manifestation at one time. It leaves observable evidence of its presence, but without the possibility of its location being determined. It is known and not known, a bit of physical matter and not one.[11]

Whitten applied the wisdom of the ages to contemporary science and technology. In his search for spiritual 'presence,' he used paint in accord with the foundation of modern computerization, the digital system.[12] Conceived as more of a rhizome than a spreadsheet or a flowchart, his use of paint developed as a gridded, unit-by-unit process. He would cut a thick sheet of laminated layers of acrylic, his 'slab,' into tile-like elements that he associated with the tesserae of mosaic—his material building blocks or 'molecules.'[13] In 2017, he recounted his evolution: 'Paint as matter, molecular perception, the unit as tessera, multidimensional space and light, all started with the Slab.'[14] Initially, around 1970, his paintings consisted of a 'slab' in its entirety, figured in various ways by squeegee- and rake-like tools during the brief period that the acrylic remained wet and malleable (see First Testing Slab, 1972 [fig. 2]). 'To be as clear as possible without getting confused, I just want a slab of paint,' he stated in 1972.[15] A 'slab' was Whitten's 'first non-relational painting.'[16] He established the final configuration of the paint in a single gesture, with 'the whole painting conceived of as one line.' And it was fast: 'That speed removes it from relational thinking to non-relational thinking'—from the relation of A to B to C, to the non-relation of A–Z.[17]

Later, using fragments of a slab, his tesserae, Whitten could 'make' a painting digitally rather than 'paint' it pictorially—construct it like a wall with units, rather than as a traditional composition with diverse elements serving diverse pictorial functions. 'I don't paint a painting, I make a painting,' he said in 1994.[18] And in 1996: 'The painting must be built … like you are building a stone wall.'[19] A painted composition is 'relational' but not a painting made like a wall. Working with tesserae and other prefabricated acrylic units such as forms cast from molds, Whitten could constitute his digital grid rather than follow the predetermined order of one—guided by instinct instead of geometry, working organically instead of logically. His frequent allusions to escaping the restrictiveness of 'relational' art signify a break with the principles espoused by critic Clement Greenberg and his acolytes (Whitten, 1991: 'At random is one way to achieve a total non-relational image').[20] In 1967, Greenberg, always keen on establishing analytical relations, disputed claims made for perceptual minimalism in sculpture: 'No matter how simple the [art] object may be, there remains the relations and interrelations of surface, contour, and spatial interval.'[21]

Whitten had been developing a different type of 'minimalism,' an art of elemental units, his tesserae, which could be handled like the little objects they were; they bore their 'space' within their materiality. As of 1968, he knew Greenberg personally; the two maintained a friendly acquaintance, and Whitten followed Greenberg's writings with interest. But he was hardly Greenbergian. Not long after recording Greenberg's death in his studio log, he completed Space Is Clement (For Clement Greenberg) (1994 [fig. 3]), one of his many 'memorial' paintings.[22] 'When I dedicate paintings it is my way of acknowledging that certain people existed as a spirit and energy. I take material and present it in a way to say that these spirits are here. These people existed. I spoke to them, I knew them.'[23] The spirits were 'here'—in the paint-matter and in its light.

Space Is Clement sets rectilinear tesserae about as far off a relational grid as they might be, as if the units of material themselves, not an implied geometrical order, were guiding the hand to create the space. Whitten later recalled his thinking about this anti-Greenbergian memorial to Greenberg: 'My use of topographical space in The Space Is Clement signifies my distancing myself from Greenbergian formalism. I eventually understood that abstraction as preached in Greenbergian terms was abstraction as an end to itself. I wanted abstraction to be a means to something else … 'black sensibility.''[24] (On the sensibility that Whitten invokes in connection with his abstract art of matter: 'When the question of being a Black artist comes up, I always say we have to go to the word 'sensibility.' … Slavery eliminated our sense of place. Blacks had no choice but to recreate a sense of place.'[25]) I wonder if the form of the memorial to Greenberg, which resembles a planographic image of a meandering stream, pertains to a thought Whitten had on 11 May 1994, as he first noted the critic's death. He followed with a quotation, a variant of one of Greenberg's statements, and concluded with a self-assessment true to his own sensibility: 'Clem passed. 'Abstraction is the only stream that leads to an ocean.' I am the ocean.'[26]

On 3 March 1996, about two years after The Space Is Clement, Whitten wrote in his log: 'Space is not a relational formal element in painting; it must be strictly a priori.'[27] Space would inhere in the nature of the materials, to which human perception was attuned; space was a material property, not an aim of formal (therefore, 'abstract') composition in compliance with pictorial logic. On 24 February 1996, shortly before he recorded his belief that perceived space is a property of material (not a pictorial illusion), Whitten associated space with the 'photographic,' which for him was a mode of perception, a mentality: 'The space is photographic. … the new painting is recognizable by its space which is photographic, [a representational] image could be included if one desires.'[28] If the 'photographic' need not entail representational imagery, then Whitten's sense of photographic practice could not have been the common one.[29] It constituted more of a mental attitude toward materials, or rather, a recognition. The photographic mind for Whitten was itself a material, just as his acrylic was; and the two intersected in his studio practice. 'I first wrote in 1964 … that the image is photographic, therefore I must photograph my thoughts. I have been trying to understand this ever since.'[30] Photographic thought, Whitten seemed to determine, was neither representational in a pictorial way, nor abstract in a pictorial way. It was an image-generator, not an image generated by a pictorial device. He was seeking the image-in-itself, which he sometimes called 'eidetic,' deriving the term from Edmund Husserl's phenomenology.[31] His familiarity with Husserl's writings extended back at least to the 1960s; in 2012, he referred to revisiting the texts and mentioned Husserl again in his final log entry at the end of 2017.[32]

To capture the link to Husserl—difficult, though not obscure—quotation from Whitten's notes of May 1995 helps: 'The real painting exists only in the mind. The mind sees the painting. This is what the ancients meant by the inner eye. Image is only a feeling. And not necessarily a feeling about something. Feeling can exist as pure phenomenon. I am sure that this is what drove Husserl crazy.'[33] We can compare Whitten's thinking here to Husserl's Cartesian Meditations: 'Perception, the universal type … floats in the air, so to speak—in the atmosphere of pure phantasiableness. Thus removed from all factualness [all habitual reality, considered as factual], it has become the pure 'eidos' perception, whose 'ideal' extension is made up of all ideally possible perceptions, as purely phantasiable processes. Analyses of perception are then 'essential' or 'eidetic' analyses.'[34] Eidetic analysis arrives at the image of all images (if it is fair to state the philosophical notion so summarily).

Husserl, metaphorically, located perception 'in the air.' Whitten, non-metaphorically, located it in matter, specifically paint-matter, and later in the light captured in paint-matter. (His painting released the light as image.) This is Whitten in 1986: 'If we extend the meaning of the painting as object (to include the immaterial), that object in its material form could very well become spirit. Light functions as the element which dematerializes the object and allows it to become spirit.'[35] Returning now to the meditations of a decade later, May 1995, Whitten, having referred to Husserl, continues in his typically compressed A–Z manner: 'The structure is digital. The digital structure signifies the time; the space is indigenous to the structure. I am at the intersection where space-time cancels out. The meaning of dimensional time ceases to be of importance. I am where I've always wanted to be. … Within the now.'[36] Whitten's notion of 'intersection' and canceling out is consistent with his resistance to the standard dualities that articulate the order of Western culture, including not only the division of light and spirit from matter, but also the division of 'black' or 'colored' races from the 'white' race. 'I think that my growing up black in [white] America gives me an advantage in dealing with the unique psychology of vision,' he wrote in 1979: 'I am a product of the cancellation of opposing races.'[37] He may have been alluding to his activity as an artist, which transcended the artificial categorization of social and historical identities. He perceived art as existing beyond racial difference, even when expressive of black 'sensibility.' An artist's mentality or sensibility need not inhibit the creation of an art capable of crossing barriers of identity.

In spring 1994, Whitten had mused over a condition that became real for him in 1995: 'There is an intersection in time where the past cancels the present … The self is located at that intersection; it is a point on a plane known as space. All of my life I have been trying to locate that point.'[38] Past and present, time and space, would become indistinguishable, the dualisms canceled—at 'that point.' The point was mental, to be reached by way of matter. After a summer interlude, back in his New York studio during autumn 1994, Whitten was thinking of his painting as a found object, which was a way of regarding its materiality as releasing sensory information rather than receiving information from the artist. He would be gaining insight rather than relating what preexisted as his possession. He had already associated materiality with the production of space (and time). Notions of his African heritage, a spirituality superseding racial difference, and a meaning that could be found in matter—these various imaginings were converging both materially and intellectually. His log from late September through early December includes these notes: 'It's my culture that I am putting back together. Due to Slavery, it was f[r]actured and it's my job as an artist to put it back together. … I want to put the magic back into art; American Art especially has become anemic. … Spirits are suspended in space. … Therefore, the painting as found object could qualify as a spirit. I like this very much!! It takes me back to Africa.'[39] The implication is this: beyond the customary boundaries of time and space (defined by the prevailing culture), a different quality of space, one imbued with spirit, would become accessible through the matter that generated it; this matter would be experienced as a found object, the mode of painting that Whitten envisaged. Earlier musings had already approached this notion: 'I cannot use my thinking apparatus to capture 'presence.' … One doesn't try to capture 'presence,' it is simply 'found,' or better yet, it is given.'[40] And without elaboration, he wrote in 1989: 'The painting as found object.'[41]

Whitten was moving beyond history, beyond culture, beyond racial difference, beyond discourse, beyond conventional categories of perception and knowledge (beyond space and time).[42] His perception was, as he said in early May 1995, 'within the now,' that is, immediate—not resolved as a concept but experienced as a 'feeling.'[43] For him, Africa was 'now.' A somewhat later note (November 1996), follows the train of thought: 'For a painting to qualify as abstract [here meaning, removed from relational pictorialism], ultimately, it must defy oral interpretation.'[44] Whatever is immediate has no narrative to relate, no development to relate, no relations of any kind to relate—hence, 'non-relational.' (Husserl: 'The eidos … is prior to all 'concepts,' in the sense of verbal significations.'[45]) Mid-May 1995, Whitten's meditation paused for a week, during which he completed Self Portrait (1995 [fig. 4]). He called it 'the world's first perceptual painting (of conceptual awareness).'[46] It features a scavenged piece of metal, symmetrical but oblong. Regard this as a found object, a fetish object. Whitten framed the metal with an irregular array of black acrylic tesserae. In turn, the open metallic form encloses a central area of mottled tesserae, as if to project a face, or—to put it more 'abstractly'—a countenance, the bearer of a presence, at once material (the paint-matter) and dematerialized (the eidetic image, the spirit, the 'portrait').

With Self Portrait resonating, Whitten's May meditation continues, as he assesses a complex set of (Husserlian) discoveries. Here is the entry for 15 May in full, supplemented by some words of clarification: 'My job as a painter is to create the right visual condition within the object which allows the image to exist. Image and object [as experience] is not the same. The object only acts as a physical representation of the image. The image only exists in the brain. In African sculpture, when we speak of presence, presence is image. The object must have a specific physical quality for image to exist; therefore, image is a metaphysical manifestation [beyond an ordinary perception of physicality]. It is [nevertheless] dependent upon matter. Image is eidetic [generatively representational], photographic in structure, not photographic as in mechanical reproduction but photographic organically perceived. Eidetic imagery has the same structure of light recognizable in mechanical photography.'[47] The 'structure of light,' not the representational configuration, provides the felt image, the emotion.

As Whitten often affirmed, the relevant structure was digital. He had already discovered this in the materiality of African art: 'There's a grid under [African wood carving], a molecular structure that explains how the artist perceives things. … The sculpture [made] me aware of the molecular physicality of painting, or paint as matter.'[48] Whitten's painting advanced because of his experience with sculpture. Elaborating on his interest in African animism, he stated that the form of a sculpture was less important to him than the spirit in the wood itself, regarded as elemental matter.[49] In a note of January 1996, his several realizations converge. His paintings 'could be referred [to] as physical photographs, and eidetic image[s], produced by materiality, its substance a product of the emotions.'[50] This statement may be the answer to a question the artist had asked himself earlier in the decade: 'What is the equivalent of animism in a modern technological society?'[51] Later, in 2010, he wrote of his fulfillment of an animist aesthetic: 'To reclaim the spirit through matter is what I want. The spirit of the Middle Passage is trapped within matter. … Set it free! It is not about pictorial illusion of any form … It is as is. … Trust the matter to speak for itself.'[52] The animist matter that Whitten used for painting was nevertheless 'technological'—synthetic acrylic, which, through experimentation, he led into a remarkable range of sensory effects. And his construction was digital. The spirit of his African heritage was already there 'as is' in the acrylic (digitized or not), as were other forms of spirit, needing only to be released. As he proclaimed: 'Set it free!'

