Varnedoe, Kirk: *Pictures of nothing. Abstract art since Pollock (= Bollingen series, The A. W. Mellon lectures in the fine arts)*, Princeton [u.a.]: Princeton University Press 2006
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Many questions continue to surround abstract art, especially the waves of movements and styles that appeared in the wake of Jackson Pollock's drip paintings and the New York School in the years after World War II. What are the meanings and purposes of abstract art, of paintings, drawings, and sculptures that depict or illustrate nothing and do not even convey or evoke possible figurative references? How is such art relevant and useful in our turbulent, chaotic, fast-paced post-industrial, media-saturated society? In cultures that value the monetary and the material, how does art that is immaterial, unmeasurable, and fugitive have significance and command respect that gets it into museums and private collections, galleries and auction houses, textbooks and coffee table books, newspapers and magazines? What if anything is beautiful and appealing in abstract art? What is abhorrent and repugnant? Can these be found in the same artworks or in the work of a single artist? Do such aesthetic judgements and responses have any relevance anymore? These and more questions are posed and often answered with striking intelligence and clarity by Kirk Varnedoe in "Pictures of Nothing: Abstract Art since Pollock".

"Pictures of Nothing" is Varnedoe's culminating study of post-World War II abstraction and the final book of a prolific, erudite, and influential scholar-curator who brilliantly steered the curatorial direction of the Museum of Modern Art in New York City for nearly twenty years. During this period, he contributed to or supervised numerous important exhibitions, including memorial, controversial ones such as "Primitivism and Modern Art" and "High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture". He also directed retrospectives of Jackson Pollock, Jasper Johns, Andy Warhol, Cy Twombly, Chuck Close, and others. His interests and areas of research as a modernist were far-reaching. His curatorial work provided great opportunities for firsthand consideration of artworks and the essays which comprise this book reflect his enormous knowledge, insight, and familiarity with the artists and works he discusses. The book contains six chapters which correspond to the six lectures that Varnedoe gave in the spring of 2003 at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. under the auspices of the Andrew W. Mellon lecture series. Unfortunately, Varnedoe died only a few months later, in August 2003 at the age of 57 after a long battle with cancer. The lectures have been preserved splendidly in this richly illustrated and handsomely produced book. They have been modestly edited for clarity in the context of a book format, but they read with the fluid immediacy of an articulate, lively speaker presenting his ideas to an enthusiastic audience familiar with contemporary developments in art but desirous of greater understanding. The skillful editing includes judicious endnoting, so that the reader can peruse the scholarly literature on the topic at hand if so inclined. The book is a wonderful tribute to the author, whose untimely death was an enormous loss to the scholarship of modern art.

In the first chapter, Varnedoe explores how and why abstract art has remained relevant since the middle of the twentieth century. To underscore his position, he posits Ernst Gombrich's studies of perception and representation, which have survived in such art-historical masterpieces as his seminal "Art and Illusion". Positioning himself opposite Gombrich is intriguing and poignant because Gombrich was the first Mellon lecturer in 1956, the same year in which Pollock died. Whereas Gombrich argued that the history of art from the early Renaissance on was a long pathway toward greater illusionism in visual arts and that such illusionism was the result of an inner social, cultural necessity, Varnedoe takes Gombrich's arguments and theories as a parallel basis for the inner necessity of abstract art since the beginning of the twentieth century. Although this chapter is intended to set up the rest of the series, it is especially powerful in making profound claims for the importance and validity of abstraction without any trace of hesitation. Anyone who has taught modern art to college students or in similar settings realizes that this is no small feat. Varnedoe positions Neo-Dada and Pop Art as a counterpoint of more figurative, representational art to post--World War II abstraction, but he demonstrates that the opposition between the abstract and the figurative is often unclear, permeable, and irrelevant.

Most of the remaining chapters deal with Minimalism and important aspects of post-Minimalism, in particular Richard Serra, Eva Hesse, and Earth Art. The book's use of the word "pictures" in the title is somewhat of a misnomer, for much of the art discussed is not pictorial in function, meaning, or effect, and sculptures by their physical nature would not be considered "pictures." The period of the 1960s and early-1970s is of great interest to Varnedoe, perhaps because this is when he was coming of age personally and intellectually. Varnedoe acts more as a scholarly critic than a critical historian in this book, and relishes the opportunity to take this approach to post-war abstraction. His well-informed interpretations are crisp, direct, and provocative. Some are likely to inspire debate, but most are quite persuasively explicated. His most useful critical device is to compare and contrast movements, artists, and artworks. He is not afraid to take sides, make judgements, and show his personal preferences, but he always does so in a gentlemanly manner. He puts Color-Field Painting up against Minimalism, Ellsworth Kelly up against Frank Stella, Richard Serra up against Jackie Windsor, Robert Smithson up against Michael Heizer, and Agnes Martin up against Robert Ryman. He often makes strong arguments for why some artists, artworks, and movements are aesthetically and intellectually superior than others, and his preferences and favorites are explained with clarity and passion. He takes issue with feminist critiques of Minimalism as masculine aggression and corporate glorification, but does so with gentlemanly grace that is uncommon in art-historical discourse. The fact that he considers Earth Art a manifestation of abstraction is interesting in and of itself, and open to further debate. His assertion that there are two strains of Minimalism, one on the East Coast and another on the West Coast, is intriguing but not entirely convincing. The hypothesis is certainly worth further consideration.

The fifth chapter on humor, satire, and irony in abstract art explores how artists of the past fifty years have criticized and found humor in art with no discernible figurative content, art that often seems to demand absolute seriousness. Some artists have scrutinized their own work but more often the artworks are under scrutiny from artists outside abstraction, usually by artists involved with Neo-Dada and Pop. Sometimes this becomes a moot point, since many of these visual "jokes," "puns" and "critiques" demonstrate that even staunchly figurative art can find its way to abstraction or that abstraction often cannot lose its figurative connotations. Varnedoe expands on this complex polarity in the last chapter. The topic of this chapter is very unusual for a scholar

of abstraction, and does not quite seem to fit with the rest of the book. However, it is a sorely overlooked issue, for I know of no other study of it, and I am quite pleased Varnedoe devoted one lecture to this intriguing issue.

The sixth and final chapter is supposedly about recent abstraction, according to its title "Abstract Art Now," but it is mostly a summation and clarification of the issues and themes established in the first chapter. As with the book's title, the title of this chapter is somewhat a misnomer. Some of the artists and artworks discussed come from the 1980s and early 1990s, but the artists who dominate this chapter, such as Willem de Kooning, Richard Serra, and Brice Marden, have been around for over forty years. Much of the chapter reiterates and clarifies aspects of what was discussed earlier and reflects on ideas and themes that surfaced along the way. Varnedoe's almost celebratory discussion of Serra's larger-than-room-size curved and twisted sheets of rusting metal done over the past twenty years is particularly thoughtful and enlightening, especially since these hulking structures seem so resistant to interpretation and explanation. This chapter concludes the entire enterprise of Varnedoe's Mellon Lectures and his evolving consideration of how we comprehend, experience, and appreciate abstraction, and how it remains compelling, relevant, and enlightening to this very day. "Pictures of Nothing" is an ironic, almost bittersweet title for a book that is certainly about something, something that is as exciting, thought-provoking and innovative today as it was when it was totally new a century ago.

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