Whitten's units of acrylic derived from unarticulated slabs of paint-matter, his primordial substance. They had the eidetic potential to incorporate within his paintings the entire world of experience—not only his own experience but all experience—all images, all spirit, all soul.

Figure 4. Jack Whitten. Self Portrait, 1995.

Degrees of understanding of the technological-photographic, both its physicality and its spirituality, came at various moments in Whitten's career.[53] About a month after he wrote, 'The space is photographic' (February 1996), he noted a statement by the older African American artist Herbert Gentry, which provided a crucial insight. A log entry for 2 April 1996 records Gentry's words: 'Experiences have already been photographed in the subconscious.'[54] to which Whitten responded: 'If this is true, my interest is in digitalizing the subconscious.'[55] He would map the molecules of the mind. Two tesserae-like works on paper are among the products of Whitten's musings on digitization at that moment: Broken Grid VI (1996) and Broken Grid VIII (1996).

A log entry from a decade later is explicit regarding the nature of photographic thought, reiterating the realizations of 1995–1996: 'The photograph is the only graphic representation that illustrates my thinking, but I am not talking about mechanics. This stuff is totally mental! Mind as matter is my mantra, and paint is my matter.'[56] So the digital photograph of the mind would look like a painting, not a photograph. Whitten regarded his digital or molecular method as an extension of a tendency toward an art of units, already present in the modern tradition, as he explained to an interviewer in 1997: 'My acrylic paint tesserae represent the evolution of Cézanne's brushstroke, Seurat's dot, Picasso's cube, Malevich and Mondrian's square, de Kooning's gesture, Pollock's line. Perception is the basis of all aesthetic reason and I maintain that it is molecular in structure.'[57] He had liberated 'aesthetic reason' from the method of relational composition, identified with (Greenbergian) modernism. He was exposing both his paint-matter and his mind to the photographic subconscious, to the spirit and soul of organic being.

## Image in matter

Despite the conceptual directness of Whitten's unit-by-unit structures, they become perceptually, and even associatively, complex. Multidimensional—often more like relief sculpture than conventional painting—his works generate streams of sensory experience that are anything but customary. Viewing will seem to demand looking from the sides as well as the front, not only because of the factor of relief (which often approaches assemblage), but also because the quality of light shifts as it reflects from the slightly angled tesserae when seen from different perspectives. Any movement of the body animates Whitten's light, encouraging an additional shift in the position of the viewer. His works are suitable for contemplation, but not of a passive kind. They induce viewers to investigate their own perception, testing it out, as if both it and the art object were mobile. Works that have a totemic structure—oriented vertically and segmented—often feature tilted, conjoined panels that each lie in a different plane in relation to the source of light, as well as to a viewer's stance. By this device, the several segments of a 'totem' animate the whole, just as the skewed array of individual tesserae brings material animation to the details. Of the many segments of Totem 2000 V: For KD (Kenny's Ladder) (2000), the topmost cants back from the one joined below it; both segments appear to be supported by the wooden seat of a scavenged lounge chair, which forms a shallow S-curve.[58] Here Whitten introduces a sculptural effect of convex and concave surfaces.

Something similar characterizes the irregularly shaped Blue Song: For Tony Batten (1999); its wooden support is bowed, and probably was so when Whitten appropriated it as material with potential for his art. The three-dimensional curve of Blue Song evokes a wave or watery environment, as does the blue-green pigment that seems to float within its translucent acrylic medium. With the dedication to musicologist and filmmaker Batten, presumably after the work had been finished or was already headed toward completion, the bluish environment adds another dimension of evocation, possibly referring to Batten's radio program Let Me Tell You About the Blues.[59] Here I must pause, for such a statement on my part, relating primarily to the dedication, is blatantly interpretive. Yet it seems that the core effect of each of Whitten's paintings remains independent of any interpretive supplementation, which risks distracting from the perceptual experience of the work, the artist's interest.[60] Commentary falls into what he might call a 'gap.' It's at once relevant and not. In the end, my suggestions should be regarded as aspects of an interpretive context, but only with the understanding that an interpretive context itself has limited linkage to the emotional profundity of Whitten's painting. His art extends beyond the history of its making and beyond any discursive slotting into transitory cultural issues. I should be wary of my own gestures of interpretation, which, without much cognitive resistance, can readily drift into an explanatory mode.

In Totem 2000 IV: For Amadou Diallo (2000), Whitten crafts an elaborate armature that projects the panels of tesserae into relatively high relief, with the center panel the most forward. A context is explicit. Whitten seems to have conceived of this work from the start in relation to the tragic shooting of the Guinean immigrant Amadou Diallo by plain-clothed New York City police. Some of the reds among the dominant blacks hold the artist's own blood: 'Using my blood as an offering mixed with dried animal blood and suspended in clear acrylic gel along with the deep density of Spinel Black, I constructed a dark totemic elegy in memory of Amadou Diallo.'[61] Whitten resorted to the use of blood once again when memorializing the loss of life from the Twin Towers attack in New York on 11 September 2001, deaths he witnessed from his nearby studio-residence on Lispenard Street.[62] He colored the acrylic of his 9-11-01 (2006 [fig. 5]) with blood and added into it a lot more, perhaps alluding to the complexity of the historical causes of the event. Poet Quincy Troupe describes this work aptly, while hinting at interpretation: 'a black, bloody pyramid shape you lifted off the dollar bill, jack, blood money, so you bought gallons of blood, splashed it all over your painting, dropped bone fragments, silica, debris, rusted material into it.'[63]

In one sense, Whitten's works have remained materially simple: they are acrylic on canvas or panel, little or nothing more. In another sense, they are complex: the acrylic is likely to be in the form of multicolored tesserae cut from a slab, but may also include casts from objects and surfaces of various sorts, or odd pieces of acrylic set whole onto the canvases as elements of collage. In addition, as in Self Portrait, the acrylic object-matter may be supporting metals and other materials embedded into it or otherwise attached to it: see the metal mending plates of Art's Cross (1994), the styrofoam and hair of Mask I (1991), and the styrofoam, hair, and eggshells of Mask III (1991). Whitten's various 'totems,' like his other works of the decade, are inherently additive images with a potential to range from simple to complex. The fundamental concept of the totem allowed him to combine microcosms of tesserae of similar nature (separate panels within the vertical configuration) to generate a unified macrocosm. This effect characterizes Totem 2000 IV: For Amadou Diallo, as well as Totem 2000 V: For KD (Kenny's Ladder) and Totem 2000 VI Annunciation: For John Coltrane (2000).

Figure 5. Jack Whitten. 9-11-01, 2006. Photo: John Berens

To the contrary, for Totem 2000 III (2000), Whitten used a subtly crafted armature to join three panels that may have originated in unrelated ways. Occupying slightly different planes in relation to a prospective viewer, they create a striking collage of color, texture, and reflectivity that one would never suspect could be so arresting. Whitten may not have imagined it himself until he did it—by A–Z intuition. The top panel consists of translucent elements on a white ground; the middle panel is opaque and mostly matte black against a black ground; while the bottom panel, also opaque, consists of a reflective green against a translucent acrylic ground. Two panels are relatively neutral but contrast as translucent to opaque; the third panel is brilliantly chromatic: A–Z.

Regardless of the wariness that I've recommended (at least for myself), it seems that Whitten's works act like cultural magnets, attracting multiple efforts at interpretation along with the lift and stretch they demand in aesthetic perception. The potential for open interpretation extended to the artist himself. As I've indicated, from the start of certain works, he intended a memorial function; a project could be instigated by a life or an event that touched Whitten emotionally. His art was his commentary on the human condition as well as his emotional outlet. The title 20 April 1999 #1 (1999) refers to the date of the shootings at Columbine High School. Whitten's construction incorporates the widely distributed, anodyne yearbook images of the two perpetrators—perhaps an indication of their human ordinariness (Hannah Arendt's 'word-and-thought-defying banality of evil').[64] Whitten set each photographic image within a mask or fog of fissured translucent acrylic, as if these individuals were fading from memory while the enormity of the event remained. Excepting the two inset images—which, along with the title, establish the historical source of the transcendent emotion—the surface projects a fathomless black (enhanced by tar). Whitten's use of black is multidimensional and polysemic. It should not be generalized as equivalent to this sensation or that concept. Here, the likely evocation is both the clothing of the shooters and the dark violence of the event—emotion intensified through matter and light, black light. Virtually a sculptural construction, the top element of 20 April 1999 #1 is a tesserae-encrusted board projecting forward; like many of Whitten's surfaces, it catches and distributes light through its reflective gloss as well as its irregular relief. It becomes a ballast for the two vertical, tesserae-covered canvases that hang like funereal drapes, each with its inset photograph; they memorialize the event, not the individuals.

Whitten's black can be more luminous than dark. He often modified its sensory effect with bits of reflective particles mixed into the acrylic pigment and medium; the mixture would constitute a slab to be cut into elements for a constructive acrylic collage ('making' with the paint, rather than 'painting' with it). His homage to jazz giant Miles Davis, Homecoming: For Miles (1992 [fig. 6]) is an example of black luminosity. In many cases, the specific material content of a work (as opposed to the arrangement of elements) relates to the event or person memorialized. This situation is especially explicit in The Mingo Altarpiece: For George Mingo 14 September 1950 – 6 December 19966 (1996). Black tesserae predominate here, but there are also brightly colored units, as well as glimpses of various reds and blues appearing at the interstices of the acrylic tiles. This supplemental color derives from the board that Whitten used as the supportive ground of The Mingo Altarpiece. The rigid ground allows a rectilinear area at the lower center to be reserved for placement of a small bronze sculpture by George Mingo, one of Whitten's students, whose life and work this 'altar' memorializes. Whitten's sculptural sense of painting—more construction than composition—made this type of hybrid possible: painting as sculpture, Mingo as Whitten, Whitten as Mingo, Mingo's sculpture becoming Whitten's painting. 'Jack always had a certain connection with different students, and when they died, he took it to heart very deeply.'[65]

Along similar lines, Whitten included a personal item as a gift, sealed in a packet attached to the front of My Argiroula: For Argiro Galeraki 1981–1995 (1995). He dedicated this work to the memory of a young Cretan girl who died of leukemia. Deceptively, the gift packet appears to hang freely; it is, in fact, rigidly attached—a reflection of Whitten's craft and his concern for creating durable structures. The symmetrical but irregular wooden support for the tesserae—brightly colorful in this case—appears to be the scavenged seat of a chair. As a master of bricolage, Whitten set a burner unit from a stove at the gravitational center of the chair form; its concentric black rings generate additional circular bands of tesserae, many of them translucent. Regarding the work as a dimensional object rather than a flat pictorial surface, he encrusted the sides of the chair seat with additional tesserae, paying characteristically sculptural attention to all visible aspects of the object—treating it as volumetric. A more dramatic use of tesserae as sculpture occurs in another memorial work, Manolis Giannakakis of Melampes (1998), where the acrylic elements cover all visible sides of a wood crate that projects in high relief when the 'painting' is hung. The crate itself was the work of the local Cretan craftsman to whom Whitten dedicated its transformed, painted state. Giannakakis's photographic image becomes one of the tessera units near the right bottom corner.

Whitten often set out to make works materially relevant to their dedication—a condition as true of The Hairdresser: For Sister (1994) as it is of My Argiroula and Manolis Giannakakis. Creating The Hairdresser (for his sister LaVerne Sykes), Whitten incorporated human hair in the separate area of tesserae arranged to radiate from a small circular mirror. The hair

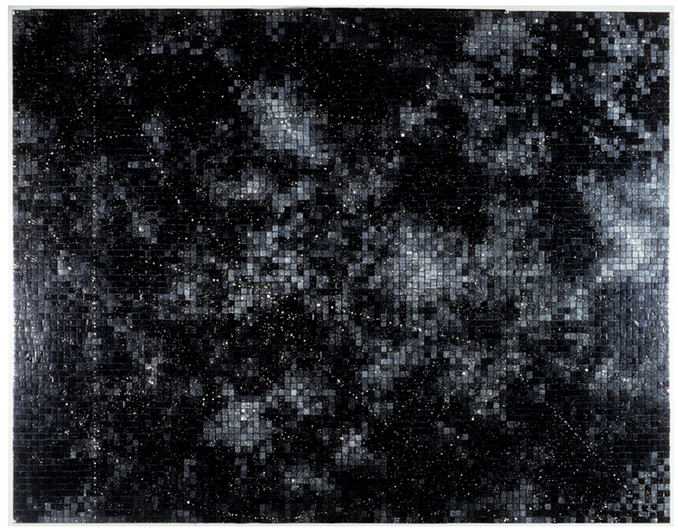

Figure 6. Jack Whitten. Homecoming: For Miles, 1992. Photo: John Berens

Memory Sites, 1995, acrylic on canvas, 320 × 355.6 cm / 126 × 140 in

Figure 7. Jack Whitten. Vibrations For Milt 'Bags' Jackson, 1999. Photo: John Berens

lends the translucent black and gray acrylic elements their curiously resonant brownish black tones. Something about this work is more remarkable still. Whitten conjoined the smaller, concentrically organized panel to the front of a larger panel of a very different order. Here the tesserae, including elements of stainless steel and silverleaf, are irregularly distributed. But distributed by whom? Perhaps I should write that the tesserae 'distribute themselves,' as opposed to being distributed, presumably by the artist. The individual elements give the appearance of having fallen into place rather than being arranged. This is so often the effect of Whitten's mosaics of units, or 'molecules.' The design has no discernible plan. Whitten 'makes' the painting, but does so by his process, which proceeds with a rapidity that prevents him from plotting his moves. By this means—remaining a step ahead of its artist's deliberation—the painting makes itself and shows itself to the artist. The two panels of The Hairdresser are radically opposed in many respects, yet Whitten's juxtaposition causes their coupling to seem as if it had to be. Like Totem 2000 III (which would follow), this work presents the look of an A–Z gesture lacking intermediaries—an instinctive guess at what would sync in sensation, if not in synchronous concept. If I were to analyze another equally unexpected work, Totem 2000 VIII: For Janet Carter (A Truly Sweet Lady) (2000), I would arrive at the same A–Z conclusion with respect to the structuring of its color.[66] Its hues and values constitute an illogical chromatic syllogism; none of these colors predicts the others. From its spine of translucent, warm pastel colors, the structure of Totem 2000 VIII passes to a surround of matte black and gray tesserae, then to an irregular border of off-white tesserae with glitter—an optical experience of gelatin, coal, and a novel type of chalk. I doubt that such a curious sequence of evocative colors can be found anywhere else. It has no reason to be, yet is.

Some of Whitten's memorializing images, following a death or a disaster, are celebratory of the person or of a resistance to adversity. Others convey the tragedy of a situation, and without lifting the weight of the pain, may still induce a rewarding state of contemplation, both aesthetically and thematically. Even the Columbine painting, 20 April 1999 #1, can be appreciated for its aesthetic power, like a Holocaust memorial. The range of emotion captured in or projected from Whitten's art is remarkably broad—multifaceted like his tesserae surfaces. When the legendary jazz vibraphonist Milt 'Bags' Jackson died on 9 October 1999, Whitten was at work on a large painting. Returning from the funeral home in Manhattan, he recorded this entry in his log for 13 October: 'Bags [lay] against an ivory backdrop wearing his gold vibraphone on his lapels as always. He was holding a pair of bright green mallets in his hands with a little circle in the middle. I knew immediately that the painting which I am presently working on was for 'Bags.' My mind always does this to me: actual physical nature serves as a catalyst through experience of the present to project that which is true.' Whitten's truth, an authentic image of Milt Jackson, arose from the conjunction of the experience of 'Bags' in the funeral home and his own array of white tesserae laid out in circular motifs in the studio, enhanced by chromatic accents—ivory with golden yellow, green, and other vibrant notes.

Whitten titled the painting Vibrations For Milt 'Bags' Jackson (1999 [fig. 7]). Its intersecting arcs and chromatic discs suggest the vibraphone's percussive waves of sound, its mallet strikes and accumulating resonance. But Whitten's colors do not imitate those he observed, nor is his design a musical metaphor. This, despite his having stated in 1988, 'I want the visual equivalent of jazz. … Jazz is my metaphor.'[67] He made this declaration shortly after disclaiming most everything else: 'I don't want sexual metaphors. I don't want naturalistic metaphors. I don't want formalistic metaphors. I don't want political metaphors. I don't want ethnic metaphors. I don't want decoration as metaphor. I don't want historical metaphors. I don't want religious metaphors.'[68] The appeal of jazz was its free composition, its call and response, analogous to Whitten's process of material experimentation.[69] Metaphor involves deciding upon a fixed image or sign of some kind to represent a person, object, event, or concept. Instead, the image that Whitten created for 'Bags' was specific to the process at hand, immanent. The affinity of the painting for the vibraphonist resulted circumstantially, as Whitten became mentally, spiritually, occupied by thoughts of both Jackson and the painting destined to be titled Vibrations. 'My mind always does this to me,' he said, as if it had not been his choice to make, as if he—the acculturated creature of habit, Jack Whitten—had an alien force within him, forever breaking his habits, leading him to discovery ('to project that which is true'). 'The image comes [directly] from the material,' he had noted, also in 1988: 'I have been making somewhat of a mistake by allowing the image to read metaphorically; therefore, I must remove the metaphor, whatever it may be.'[70]

Figure 8. Jack Whitten. The Mask: Reclamation, 1995. Photo: Matthew Kroening

When Whitten dedicated a painting to Ron Brown, Secretary of Commerce under President Clinton—Mask II: For Ronald Brown (1996)—he did so immediately upon learning of Brown's accidental death on 3 April 1996. The painting had been completed on 29 March with its initial title, Mask II. Four days later, 2 April, Whitten referred to 'digitalizing the unconscious' (discussed above in connection with Herbert Gentry). It was as if, a day later, his unconscious made the association—Mask II is Ron Brown—and his digitized tesserae rendered this identity visible. Regarding the relevance to Brown, he wrote: 'I dedicated Mask II to Ron. (It's a bird's beak, see face of R. B.).'[71] The structure of this large tesserae painting resembles that of a rudimentary mask, a creased wrap-around covering. It was preceded in January 1995 by The Mask: Reclamation [fig. 8], in which 'reclamation' refers to the restoration of African heritage.[72] The artist intended this work to be stapled in place on a wall with the acrylic-covered canvas support hanging freely. The slit in the lower half of the work would, in principle, allow this flexible form to fit over the bridge of a nose, falling to either side of a face. In Mask II, the triangular notch at the center top corresponds to a central axis along which the canvas could be folded so that it would follow the volumetric contours of a face; the much larger, central inverted triangle evokes the configuration of eyes to either side of a protruding nose (or bird's beak, as Whitten stated). The painting in entirety amounts to a flat projection of a dimensional surface—a mask form to suit any purpose, perhaps suggesting that any painting holds within it the potential to represent or accommodate any dimension.

Whitten conceived the mask form as a restoration of traditional African practices, as he indicated in a note of 8 January 1995, having completed The Mask: Reclamation: 'To reclaim our culture … what was lost as a direct result of the slave trade. … The mask gives focus an anchor for identity. Identity as a people was lost. We have suffered for this. My art is a tool used for the purpose of reclaiming my lost culture and directing it into the present.'[73] He had previously made relatively small assemblage-like versions of masks (Mask I, 1991; Mask III, 1991), not the draping, flexible kind. The mask form also developed, like so many of Whitten's other works, from digitized matter (his response to the new technological environment). 'Art must transcend dogma,' he wrote during the same month: 'The painting as found object allows me to paint without considering meaning and [simultaneously] avoid automatism. There is no story. The story lies only in the fact of finding.'[74] Whitten was a constructivist (a maker), not an automatist (a finder); yet his resultant image would be found in matter, neither through a set of automatic gestures nor through the application of a thematic program. 'The digital must be conceived as derived from nature … not man … It's organic. It can be constructed on a grid pattern, but the pattern must be organic not machined.'[75] The tesserae of Mask II: For Ronald Brown fall into place with the irregularity of organic growth under changing conditions; each unit added to the compound whole becomes a change affecting all the others. When the news of Ron Brown's death arrived, Mask II aligned with Whitten's need to respond with a memorial. The realization of this connection was itself 'found,' impressing itself upon Whitten's sensibility.

The mask form involves vertical axial symmetry and sometimes horizontal axiality as well, as in the case of Mask III: For The Children of Dunblane Scotland (1996, pp. 10–11). This work assumes the form of a cross, though not of the Christian kind. Whitten described this right-angled configuration as 'the elemental basis of the grid'; it suited his work with patterns of units, his tesserae, and with their potential to expand in any direction.[76] A graphite and ink study for the Dunblane painting, Mask III (1996), indicates its multifaceted axial structure with heavier and lighter lines. The large-scale version in acrylic tesserae renders the primary vertical and horizontal divisions in bright white units, while the lesser vertical divisions along the four 'wings' of the structure appear as breaks in the continuous patterning of brilliantly chromatic tesserae. Even these divisions become hierarchically distinctive; those that are farther from the central vertical axis are less precisely indicated than those that are nearer. Imagine this large painting as an actual canvas mask to be worn: the deepest folds or creases would follow the primary white axes, while the secondary folds would occur along the secondary breaks in the pattern; and at the least distinct breaks, farthest from the central vertical, the folding or bending would be much less pronounced. The masking fabric that we imagine gradually wraps around the volume of a head, an action suggested by the external shape of the painting, which tapers at left and right, as if receding away from a frontal position. Yet, such thoughts about masking are fantasy: the painting is heavy with tesserae, of both acrylic and glass; it is beyond the scale of any human head, decidedly planar, and frontal in its presentation. Its relative flatness as a shape introduces other possibilities, edging from description toward interpretation.[77] Whitten dedicated this form as a memorial to the sixteen Scottish school children who died (along with one teacher) on 13 March 1996 at the hands of a gunman; he completed it on 28 April, a month after he had finished work on Mask II, which he soon dedicated to Ron Brown.[78] If, for some, the major axes in white might vaguely evoke a Greek or Latin cross, they are just as likely to recall the sight or scope of a gun, seeking its target.

The axial symmetry of mask forms, corresponding to the symmetry of the human body, can function as a stabilizing factor at the core of the image. Such symmetry allowed Whitten to range into unusually asymmetrical territory without abandoning a sense of center, as if growing his tesserae outward from a node (though he also expressed a need to lose the center, and by that, perhaps he was referring to breaking from a geometrical frame, an action his internalized axes facilitated).[79] With his eccentrically shaped surfaces, often appearing to have developed additively, he broke definitively with formats suited to relational composition. Some of his totems and other vertically oriented paintings have a central axial 'spine' (Art's Cross, 1994; Totem 2000 VI Annunciation: For John Coltrane, 2000; Totem 2000 VIII: For Janet Carter (A Truly Sweet Lady), 2000). A central 'spine' supports the form of Natural Selection (1995, pp. 14–15), which has a horizontal axis as well as its vertical, clearly indicated by the tesserae pattern, dividing the painting into irregular quadrants.[80] Here, an orthogonal geometry encounters the call and response of free organicism: 'My grid is organic, it grows as the painting progresses.'[81] The complex contour of Natural Selection is the result of six separate pieces of canvas having been joined together as the support. The arc at the upper left recalls the geometric order of Vitruvian man, while the neutral but decidedly earthy tones of the tesserae suggest a corporal composition of primordial matter and the evolutionary growth of the human body from some elemental germination.

If Whitten's organic grid of digital units is nearly a constant during the 1990s, little else is, including his palette. For another painting featuring vertical and horizontal axes, Paradise Beach: Dedicated To The Memory of F. Sinatra (1998), he developed a complete spectrum.[82] The tesserae pattern establishes a vertical axial division, while the physical separation of two plywood panels creates the horizontal axis. The two panels are flopped in relation to each other, as if inverted and reversed, as in a hyperbolic mirror. Edges of opaque, achromatic tesserae—black, gray, white—frame central areas of translucent, brilliantly chromatic elements.

For the most part, Whitten had been personally acquainted with the individuals (as opposed to groups) to whom he dedicated his 'memorial' works; Frank Sinatra was among the exceptions, as was Yitzhak Rabin. Whitten associated the latter figure with Memory Sites (1995 pp. 6–7), which, like Natural Selection, consists of several pieces of canvas joined to create a complex additive shape, hardly suited to a conventional 'relational' composition. Memory Sites offers the sense of dimensionality typical of work in sculpture but does so while occupying two dimensions, not three; photographic reproduction will cause it to appear less flat than it is. The chance convergence of Whitten's studio history with world history connects Rabin to Memory Sites. Whitten had linked this work to the general notion of 'man's inhumanity to man,' but with the assassination of Rabin, just days after the painting was completed, its instance of inhumanity became painfully specific.[83]

In an interview conducted in 1997, Whitten reiterated his longstanding concern to develop a non-relational means of painting and the likeminded strategy behind his current practice. 'Paint as matter means that data is carried within the paint,' he said: 'The [surface of] tesserae is a non-illusionist physical object loaded with data. … What I want to do is to incorporate 'the image' in 'the matter' on an abstract basis without having to illustrate it. … Within one of those little pieces of acrylic that I use, it's all in there. The information is in that thing.'[84] Whitten provided two examples of his method, one of them a painting he had not yet made: 'I'm aware of something being caught in the matter. … Congresswoman Barbara Jordan is my next subject. … She's in that bucket [of acrylic]! … I want what that woman is about in her spirit to be in that paint.'[85] His explanatory analogy (already cited in this essay) was animism: 'This thing [caught in the matter] has its own mind, its own body. It's similar to the [African] animists who believe that all matter holds something in it.'[86] In 1992, he had written, 'I am an animist.'[87] And in 1998, he concluded: 'My paintings are animist structures, they incorporate spirit in matter.'[88]

Whitten's other example was Memory Sites. He had finished it at the end of October 1995 and characterized it as 'a historical theme painting.'[89] He meant history in the broadest sense—human, evolutionary history. In this instance, the primary analogy invoked would not be African animism but Euro-American Husserlianism, though the two have much in common, as Whitten no doubt perceived. The capacity of his thought to flow from one to the other indicated both his cosmopolitanism ('the cancellation of opposing races') and the agile nature of his A–Z intuition.[90] Extended quotation is revealing: 'The theme is man's inhumanity to man. And I've built these seven skulls in it. They start with a modern skull and it goes back in time.' A detail shows one skull to the left of center; its rows of small white tesserae suggest teeth [fig. 9]. Whitten continues: 'You can see how it passes through [to] Cro-Magnon. … [The skulls] become much more primitive. This is like an archeological find; it's as if you dug something up to discover this. That's where the color structure comes from. The material is primarily bone, ash from bone. I had to burn bone and reduce it to an ash. There's a lot of calcium in that painting, a lot of silica. So it has this intensely earthy quality as if you just dug it up out of the ground.'[91] In fact, the burnt character of some of the local areas of tesserae is immediately evident. When the interviewer, Jeanne Siegel, commented that Memory Sites 'combines abstraction and representation,' Whitten had a Nietzschean moment and balked at retaining the dualism: 'There's a third order out there that's not abstract, nor is it representation. … You have to go beyond the notion of just bringing them together. It's another order … more in relation to the word 'eidetic'—an image that comes out of matter.'[92] Eidetic: this was Whitten's specific reference, less to Nietzsche, more to Husserl. He alluded to an essence located in both mind and matter, representationally generative (like his tesserae), and beyond the domain of any discursive logic or ideological system.

Whitten's non-relational structuring, his application of digitization, was post-logical, that is, it was 'beyond abstraction' and all the cultural baggage abstraction was carrying. Or, better stated, his digital structuring ventured into the realm of the pre-logical (suggested by his reference to Cro-Magnon in Memory Sites, alluding to a 'historical' era before human culture produced recorded history). His studio log for 13 November 1995 has a relevant entry: 'I am very interested in structures that occur before the advent of human consciousness (pre-logic).'[93] Consciousness or, more precisely, self-consciousness, separates the conscious mind from the matter that constitutes it. Whether we call it animism when we reinstitute a mind-matter continuum or defer instead to a physicist like David Bohm (quoted below), such a belief is founded on the vicissitudes of observation and abductive guesswork, not strict logical argumentation. On the animist side, Whitten had an ongoing fascination with African sculpture, initially through familiarity with the collection of his early dealer Allan Stone, as well as the holdings of the Metropolitan Museum, New York. His later travel to Africa in 2001 reinforced these first encounters. His log for early 1996 states: 'Abstraction as modernist invention ended with the grid. From now on abstraction part II is derived from pre-modernist sensibilities, in my particular case of African origin … pre-scientific … pre-logic, an expression of the mind in its natural state.'[94] Whitten recapitulated his experience in one of his final statements, 2017: 'I have discovered a universal code embedded in the geometry of African art … I call this pattern the DNA of visual perception, containing a cosmic worldview that has evolved through millennia.'[95]

Well beyond issues of race and racial history—beyond the conceptual 'abstraction' of race—Whitten committed himself to what he sometimes identified as the 'DNA of visuality.'[96] Late in his career, he explained: 'DNA is a molecule shared by all human beings … a universal fact in our present society. I apply it to painting because of my belief that painting is organic.'[97] Just as DNA had been theorized as the essential unit of human nature—the human as a species, as well as the human as a mass of individuals—visual perception would have its 'unit,' its constituent 'molecule.' Discovery of the 'DNA of visuality' would take Whitten's human feeling down to the microscopic level, from which he could restructure his paint-matter with the understanding that the units of paint would become the bearers of thought, feeling, and soul. His aesthetic responded to the rapid evolution of technological imaging: 'My metaphors are found in scientific processes. Hydrogen bubble chambers turned me on in the '70s. Electronic scanning devices—that's where I found my images.'[98]

As I've suggested, on the scientific side of Whitten's investigations, his sense that mind and matter coalesce accords with the thinking of quantum physicists such as David Bohm, with whose work he was at least somewhat familiar. Bohm stated in 1990: 'A rudimentary mind-like quality is present even at the level of particle physics. … There is no real division between mind and matter.'[99] If there is mind in matter, and if matter, like the molten core of the planet, existed in advance of the evolution of organic life, then the derivation of spirit from matter would 'occur before the advent of human consciousness'—before the dominance of a culture of (ideological) reason. Hence, Whitten's occasional references to a condition of 'pre-logic' or 'the mind in its natural state.'[100] 'The world is a mind made of matter,' he wrote in 2009: 'I construct that world with paint as matter.'[101] Mind or spirit would be the result. Accordingly, Whitten sometimes referred to a need to 'dematerialize the painting.'[102] From its origin in mind that passes through matter, Whitten's paint-matter would return to mind. His mantra during the 1990s: 'I do not separate spirit from matter.'[103]

Figure 9. Jack Whitten. Memory Sites (detail), 1995. Photo: Dan Bradica

## Remove me

On the natural state of the human mind, consider Whitten's sculpture of 2010, Gray Matter [fig. 10]. He created most of his sculptural work—carvings and assemblages of wood, stone, metals, and various found objects, sometimes electronic in origin—while he summered in Crete, at Agia Galini, where he built a house. For Gray Matter, Whitten balanced a polished construction of mulberry wood on a block of gray Gortynis marble, a regional stone that he regarded as 'the brain of Crete'; he also evoked the titular 'gray matter' by adding protrusions of sawdust congealed in Gorilla Glue. In notes accompanying a local exhibition of 2011, Whitten wrote: 'The rich dark color of black mulberry combined with Gortynis marble is a mystical bond of spirit and matter. This is the stuff that myth is made of.'[104] We should take his last remark literally. Myth (spirit, mentality, soul) is 'made' of matter—or better phrased, matter-made, as opposed to man-made. It derives from the materiality of marble, or from mulberry, but not from theoretical intangibles like the ether or a void of interstellar space. Despite his acknowledgment of effects that seemed mystical, Whitten followed advances in the physical sciences, not science fiction. The quantum theory that especially fascinated him during his last decade of work resonated poetically (mystically, if you prefer): 'Quantum emotions produces [sic] emotional geometry. Emotional geometry exists in the gap between figure and ground. You cannot see it you can only feel it.'[105] Quantum geometry was 'the geometry of multiple dimensions'—prefigured in works of the 1990s such as Memory Sites and Windows Of The Mind: A Monument Dedicated To The Power Of Painting! (1995, pp. 2–3, discussed below).[106]

On 12 September 2010, shortly after completing Gray Matter but before composing his commentary of 2011, Whitten recorded this assessment: 'Gray Matter [is] a strange piece with extreme philosophical depth which I do not fully understand. Not understanding the full meaning of things could be a virtue. I refuse to speculate on meaning. I prefer to wait until meaning reveals itself on its own terms. I try to avoid imposing meaning.'[107] The phrasing of 2011, 'a mystical bond of spirit and matter,' hardly constitutes an attributed meaning; it merely registers recognition. On 13 September 2011—in another post-Cretan-summer, return-to-New York, taking-stock note—Whitten wrote as someone attuned to both materials and myth, rather like an animist: 'The artist must be open and sensitive to vibrations emanating from signals generated by various energy sources, e.g., nature (both organic and inorganic), people, [and] things in general. These vibrations can only be accessed through the nervous system. They are emotional. A stone generates signals. Water generates signals—people generate signals. Animals generate signals. We must learn to decipher the codes embedded in these signals.'[108]

The centrality that Whitten gave to 'soul' in his thought and art may seem regressive, at least from the perspective of the modern sciences from which he was drawing much of his inspiration. In 1890, William James had already dismissed the relevance of soul, but without entirely rejecting the concept: 'Our reasonings have not established the non-existence of the Soul; they have only proved its superfluity for scientific purposes.'[109] For psychologists, the soul could no longer be regarded as the transcendent source of human motivation and thought as it may have factored in the speculations of generations past. But for Whitten, the soul, like thought itself, and like a revelatory image, 'comes out of matter.'[110] The identification with matter was crucial. Soul was something other than an aspect of the socially constructed self—an ideological abstraction and product of a specific culture. Circumventing the socially imposed orientation of his own mentality, just as he circumvented the social implications of racial difference, Whitten imagined a pre-human time, a pre-conscious time, an era of 'pre-logic.'[111] He sought to (re)discover the thinking that had never been divorced from matter or from direct sensory feeling and emotion—the thinking immersed in the material environment, aligned with both quantum mechanics and African animism. Whitten extracted this thought, this soul, from the paint-matter and other objects and

Mask III: For The Children of Dunblane, Scotland, 1996, acrylic and recycled glass on canvas, 167.6 × 312.4 cm / 66 × 123 in

Figure 10. Jack Whitten. Gray Matter, 2010.

substances of his studio. But 'extracted' is too strong a verb, for the paint and the soul were one, inseparable (as Z is to A in an intuition denoted as A–Z or simply AZ).

'Remove the self,' Whitten wrote, as he continued his note of 13 September 2011: 'The notion of self is a sick Western notion. There is no such thing as the self! Identity has eluded me all of these years because of this sick Western notion! … Let science take care to explain the genetics of people and I will take care to explain the genetics of painting!'[112] For support of his position of anti-self, Whitten might have turned to Maurice Merleau-Ponty (nominally an existentialist, like Husserl): 'Through its 'sensory fields' and its whole organization the body is, so to speak, predestined to model itself on the natural aspects of the world. But as an active body capable of gestures, of expression, and finally of language, it turns back on the world to signify it.'[113] A self that has been acculturated, the linguistic self, breaks from the body, sundering mind from matter, a subject from its corresponding object-world. We need only recall how, like Merleau-Ponty, Whitten resisted the separation: 'Mind as matter is my mantra, and paint is my matter.'[114] He might have invoked Nietzsche, too, exposing the coherence of the self as a human fantasy: "The subject' is the fiction that many similar states in us are the effect of one substratum: but it is we who first created the 'similarity' of these states; our adjusting them and making them similar is the fact, not their similarity.'[115] I think here of remarks by Mary Whitten: 'Jack always felt in many cases he would do a painting and he would say, 'I don't understand this painting.' And then something would happen, an event, whatever. And he would say, 'Oh, it was really about that.' … He didn't like being held down to one thought, idea.'[116] Rather than assume that he had total control of his art, Whitten was attending to the physical world, not to himself (his self). He avoided using language or illustration to signify his world, objectifying it. He allowed it, its materiality, its embedded soul, to signify him.

'I am the image therefore I am the object,' Whitten wrote in 1994.[117] He was finding himself, his soul, his affinity to others, in an identity other than the one society assigned to him. He was in the paint-matter as he worked. This was not long after he mused over regarding his painting as a found object. Along similar lines, at various moments, he said, 'The object is the spirit,' 'I am spirit,' 'I am the subject,' 'I am a part of nature,' 'I am nature,' 'I am an animist,' 'I am the process,' 'I am a historical fact.'[118] But Whitten did not say, 'I am myself; I am I.' His character was hardly fixed. Like his art, he was evolving and open to soul as well as to change.

The 1980s was the decade most associated with so-called postmodernism, in which many artists appropriated the styles of others as a challenge to 'original' expression, all the while reinforcing the centrality of this longstanding issue, pro or con. Postmodernists focused on the construction of the self, whether social (neo-Marxism), individual (psychoanalysis), or both. Toward the end of the decade, during October 1988, Whitten composed several notes relevant to transcending the limitations of the constructed self: 'I am convinced that art lies beyond the self. I must be able to get outside of myself. Those artists that wallow in the psychology of self are producing a minor art, only fit for the cult of consumption. The surface (which is matter) is only a material vehicle for the spirit.'[119] After noting his disapproval of a celebrated exhibition he had seen—'the true essence of soul escapes [this artist]'—Whitten added: 'I am a conduit for the spirit. It flows through me and manifests itself through the materiality of paint. … What is spirit? A type of mental, i.e., cerebral matter closely akin to the nature of thought.'[120]

To project spirit and thought, as opposed to an image with all its social and historical baggage, was hardly consistent with the postmodernist interest in what Whitten would call 'non-spiritual signifiers.'[121] Interviewed in 1994, he reflected on his need to persevere during the 1980s, to maintain his independence: 'What happened to me in the '80s is that I buried deeper into my mind. … I went underground into the woodshed. … The works I was doing could not participate … in the '80s.'[122] In 1998, he wrote, 'I want to remove me from the painting' and then issued a more general directive, 'Remove the notion of me.'[123] Despite his experience with the pervasive racism he called 'American Apartheid,' Whitten's temperament did not countenance bitterness.[124] As he sustained his productivity during the me-years of the 1980s, he remained optimistic that a better human future would emerge. In 1999, he marked the end of me-ism, perhaps prematurely: 'The transitional aesthetics of postmodernism has passed; we are now entering the third phase of modernism. It is beyond me-ism. One must be able to project beyond the self … beyond ethnic, gender, political, and religious barriers.'[125] By concentrating on analyzing those barriers and the associated nuances of identity, postmodernist artists and critics had been tacitly affirming that the ideologically constructed self exists at the core of human culture. This went contrary to Whitten's strategy for obviating the barriers.

Once again, we might turn either to African animism or to Euro-American phenomenology to find a theoretical foundation for Whitten's thinking. On the phenomenological side, the following passage from Husserl is suggestive: 'With each eidetically pure type we find ourselves, not indeed inside the de facto ego [our habitual identity and sense of self, the postmodernist's interest], but inside an eidos ego; and constitution of one actually pure possibility among others carries with it implicitly, as its outer horizon, a purely possible ego, a pure possibility-variant of my de facto ego.'[126] Not easy to follow: Husserl's 'eidos' encompasses all possible ego formations, realized and unrealized, a type with many manifestations. For him, this was a transcendental psychological substance, so to speak. For Whitten, it became a material substance in the studio—his paint-matter, his slab, his tesserae.[127] Just as the photographic emulsion or plate contains all possible images in potential, Whitten's paint-matter does as well; hence, it contains all possible ego formations. But here 'contain' is rhetorical, a figurative or metaphorical construction to ease the discursive thought along. It would be better to imagine that the paint-matter is all possible ego formations. In 1990, Whitten noted: 'The painting became object. The object became spirit. My previous thought was that the spirit lives in the object, i.e., the object as container for the spirit … The object must become spirit. The object is the spirit.'[128] Whitten finds in the paint a self, just as he finds the souls of others. His self is no longer 'me' (his 'me' derived from the culture he was resisting). Painting takes Whitten 'beyond the self,' just as it took him to 'man's inhumanity to man' when he arranged his tesserae to form the skulls of Memory Sites. There he applied his option either to remain within the mode of nominal abstraction (one type of image) or to introduce representation (another type of image). Both options led him beyond traditional pictorialism.

I've noted that Whitten's 'I am …' constructions included 'I am nature' and 'I am a part of nature,' the former statement from 1988, the latter from 1996.[129] They bear on his

Figure 11. Installation view, Gagosian Gallery, 'Claude Monet. Late Work', 1 May – 26 June 2010, West 21st Street, New York NY. Photo: Rob McKeever. Courtesy Gagosian.

many references to the importance of Jackson Pollock, as well as to his experience of the art of Claude Monet at an exhibition visited in New York in May 2010 (Claude Monet: Late Work, Gagosian Gallery [installation shot, fig. 11]). Whitten wrote: 'His paintings are loaded with eidetic imagery … the phenomenological nature of being: our recognizing ourselves through nature. … Nature is extended through being … thinking extends nature. I love Monet but I want it through a technological worldview, i.e., technology as an extension of nature. Mind is nature. I receive my info through nature as mind. I am a perceptualist.'[130] To unpack Whitten's A–Z thought pattern here, consider this: his eidetic grasp of his own being would not stem from his immersion in nature but from his immersion in the technology of his practice, its photographic character, its digital structure. Paint-matter, slab, and tesserae would ground Whitten's perception, presenting more of a mental (hence, spiritual) operation than would be true of the working of everyday vision. In vision, the 'I' or 'me' sees. The 'I' and its eye objectify. But in perception, the mind experiences internal change—hence, Whitten's self-identification as a 'perceptualist.'[131] 'Mind is the medium,' he wrote in 'Beyond Abstraction,' with which this essay began.[132]

From Monet in May to Pollock in October, same year, 2010, the year of Gray Matter: 'Pollock had it wrong. 'I am nature' that was a mistake! We are simply a part of nature. We must remove the I.'[133] Whitten was depersonalizing Pollock, a move that postmodernist critics should have applauded, if they were paying attention. Pollock's significance for Whitten had nothing to do with asserting an ego. 'I'm coming in back of Pollock,' he had told an interviewer in 1994; '[Pollock's] paint leaves the hand, falls onto the canvas. I take that and extend it several steps further. … The tool [for spreading a 'line' of paint] is a sort of medium.'[134] It was also a technology that mimicked the speed with which a photographic process could capture and project an image. Whitten was advancing Pollock's technology, informed by his interest in photography, modes of photo-printing, and all procedures involving digitization, from ancient mosaic to contemporary computing. His concern returned to what the two artists shared—the paint-matter.

For an interview of 1997, intended to focus on the importance of Pollock, Whitten stated: 'There's no way you can discuss matter without discussing Pollock. … I'm close to Pollock in [this] sense. It would never occur to Pollock to split the conceptual from the action [mentality split from physicality, spirit from matter]. It's all in there; we don't divide it.'[135] Whitten continued: 'In 1990 I did the first of those digital abstract paintings in the form of little pixels cut from acrylic. Now [1997], I'm finding that coming out of the process, out of Pollock, process can be directed toward the specifics of subject.'[136] Although Whitten's tesserae work of the 1990s was nominally abstract art, it was, as I've stated, 'beyond abstraction' as either a logical or a pictorial exercise; and it obviated the abstract-representational dualism. It avoided generating signifiers for interpreters to 'read' as they would a text. Instead, from the process of creating a tesserae painting, a presence would emerge—the presence of a person, event, or condition.[137] Whitten's arrays of acrylic tesserae became the Cretan girl Argiro Galeraki (My Argiroula), the Dunblane shooting (Mask III), and man's inhumanity to man (Memory Sites). The tesserae became a portrait of the artist (Self Portrait) while not a portrait of Whitten-me. The proper names, the cultural assignations that might be applied to the artist's subjects as their identities, would no longer be adequate to them. Whitten had removed the emotional force of his subjects from the strictures of cultural reference. The feeling of Argiroula, of Dunblane, of primordial man, would now resonate with soul—or, perhaps better stated—resonate in soul.

## Someday, not soon

Whitten had divorced his art from the methods of his New York School, gesture-painting predecessors at least by 1970, when he created the Slab.[138] Whatever Pollock's lasting importance, the abstract expressionist retained the limitation inherent in creating a hand-wrought expressive surface; it reeked of the 'me.' Members of the Pollock generation are unlikely to have regarded this rampant self-mirroring as a disadvantage; yet it would block their realization of what Whitten was locating 'beyond abstraction.' In fact, the 'all-over' surface of paint that characterized Pollock's art, with all areas of the composite image receiving like emphasis, was regarded as an efficient means of avoiding the traditional relational hierarchy of figure and ground (and with this loss of hierarchy, the image became non-illusionistic, materially 'real'). Greenberg defined the 'all-over picture' in 1948: 'a surface knit together of a multiplicity of identical or similar elements … atomiz[ing] the picture surface into separate brushstrokes. … Every part of the canvas [is] equivalent [and] we find the essence of the whole work in every one of its parts.'[139] Taking such qualities under consideration—but not yet knowing quite what to do about them—Greenberg had praised Pollock in 1947: 'Pollock points a way beyond the easel, beyond the mobile, framed picture, to the mural, perhaps—or perhaps not. I cannot tell.' [Cathedral, 1947; fig. 12].[140] A painting that was all surface, no ground, would seem limitless, like those of muralists whose imagery could conceivably cover vast architectural expanses—or, for that matter, mosaicists who also avoided conventional pictorial constraints. For those who work on walls, the ground preexists and hardly plays into the nuances of imagery.

In 2012, Whitten devised a theoretical argument—derived from his studio practice—to counter the more extreme claims that had been made for the expressive potency of an all-over manner of painting. 'The all-over has a ground,' he realized: 'What would Clem [Greenberg] say? Everybody, including myself, believed that the all-over was final, i.e., no possible ground. … And Pollock? He didn't have a clue! He simply thought it was more of himself. (A basic American mistake!) This shit is not about us! It is beyond us. It's no wonder that particle physicists

Figure 12. Jackson Pollock. Cathedral, 1947. Dallas Museum of Art, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Bernard J. Reis. 1950.87. © 2020 The Pollock-Krasner Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Image courtesy Dallas Museum of Art

speak of other dimensions.'[141] The ground of the all-over, as of all other painting, was the physicality of the paint itself, its eidetic being as matter, irrespective of how an artist might configure it. Whitten was struggling to think universally, beyond American Apartheid, beyond the historical moment, beyond the culturally conditioned self. 'A basic American mistake,' he said. The exceptionalism—the me-ism. Whitten would extract a self-as-soul from paint-as-ground rather than set a preexisting cultural self into it.

On this Pollock business, Whitten had an aesthetic and intellectual ally, an affinity of which neither party was probably aware. Donald Judd did not accept the argument for the value of all-over composition, the integrated expressive surface, any more than Whitten did. For him, this was hardly the source of Pollock's remarkable achievement—virtually the opposite. Pollock was the primary example of Judd's praise of polarity in abstract art, the establishment of 'opposed extremes,' where, in this case of 'paint-on-a-surface,' 'both marks and bare canvas are equally positive, almost in competition for frontality.'[142] The all-over character of Pollock's mark-making was hardly eliminating the significance of his ground, which continued to assert its presence. (Recall Whitten's remarks on the 'extreme middle,' the 'gap,' and 'presence.') In 1967, Judd devoted an essay to Pollock; he referred to 'elements … polarized rather than amalgamated. … The dripped paint in most of Pollock's paintings is dripped paint. It's that sensation … It's not something else that alludes to dripped paint.'[143] When Judd returned to the subject of Pollock in the 1980s, he made a summary statement worthy of Whitten in its ambitious scope: 'The greater the polarity of the elements in a work, the greater the work's comprehension of space, time, and existence.'[144] We might compare Whitten's objection to the indirectness of metaphorical allusions, his concern to let his tesserae be the separate units of paint that they were. Like Pollock's pours, drips, and spatters, Whitten's acrylic would manifest its inherent color, spatiality, and light.

In the 1967 essay, Judd concluded by contrasting Pollock's direct physicality to the emotionally loaded painting of an artist like Willem de Kooning. (With his Slab, Whitten expanded on de Kooning's broad brushwork to such a degree that he departed from the precedent.[145]) Judd identified de Kooning's type of 'expression of emotion' as a reaction to things observed and, as such, a commonplace within the tradition of Western art. His objection to de Kooning corresponded to his approval of Pollock's direct physicality, a reaction only to the paint. De Kooning's reactive image, Judd argued, would have little to do with 'the nature of things,' for 'what you feel and what things are aren't the same.'[146] It seems that in Judd's view, de Kooning was painting the 'me' (his personal response) while Pollock was not. Here, the affinity to Whitten, who, instead of projecting himself into the paint, attempted to perceive in it whatever information it held in potential.

Judd, born 1928, was an art-generation older than Whitten, born 1939—we might say they were minimalist and post-minimalist—but their studio work developed rapidly through the same decades of the 1970s and 1980s. Both operated in resistance to the prevailing fashion for referential imagery, historical allusion, and negative critiques of the modernist past. Both acknowledged the merits of preceding generations, moving beyond without expending negative energy on demeaning past achievements. They simply had no interest in repeating the past. They shared an enduring admiration for the character of Pollock's painting but without advocating its continuation. (For Whitten, this would not have suited the current technological environment.) In 1993, in conjunction with his acceptance of the prestigious Sikkens Prize, Judd, who had started as a painter, presented an account of his development of color in work in three dimensions. Between the lines, it became clear that his own innovations had been provoked by the failure he perceived in the painting of his contemporaries, at least in their general drift. They had not accepted Pollock's implicit challenge: 'The achievement of Pollock and the others [Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still] meant that the century's development of color could continue no further on a flat surface.' Yet, Judd had not entirely abandoned hope for painting and, as exceptional cases, admired some of the work of his studio-painting peers. He speculated that the medium he had left to others still had a future: 'Someday, not soon, there will be another kind of painting, far from the easel, [and also] far from beyond the easel, since our environment indoors is four walls, usually flat. Color to continue had to occur in space.'[147]

Work in color would continue after Pollock, despite his seeming to have led painting to a point without a beyond. In Judd's era, illusionistic or naturalistic painting was expected to establish recession from the plane of the wall, whereas abstract painting would project its colors and light forward from the wall, yet not in space (actual) but as space (fictive), to generate a virtual three-dimensional quality accessible to perception. Working with color in three dimensions [Untitled, 1989–90; fig. 13], Judd converted chromatic space from virtual to real—his way of making a new form of sculptural production that he sometimes called 'three-dimensional work,' or sometimes 'specific objects.' Specific, that is, not general, not formulaic, not obeying external rules, not following a cultural logic. Specific to the space it made: 'Space is made,' he wrote.[148] 'Someday, not soon,' Judd speculated, an art would emerge that was more obviously in the mode of painting, though neither easel painting nor anti-easel painting; and it would create space.

Figure 13. Donald Judd. Untitled, 1989/1990. Kunstsammlung Nordrhein Westfalen, Düsseldorf. © 2020 Judd Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Walter Klein, Düsseldorf

Unknown to Judd, or unnoticed, was the work of Whitten, already there, already yielding color, light, and space. At least since 1970, when he began forming layers of acrylic into slab-like sheets to make his 'one-line' paintings, Whitten had been creating forms of abstract art that satisfied Judd's demands for painting that would project a specific space, not a general, relational one.[149] In 1993, when Judd made his 'someday, not soon' statement, Whitten was in the thick of his production of digitized tesserae paintings. Neither pro-easel nor anti-easel, his art had moved beyond. His painting was not on a flat surface but was the flat surface—and often not so flat. His space was in the paint-matter. An entry in Whitten's studio log for December 1994 (about a year after Judd's statement), reads: 'Object = Image (this is my contribution to art history).'[151] What had he discovered? His object-matter (paint, tesserae) was already his image-matter, with no transition involved. The 'image' became an image in space, or rather, an image of matter and light and spirit, all contained within the object (paint, tesserae) and yet not 'contained' but liberated—being the object. Some days later, same month, Whitten composed his curious pronouncement: 'I am the image therefore I am the object.'[151] He was inside the paint, also beyond the paint. Perhaps he was the gap, the presence. He was removed from himself.

## I am close

After the 1990s, Whitten continued to pursue the possibilities of organic grids of acrylic tesserae and collages of cast acrylic, making (not 'painting') technologically sophisticated works that he slyly described as no more than 'acrylic on canvas.' Judd's 'someday, not soon' became Whitten's 'I am close.' He wrote in his final log entry, 27 December 2017, 'I am close … but not close enough.'[152] Two years previously, he had reflected on the distinction between his sense of 'quantum' space—a continuous space, nevertheless with gaps—and the conventionally relational space of painting maintained by Greenberg and others. 'When different dimensions clash at the quantum level,' he wrote, 'they jump from one dimension to another … Of course, light plays a role in this since light is an adjunct to matter. Clem [Greenberg's] insistence on the flattening of the picture plane just took on another meaning, i.e., several dimensions can be flattened by light [to produce] a topological appearance of space … This explains why my paintings have always had a topographical 'look.' Of course, I had no way of understanding [this] in the 1970s, '80s, '90s, '00s … never arriving at the true meaning of [the] notion: the idea as object.'[153] Whitten may not have mastered the theoretical side of his 'topological' painting-space—expanding and collapsing of dimensions and measurable distances—but his A–Z intuition had long led him to conclude that the object (matter) manifested the idea (mind): 'the idea as object.'

Whitten's evolving experience with multidimensional topological space, with matter that is as conceptually flexible as mind—his acrylic tesserae, digits of information, smart-matter—led him to record some consequent thoughts on the universality of 'the idea as object.' His remarks exemplify his characteristic mix of irreverent humility and the wisdom of the ages: 'Now, all of this shit is interrelated … right down to the cells of our bodies and of course our genes: we are all one. … Get rid of politics / get rid of religion / get rid of race. All we need is our original identity and the present will take care of itself.'[154] Obvious question: What was 'our original identity'? Recall Whitten's interest in the 'pre-logical' and Nietzsche's speculations on the self as an arbitrary socio-cultural construction. There must have been another time, a world existing before all the political, religious, and racial differentiation came to plague society, present and past—a time before self-identity hinged on such distinctions. The scientist in Whitten, and perhaps the animist as well, knew that light, the bearer of spirit and of the energy of matter, was older than we are. In 2013, he distinguished between 'an Outer light … traveling since the birth of the cosmos,' and 'an Inner light … traveling since the birth of man.' 'If I could only let go'—he wished it could be so—'stop trying to keep up [with light] and let the light carry me.'[155] Anyone borne by light, rather than pursuing it, would be released from their cultural identity, free to discover another self—their own or someone else's.

Painting with primordial 'Outer' light would seem to have been Whitten's aim. His 'I am close' statement of 2017 was more than a lament about not being close enough. He referred to the light of prehistory contained within the matter, the acrylic paint in his studio: 'I am close … but not close enough. … My first mistake was to misunderstand how many years it took the light that I am working with, [at] one million years to reach planet Earth. I am working with [what] goes back in time. Before the Greeks, before the Egyptians, before the Africans (both North and Sub-Saharan Africans) (I could still be off another 500 light years).' Whitten extended his speculation about light to the problem of political, religious, and racial discrimination: 'I use this time period because there was no binary system in place.'[156] He sought the light embedded in matter, light that had originated long before human culture committed its reason to a binary system, dividing black from white, woman from man, Jew from Christian from Muslim. Perhaps most importantly, he sought the light that never knew the primordial division of mind-spirit-soul from matter. In Whitten's modern-day experience, resistance to the division of mind and matter derived from advances in quantum physics ('at the quantum level, there is no dualism') and the resilient tradition of African animism.[157]

The title of one of Whitten's most suggestive tesserae paintings of the 1990s is deceptively self-explanatory: Windows Of The Mind: A Monument Dedicated To The Power Of Painting!' (1995, pp. 2–3). This, we surmise, is a painting to memorialize painting. Whitten completed it on 13 February 1995, as noted in his log, where he gave it a slightly different title: Windows Of The Mind: A Monument Celebrating The Art Of Painting.[158] This free-hanging canvas is large and extremely oddly shaped, even more so than Memory Sites, as if Whitten were designing it to fit a specific architectural frame; but no such placement seems likely.[159] At the left edge and at the underside of the rightmost segment, areas of black suggest traditional illusionistic recession, as in classical Western painting. If the contrasting light areas of tesserae, which surround darker areas, connote an architectural framing of sorts, then within the frames, perhaps we perceive three 'paintings,' each set off by an implicit quadrilateral set up by the straight edges that appear within the far more irregular array of tesserae. It is as if Whitten had architectural stonework in mind, creating 'windows of the mind.' In each of the 'windows,' a painting appears. But all is just acrylic on canvas. And the 'paintings' are products of mind—images coming out of matter.

Though Whitten left no ekphrastic account in 1995 regarding Windows Of The Mind, some of his later musings evoke the work. At the end of 2012, he wrote about 'multi-dimensional space,' his non-relational 'quantum' space: 'One point, two point, multiple point, both bird's eye and worm eye were used in the Italian Renaissance … but now because of quantum mechanics a compound perspective is needed to depict space in the modern technological society.' Compound perspective suited the perceptual apparatus that modern technology had induced in modern viewers of images, just as—it might be argued—acrylic paint did, as a versatile, adaptable product of chemical synthesis. Whitten added this: 'Another way of describing compound perspective and perhaps a little clearer is: develop a mental picture of traditional-historical perspective from the (1) Renaissance (2) Oriental (position on the plane) (3) Cubism (4) Ab-Ex … Now compress this mentally and you would have a glimpse of compound perspective.'[160] 'A little clearer'? Maybe not. I wonder if Windows Of The Mind qualifies as compound perspective—I don't see why it would not. The compression that Whitten advocated was mental. Especially with respect to the leftmost of the three inset 'paintings,' the tesserae pattern within its framing borders is distinct from what surrounds it—a difference with which a mind can play [detail, fig. 14]. Yet the entirety of Windows Of The Mind is equally a manifestation of mind … because it is matter.

Or, it may be sensation. From the history of perspective and its compounding on a two-dimensional plane, we can turn back several years in Whitten's notes to find an analogous account of jazz—more compounding, more compression. 'In order to do what I am doing,' he wrote in 2009, 'one must be capable of understanding what John Coltrane is doing. Not just listening to J. C. but understanding, i.e., comprehending. J. C. is operating on multiple layers of space/time. He is truly the 21st century man. I knew this in the 1960s, but it has taken me this long to compress what he is

Figure 14. Jack Whitten. Windows Of The Mind: A Monument Dedicated To The Power Of Painting! (detail), 1995. Photo: Dan Bradica

Natural Selection, 1995, acrylic and ink on unstretched canvas, 243.2 × 213.7 cm / 95 ¾ × 84 ⅛ in

doing into a two-dimensional plane of paint.'[161]

It took Whitten some years to comprehend and to compress. Given his art, do I comprehend? I cannot explain Windows Of The Mind or even adequately describe it. Each interpretive gesture risks excluding a valid alternative. But often Whitten himself did not fully grasp his work. It seems that some of the notes of his last decade reflect not only on the paintings he was completing at the time, but also bear on much earlier ones, as if understanding were arriving only after a delay, within a gap. Whitten's art proceeded faster than its logical exposition. A–Z is faster than A to B to C and onward. It may not have been possible, even for the artist who experienced it, to recount the logic of his intuition. Here it would be wrong to resort to a theory to illuminate Whitten's accomplishment. Despite his knowledge of quantum theory, particle theory, wave theory, and the like, his art was far removed from what most people would call science. His art aligns, however, with what most people call art. He had been closer than he thought to 'someday, not soon.' In fact, for decades he had been there. It was only his continuing movement beyond his own accomplishment that prevented him from realizing he had taken the medium of painting more than 'close enough' to its limit.

He didn't stop. I began this essay by referring to Whitten's unpublished 2015 statement, 'Beyond Abstraction.' Its first line reads: 'To go where no one has gone before is my goal in painting.' He had spoken similarly in 2006, as well as at earlier moments: 'My ambition is to change the course of art history.'[162] So much the better for art history that already well beyond it, Whitten didn't stop.

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1. "Beyond Abstraction" remains unpublished; my use of it is courtesy Jack Whitten and Mirsini Amidon. Shortly after writing his text, Whitten sent me a copy because it pertained to issues that we had been discussing. My account of his art and thought in the present essay, focused on works of the 1990s, draws heavily on his studio logs, a journal he kept throughout his career, intending it to remain private. He called it "Notes from the Woodshed." Katy Siegel convinced Whitten that these writings were too important not to be released for their value "as a gift from [him] to other artists" (Katy Siegel, "Editor's Acknowledgments," in Jack Whitten, Notes from the Woodshed, ed. Katy Siegel [New York: Hauser & Wirth Publishers, 2018], 519). When quoting from Whitten's studio logs (as well as other casual writings), I have regularized orthography and punctuation for the sake of clarity, but only where such adjustments, in my judgment, have no substantial bearing on the connotative sense of his rhetoric. In cases where there might be a rhetorical benefit to retaining the original, I have placed my emendations within brackets. For whatever the merit of my essay, I must thank Jack Whitten as if he were still living; his thought, expressed in lengthy conversations in his studio and home, as well as in the notes he left behind, remains a source of inspiration to me—a living presence accompanying his art. I am grateful to Mary Whitten, Mirsini Amidon, and Greg Amidon for being such devoted stewards of Jack Whitten's legacy. Along with Mary, Mirsini, and Greg, I thank Tate Dougherty, Sara Chun, and Adrienne Chau at Hauser & Wirth for facilitating access to Jack's art and its documentation, as well as providing essential aid in research. For help with documentation, I am grateful also to Stuart Horodner, Alexandra Boiarsky, and my research assistant in Austin, John Semlitsch.
2. "The spirit is in the abstract. It lies beyond logic—beyond reason. …. You can't paint it, you can only provide the ground for it to exist": Whitten, note of 15 March 2008, Notes from the Woodshed, 317. Hereafter cited as Woodshed.
3. Friedrich Nietzsche, The Gay Science, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974 [1882]), 173 (emphasis original).
4. Vivian Sobchack, Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 141.
5. Whitten, note of 4 November 1979, Woodshed, 150 (emphasis original). Nietzsche, The Gay Science, 172: "'Explanation' is what we call it, but it is 'description' that distinguishes us from older stages of knowledge and science. Our descriptions are better—we do not explain any more than our predecessors."
6. Émile Bernard, "Paul Cézanne," Les hommes d'aujourd'hui 8, no. 387 (February–March 1891): n.p. When, in 1960, Whitten first visited The Museum of Modern Art, New York, he was especially interested in observing the structure of Cezanne's paintings (Kathryn Kanjo, "Facing Abstraction," in Jack Whitten: Five Decades of Painting, ed. Kathryn Kanjo [San Diego: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2015], 23).
7. Whitten, note of 25 April 1991, Woodshed, 214.
8. Whitten, "Jack Whitten: An African-American and Pollock" (interview by Jeanne Siegel, 1997), in Jeanne Siegel, Painting after Pollock: Structures of Influence (Amsterdam: G+B Arts International, 1999), 139.
9. Whitten, "Beyond Abstraction."
10. Whitten, note of 27 May 2008, Woodshed, 320 (in part unpublished, courtesy Mirsini Amidon). On "between knowing and not knowing," Whitten adds: "The bar codes [a group of his paintings] have taught me a lot but I don't know what they have taught me!" The "gap," as Whitten indicated in a parenthesis to his full statement, is a reference to Slavoj Žižek, who theorized an ineradicable parallax gap between any two positions, whether physical or intellectual (Slavoj Žižek, The Parallax View [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006]). On the "extreme middle," see especially, Whitten, note of 10 April 1975, Woodshed, 95: "Sometimes [my painting] is thick, sometimes thin—always existing within obvious extremes. Sometimes transcending all extremes and sometimes existing in the extreme middle of opposite obvious extremes. I guess it is truly the extreme middle." See also, Whitten, note of 26 January 1987, 190: "Except for the use of materials, there is nothing rational about painting. Nor can it be called irrational; it exists somewhere in the extreme middle." And Whitten, note of 13 October 1989, Woodshed, 204: "Tension exists between knowing and not knowing."
11. "In quantum mechanics, we are not dealing with an arbitrary renunciation of a more detailed analysis of atomic phenomena, but with a recognition that such an analysis is in principle excluded": Niels Bohr, Atomic Theory and Human Knowledge (1958), as quoted in Gary Zukav, The Dancing Wu Li Masters: An Overview of the New Physics (New York: William Morrow, 1979), 52 (emphasis original). Whitten was thoroughly familiar with Zukav's book; see below, note 99.
12. "If the grid is organic, therefore the computer as metaphor is organic: an organic computer": Whitten, note of 7 January 1996, Woodshed, 240.
13. "Each 'acrylic chip' represents a particle of light": Whitten, note of 10 November 1991, Woodshed, 216.
14. Whitten, "Why Do I Carve Wood?", in Katy Siegel, Jack Whitten: Odyssey, Sculpture 1963–2017 (New York: Gregory R. Miller, 2018), 39.
15. Whitten, note of October 1972, Woodshed, 41.
16. Whitten, in Siegel, Painting after Pollock, 131.
17. Whitten, in Kenneth Goldsmith, "Jack Whitten" (interview), Bomb 48 (Summer 1994) at http://bombmagzine.org/article/1772;-jack-whitten, accessed 16 July 2017. On "one line," see also Whitten, "From an interview with David Shapiro, April 1974," Woodshed, 74.
18. Whitten, in Goldsmith. See also, Whitten, "Why Do I Carve Wood?", Odyssey, 39; Whitten, "Interview" (by Courtney J. Martin), Odyssey, 158. In 2013, Whitten provided a direct explanation: "What I have done is remove the paint from the canvas, which makes it physical. I can pick it up and hold it in my hand, I can cut it and I can reapply it. This is the essence of the notion of making a painting as opposed to painting a painting": "Jack Whitten" (interview by Scott Indrisek), Modern Painters, September 2013, 21.
19. Whitten, note of 24 September 1996, Woodshed, 244 (ellipsis original).
20. Whiten, note of 24 February 1991, Woodshed, 213.
21. Clement Greenberg, "Recentness of Sculpture" (1967), The Collected Essays and Criticism, ed. John O'Brian, 4 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986–1993), 4:253.
22. Whitten, notes of 11, 25 May 1994, Woodshed, 229.
23. Whitten, interview of April 1992 by Stuart Horodner, in Horodner, "Jack Whitten: Memory and Method," Jack Whitten: Memorial Paintings (Atlanta: Atlanta Contemporary Art Center, 2008), 18.
24. Jack Whitten and Stacy Lindner, "About the Subjects," Jack Whitten: Memorial Paintings, 57.
25. Whitten, interview by Henry Geldzahler (31 March 1983), quoted in Henry Geldzahler, Jack Whitten: Ten Years—1970–1980 (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 1983), 8; Whitten, "Beyond Abstraction."
26. Whitten, note of 11 May 1994, Woodshed, 229 (emphasis original). For the quoted statement—which, in the original, reads, "abstract art today is the only stream that flows toward an ocean"—see Greenberg, "Review of the Whitney Annual and the Exhibition Romantic Painting in America" (1944), The Collected Essays and Criticism, 1:171. Whitten's attention may have been brought to this statement by still another variant appearing in Greenberg's obituary in the New York Times, 10 May 1994.
27. Whitten, note of 3 March 1996, Woodshed, 241.
28. Whitten, note of 24 February 1996, Woodshed, 241 (emphasis original). Whitten's association of space with the photographic is consistent with a subsequent thought from 1996: "We are not in space, we are on space … Space is a plane"; note of 25 September 1996, Woodshed, 244 (ellipsis original).
29. And if representation in art is tantamount to realism, Whitten had this to say: "What I am doing [with tesserae] cancels out the confrontation between abstraction and realism": Whitten, "Interview" (9 April 1992, by Stuart Horodner), in Jack Whitten (New York: Horodner Romley Gallery, 1992), 7.
30. Whitten, note of 24 February 1996, Woodshed, 241.
31. In 1997, Whitten described the character of his images as neither representational nor abstract: "It's more in relation to the word 'eidetic'—an image that comes out of matter"; Whitten, in Siegel, Painting after Pollock, 139. Discussion of the context of Whitten's remark follows below.
32. Whitten, "The 1960's"; notes of 10 September 2012, 27 December 2017, Woodshed, 20, 397, 516.
33. Whitten, note of 7 May 1995, Woodshed, 233–34 (emphasis original). The "inner eye" or the "mind's eye" would enable a degree of intensity, acuity, and insight beyond ordinary perception.
34. Edmund Husserl, Cartesian Meditations, trans. Dorian Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1977 [1929]), 70 (emphasis original; typographical error corrected).
35. Whitten, note of 19 March 1986, Woodshed, 185 (emphasis original). A note of 18 October 1995 reads: "Content is transmitted through light, not through form"; Woodshed, 237. A draft of a lecture dated 5 October 2007 proposes: "All information that defines the painting is carried by light. This includes all emotions encoded within expression"; Woodshed, 300 (emphasis original). See also, notes of 4 December 2007 ("Light is matter"), 15 March 2008, 27 December 2017, Woodshed, 305 (emphasis original), 318, 516.
36. Whitten, note of 8 May 1995, Woodshed, 234 (emphasis original). On "the now," see also notes of 30 October 1991, 11 January 1994, 31 March 2009, Woodshed, 216, 225, 338.
37. Whitten, note of 4 November 1979, Woodshed, 150.
38. Whitten, note of 15 April 1994, Woodshed, 228 (emphasis and ellipsis original).
39. Whitten, notes of 24, 31 [sic] September, 3 December 1994, Woodshed, 230 (emphasis and final ellipsis original).
40. Whitten, note of 4 April 1984, Woodshed, 174–75.
41. Whitten, note of 7 September 1989, Woodshed, 204.
42. Compare a somewhat later comment: "I want that which is found … pure without ideology. Forget about blackness, forget about whiteness—any color will do!" (Whitten, note of 11 January 1998, Woodshed, 252 [ellipsis original]).
43. On immediacy and "the now," compare Whitten's later remarks; notes of 10 March 2009, 15 December 2015, Woodshed, 335, 494–95.
44. Whitten, note of 12 November 1996, Woodshed, 245.
45. Husserl, Cartesian Meditations, 71 (emphasis original).
46. Whitten, note of 11 May 1995, Woodshed, 234.
47. Whitten, note of 15 May 1995, Woodshed, 234–35 (emphasis original).
48. Whitten, statement, 4 June 1984, in Since the Harlem Renaissance: 50 Years of Afro-American Art (Lewisburg: Center Gallery of Bucknell University, 1984), 43.
49. Whitten, in conversation with the author, New York, 8 September 2017.
50. Whitten, note of 7 January 1996, Woodshed, 240 (emphasis original).
51. Whitten, note of 11 February 1991, Woodshed, 211.
52. Whitten, note of 2 January 2010, Woodshed, 352 (emphasis original, second ellipsis original).
53. On Whitten's evolving sense of the photographic, see Richard Shiff, "Image that Comes out of Matter," More Dimensions Than You Know: Jack Whitten, Paintings 1979–1989 (New York: Hauser & Wirth, 2017), 7–29.
54. Compare Gentry's statement in Smithsonian Archives of American Art, "Oral History Interview with Herbert Gentry, 1991, May 23" (interview by Liza Kirwin), at https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-herbert-gentry-11493 (accessed 18 April 2020): "I believe that everything one sees is photographed in the subconscious, but the positive things, esthetically, the statements come out when you need them in paintings."
55. Whitten, note of 2 April 1996, Woodshed, 241.
56. Whitten, note of 8 December 2006, Woodshed, 292.
57. Whitten, in Siegel, Painting after Pollock, 143–44.
58. "KD" refers to the jazz musician Kenny Dorham; Mary Whitten, conversation with Adrienne Chau, 11 February 2020 (unpublished transcript, courtesy the participants).
59. Batten's program aired on WRVR (New York); see Jet, 30 December 1971, 63; in a controversial move, the station canceled the show in 1973.
60. "Whether we like it or not, all art is about perception. Perception has a way of creating its own reality. In truth, we could say that the perception is the reality. … With phenomenology, I think we could prove through historical analysis that perception forms reality": Whitten, in Robert Storr, "In Conversation with Jack Whitten," in Jack Whitten: Five Decades of Painting, 66.
61. Whitten, "Artist Statement," May 2000, typescript (courtesy Mirsini Amidon). The shooting of Diallo occurred on 4 February 1999.
62. Whitten gives an account of the event in his oral history: see Smithsonian Archives of American Art, "Oral History Interview with Jack Whitten, 2009, December 1–3" (interview by Judith Olch Richards), at https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-jack-whitten-15748 (accessed 14 July 2017).
63. Quincy Troupe, "Poem for Jack Whitten," in Jack Whitten: Five Decades of Painting, 78.
64. Hannah Arendt, "A Reporter at Large: Eichmann in Jerusalem—V," The New Yorker, 16 March 1963, 101 (emphasis omitted).
65. Mary Whitten, conversation with Chau.
66. Janet Carter was the wife of jazz bassist Ron Carter; Mary Whitten, conversation with Chau.
67. Whitten, note of 3 February 1988, Woodshed, 195; note of 1 October 1988, unpublished (courtesy Mirsini Amidon).
68. Whitten, note of 19 September 1988, unpublished (courtesy Mirsini Amidon).
69. See, for example, Whitten, note of 29 March 2007, Woodshed, 296.
70. Whitten, note of 9 April 1988, unpublished (courtesy Mirsini Amidon).
71. Whitten, notes of 29 March, 2, 3 April 1996, Woodshed, 241.
72. See Whitten, "Mounting Instructions For: The Mask: Reclamation," 28 April 2016, typescript (courtesy Mirsini Amidon). Compare Whitten, note of 15 March 2008, Woodshed, 318: "I have the modern/contemporary equivalent of African art. Therefore, the painting is a mask. Therefore, the painting is functional [like an African sculpture]; it serves a specific purpose through the nature of its content."
73. Whitten, note of 8 January 1995, Woodshed, 231–32.
74. Whitten, note of 19 January 1995, Woodshed, 232.
75. Whitten, note of 23 September 1996, Woodshed, 244 (emphasis original, ellipses original).
76. Whitten, note of 17 May 1990, Woodshed, 209.
77. I would nevertheless argue on theoretical grounds that all description is interpretive, but not as assertively so as what we readily call "interpretation."
78. Whitten, note of 28 April 1996, Woodshed, 242.
79. "Dump the center! (the equivalent of dumping the mass in sculpture)": Whitten, note of 21 November 1996, Woodshed, 246 (emphasis original).
80. Whitten dedicated this painting to the late curator Henry Geldzahler, who had been a supporter of his work; Whitten, note of 4 October 1994, Woodshed, 230. Although Whitten's log records the completion of the painting in 1994, he inscribed it on the back as 1995, likely an indication of subsequent reworking.
81. Whitten, note of 23 November 1996, Woodshed, 246.
82. According to Mary Whitten, Paradise Beach is near the Whitten summer residence in Crete, and the blues of the painting probably allude to "Ol' Blue Eyes" Sinatra (Mary Whitten, conversation with Chau).
83. See Whitten, note of 29 October 1995 (with appended note dated 4 November 1995), Woodshed, 237.
84. Whitten, in Siegel, Painting after Pollock, 134–36.
85. Whitten, in Siegel, Painting after Pollock, 139–40. The painting became Black Monolith III (For Barbara Jordan), 1998.
86. Whitten, in Siegel, Painting after Pollock, 139.
87. Whitten, note of 10 April 1992, Woodshed, 219 (emphasis original).
88. Whitten, note of 21 March 1998, Woodshed, 254.
89. Whitten, in Siegel, Painting after Pollock, 139.
90. On Whitten's cosmopolitanism, see Katy Siegel, "Polytropos," and Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Jack Whitten: Rooted Cosmopolitan," in Siegel, Odyssey, 13–27, 29–35.
91. Whitten, in Siegel, Painting after Pollock, 139 (paragraph break omitted).
92. Whitten, in Siegel, Painting after Pollock, 139. On rejecting the dualism of abstraction and representation, see also Whitten, note of 5 June 2016, Woodshed, 497.
93. Whitten, note of 13 November 1995, Woodshed, 237.
94. Whitten, note of 7 January 1996, Woodshed, 240 (ellipses original). Here Whitten also alluded to his need to restore or rejuvenate the "ruptured culture" of people of African descent; "abstraction part II" would be his "functional tool" in this pursuit.
95. Whitten, "Why Do I Carve Wood?", Odyssey, 38. Would Whitten's position be subject to critique by the likes of Theodor Adorno? In 1950, in the wake of World War II and the Holocaust, Adorno proclaimed: "Every attempt to achieve harmony directly in modern art—by invoking the idea of cosmic forces, for example—only shows that, shamed by our exposure to the irreconcilable, we attempt to establish the type of connection to the past that ought to be broken"; Theodor Adorno, in Hans Gerhard Evers, ed., Darmstädter Gespräch: Das Menschenbild in unserer Zeit (Darmstadt: Neue Darmstädter Verlagsanstalt, 1950), 215–16 (author's translation, incorporating phrasing from John Paul Stonard, Fault Lines: Art in Germany 1945–1955 [London: Ridinghouse, 2007], 258). For Adorno, the "irreconcilable" was the Holocaust; for Whitten, it was the institution of slavery, the African diaspora, and American racism. I would argue that Whitten's return to the "past" is to a primordial condition beyond logic—"pre-logic," as he called it—in which no reconciliation of the irreconcilable would occur. Rather, as a parallel to Adorno, Whitten would have broken with the historical past entirely.
96. Whitten, note of 4 November 1979, Woodshed, 150.
97. Whitten, "Notes on DNA Paintings," unpublished typescript, February 2017 (courtesy Jack Whitten and Mirsini Amidon).
98. Whitten, in Goldsmith.
99. David Bohm, "A New Theory of the Relationship of Mind and Matter," Philosophical Psychology 3, no. 2 (1990): 283–84. Whitten knew of Bohm through a book he considered his "bible," Zukav, The Dancing Wu Li Masters (Whitten, email to the author, 27 October 2017); on Bohm, see Zukav, 318–26. In addition to Eastern philosophers, any number of Westerners developed similar lines of argument, including Charles Sanders Peirce, Henri Bergson, and Gilles Deleuze; but Whitten derived his position more from contemporary science than from the philosophical tradition.
100. Whitten, note of 7 January 1996, Woodshed, 240.
101. Whitten, note of 28 March 2009, Woodshed, 338.
102. Whitten, note of 13 September 2011, Woodshed, 374 (emphasis omitted).
103. See Whitten, notes of 20 January 1990, 10 January 1994, Woodshed, 205, 225.
104. Whitten, notes accompanying an exhibition in Agia Galini, Crete, August 2011 (courtesy Mirsini Amidon and Katy Siegel). On Gray Matter, see also the catalogue entry by Meredith A. Brown, in Siegel, Odyssey, 98.
105. Whitten, note of 28 April 2013, Woodshed, 423. On the "gap," see Whitten, note of 27 May 2008, Woodshed, 320 (in part unpublished), as discussed above in "A material soul."
106. Whitten, note of 18 October 2015, Woodshed, 486.
107. Whitten, note of 12 September 2010, Woodshed, 360. Compare Whitten, note of 18 March 2009, Woodshed, 335: "Meaning is the enemy of art."
108. Whitten, note of 13 September 2011, Woodshed, 373–74.
109. William James, The Principles of Psychology (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983 [1890]), 332.
110. Whitten, in Siegel, Painting after Pollock, 139.
111. Whitten, "Jack Whitten in Conversation" (with Alexander Gray), Jack Whitten (New York: Alexander Gray Associates, 2013), 3.
112. Whitten, note of 13 September 2011, Woodshed, 374.
113. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "An Unpublished Text by Maurice Merleau-Ponty: A Prospectus of His Work," trans. Arleen B. Dallery, The Primacy of Perception, ed. James M. Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 7.
114. Whitten, note of 8 December 2006, Woodshed, 292.
115. Friedrich Nietzsche, The Will to Power, ed. Walter Kaufmann, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968 [posthumous, first published 1901]), 269.
116. Mary Whitten, conversation with Chau. Compare Whitten, note of 11 May 1990, Woodshed, 208 (emphasis original): "There is no such thing as one way."
117. Whitten, note of 21 December 1994, Woodshed, 231 (emphasis original).
118. Whitten, notes of 21 April 1990, 4 January 1989, 16 December 1991, 18 December 1996, 10 May 1988, 10 April 1992, fall 1983 ("Battle Plan"), 31 January 1997. The note of 10 May 1988 is unpublished (courtesy Mirsini Amidon). The remaining notes are in Woodshed, 208, 198, 217, 248, 219, 168, 248 (all emphases original).
119. Whitten, note of 28 October 1988, Woodshed, 196.
120. Whitten, note of 6 November 1988, unpublished; notes of 12, 13 November 1988, Woodshed, 196.
121. Whitten, statement for an Andy Warhol feature, Dazed and Confused 27 (January 1997): 50.
122. Whitten, in Goldsmith. On the association of "woodshed" with privacy, see Katy Siegel, "Introduction," Woodshed, 8.
123. Whitten, notes of 4, 8 October 1998, Woodshed, 256. "If I desire to remove me from the painting, I must conceptually allow a system to operate on pure randomness"; note of 24 February 1991, Woodshed, 213 (emphasis original). "Finally, I have removed myself from the painting"; note of 12 April 2007, Woodshed, 297. "The painting must be allowed to make itself, i.e., it=self as opposed to my=self. … I will remove myself and allow the painting to make itself"; note of 3 October 2015, Woodshed, 480, 482.
124. "American Apartheid": Whitten, in Storr, "In Conversation with Jack Whitten," in Jack Whitten: Five Decades of Painting, 50. "Admittedly, the politics of Race has made it much more difficult for me": Whitten, "Beyond Abstraction." In our conversations, Whitten emphasized that, regardless of the many indignities he continued to suffer as an African American (situations he often addressed publicly), his commitment to his practice demanded that these social ills not distract him from his goals.
125. Whitten, note of 22 October 1999, Woodshed, 265 (ellipsis original). Whitten had had this goal all along: "I want [my paintings] to transcend race, sex, religion, politics, time, object, and any known idea of history"; note of 21 May 1986, Woodshed, 186. "Identity, race, politics, sexuality are all crutches. They are illusionary signposts designed by culture that obscure deeper elemental truths"; Whitten, email to the author, 9 June 2016.
126. Husserl, Cartesian Meditations, 71. On eidos and eidetic, in addition to Whitten's notes already cited, see his log for 3 December 2007, Woodshed, 304 (here, Whitten's "edios" seems likely to have been intended as "eidos," though he once showed at a co-op gallery "Edios Group"; Whitten, "The 1960's," Woodshed, 13).
127. "The Slab was always about paint as raw material. … It was elemental matter": Whitten, letter to the author, 10 April 2017.
128. Whitten, note of 21 April 1990, Woodshed, 208.
129. Whitten, note of 10 May 1988, unpublished; note of 18 December 1996, Woodshed, 248.
130. Whitten, note of 8 May 2010, Woodshed, 359 (emphasis original; first, third ellipses original). In 2010, Whitten created a series of works on paper titled Ode to Monet; he used Monet-like colors in oil stick.
131. Compare Whitten's earlier statement, note of 6 May 1995, Woodshed, 233 (emphasis original): "My art is perceptual art."
132. Whitten, "Beyond Abstraction."
133. Whitten, note of 11 October 2010, Woodshed, 365.
134. Whitten, in Goldsmith.
135. Whitten, in Siegel, Painting after Pollock, 133, 136. Whitten later associated this notion with Martin Heidegger: "M. H. said the Greeks made a cosmic mistake when they separated the idea from the actions"; note of 27 December 2017, Woodshed, 516. On several occasions, Whitten also linked Pollock to his own interest in fractal geometry; see, for example, note of 18 October 2015, Woodshed, 486.
136. Whitten, in Siegel, Painting after Pollock, 138.
137. "Abstraction, as we know it, can be directed towards the specifics of subject—a person, a thing, an experience": Whitten, "Jack Whitten in Conversation" (with Alexander Gray), Jack Whitten, 3.
138. Whitten, "Why Do I Carve Wood?", Odyssey, 38.
139. Greenberg, "The Crisis of the Easel Picture" (1948), Collected Essays and Criticism, 2:222–24.
140. Greenberg, "Review of Exhibitions of Jean Dubuffet and Jackson Pollock" (1947), Collected Essays and Criticism, 2:125.
141. Whitten, note of 26 March 2012, Woodshed, 390.
142. Donald Judd, "Chamberlain: Another View" (1963), "Specific Objects" (1965), "Helen Frankenthaler" (1960), Complete Writings 1959–1975 ((Halifax: Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1975), 108, 182, 13.
143. Judd, "Jackson Pollock" (1967), Complete Writings 1959–1975, 195.
144. Judd, "Abstract Expressionism" (1983), Complete Writings 1975–1986, (Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum, 1987), 45.
145. See, for example, Whitten, "From an interview with David Shapiro, April 1974," Woodshed, 74.
146. Judd, "Jackson Pollock," Complete Writings 1959–1975, 195.
147. Judd, "Some Aspects of Color in General and of Red and Black in Particular" (1993), Donald Judd Writings, eds. Flavin Judd and Caitlin Murray (New York: Judd Foundation, 2016), 854.
148. Judd, "21 February 93," Donald Judd Writings, 811.
149. "The whole painting is one line": Whitten, "From an interview with David Shapiro, April 1974," Woodshed, 74. Judd might have appreciated some of the innovative painters of the 1970s—not only Whitten, but also artists such as Bridget Riley and David Reed. He could not notice everything. He was in fact quite open in his assessments and recognized the strengths of historical figures as diverse in orientation as Kazimir Malevich and Josef Albers. Judd combined an astute critical mind with the insistence of a convincing polemicist.
150. Whitten, note of 10 December 1994, Woodshed, 231.
151. Whitten, note of 21 December 1994, Woodshed, 231 (emphasis original).
152. Whitten, note of 27 December 2017, Woodshed, 516 (ellipsis original).
153. Whitten, note of 14 December 2015, Woodshed, 494 (emphasis original, first and second ellipsis original).
154. Whitten, note of 15 December 2015, Woodshed, 494–95 (emphasis original, first ellipsis original).
155. Whitten, note of 31 December 2013, Woodshed, 432.
156. Whitten, note of 27 December 2017, Woodshed, 516 (first ellipsis original).
157. Whitten, note of 27 December 2017, Woodshed, 515.
158. Whitten, note of 13 February 1995, Woodshed, 232.
159. Mary Whitten recalls that Whitten placed this work in a Cooper Union faculty exhibition, not because he had created it for this end but because he wanted to occupy some "real estate in the show" (Mary Whitten, conversation with Chau).
160. Whitten, note of 15 December 2012, Woodshed, 419. Compare Whitten, note of 1 March 2009, Woodshed, 332: "[The painter] must be capable of compressing the total of the history of painting. It must be compressed into the flat skin of paint …. paint as matter."
161. Whitten, note of 10 March 2009, Woodshed, 335. Compare Whitten, note of 14 September 2012, Woodshed, 399 (paragraphing suppressed): "Someone dubbed [Coltrane's 'wave of sound'] as a sheet of sound. Wave or sheet … a continuous stream of sound. My early paintings were influenced by Coltrane's wave hence I called them 'Light Sheets.' … Construct—deconstruct—reconstruct [Whitten's process of producing a slab of acrylic, cutting it into tesserae, and building a painting] must be compressed into a sheet of light, i.e., a plane of light." Musical analogies came readily to Whitten. He had played tenor saxophone with jazz groups and knew Coltrane during the 1960s (Whitten, in conversation with the author, New York, 12 July 2017). The phrase "sheets of sound" appeared in 1958 in liner notes by critic Ira Gitler for the Coltrane album Soultrane. Coltrane died in 1967, but his music remains immensely influential. Whitten created Totem VI 2000 Annunciation: For John Coltrane in 2000.
162. Whitten, note of 18 April 2006, Woodshed, 279. In 1979, beginning with a reference to Martin Luther King, Jr. and his calls for freedom, Whitten had written with subtle irony of a different freedom: "I am free of art history. … The emphasis must not be placed upon the 'image' but as usual upon the plasticity of meaning in terms of painting as a medium (painting is the medium not me!). … Strange that this [realization] should happen on Abe Lincoln's Birthday … My freedom is his birthday present"; Whitten, note of 12 February 1979, Woodshed, 137 (emphasis original, third ellipsis original). Another instance where Whitten recognized his need to remove the "me" and become the object.